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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN STEPHEN KING'S *DOLORES CLAIBORNE*

Abstract

Domestic violence and abuse are among the most relevant social issues with potentially long-lasting and detrimental consequences. One of the novels that place domestic abuse in the centre of attention is Stephen King's 1993 novel *Dolores Claiborne*. The protagonist, Dolores St. George, is subject to domestic abuse throughout the entirety of her marriage to Joe St. George, who later starts exhibiting patterns of abusive behaviours towards his children as well, which culminates with him sexually abusing their daughter Selena. Once he empties his children's savings accounts, Dolores and the children can no longer afford to escape his tyranny. Dolores has no other way out but to retaliate with an act of violence and begins planning Joe's death. The article opens with a brief definition and description of domestic violence and abuse, after which follows a discussion of the four most common types—physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse—as represented in the novel. The abusive acts analysed in the article are also observed through the lens of Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. The analysis shows that Joe perpetrates all four main types of domestic abuse: Dolores is abused physically, emotionally, and economically, Selena emotionally and sexually, and Joe Junior emotionally. Direct and indirect emotional abuse are shown to be the most damaging and traumatic form of abuse for the members of the St. George family.

Keywords: domestic violence, domestic abuse, Stephen King, *Dolores Claiborne*, trauma

Introduction

Domestic violence and abuse are among the most widespread social issues. Many people face some form of domestic violence in their lifetime, while a significant portion of people experience it regularly, in which case a more appropriate term would be domestic abuse. Due to their omnipresence in society, the topic of domestic violence and abuse¹ is also frequent in literature and literary theory. For instance, in *Masculine Domination*, cultural sociologist and literary theorist Pierre Bourdieu identifies the domestic setting as the place where “masculine domination manifests itself most indisputably and most visibly” (116). Similarly, in her *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, feminist scholar and author bell hooks agrees and asserts that for men, domestic abuse represents the tool of maintaining domination and control in their home (119), but adds that it is important not to overlook the much less frequent, yet feasible scenario in which the woman is the one perpetrating the violence (118). Apart from literary theorists, many authors of (especially contemporary) fiction bring to the forefront the issue of DVA in their works. Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* (1982), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997), Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies* (2014), Paula Hawkins’s *The Girl on the Train* (2015), Colleen Hoover’s *It Ends With Us* (2016), and Kristin Hannah’s *The Great Alone* (2018) are just some of the works of fiction that thematise DVA, some as a primary theme, and some sporadically. One of the most prolific authors in terms of novels focusing on DVA is Stephen King, who first explores the issue in his debut novel *Carrie* (1974), but most prominently in his novels from the 1990s: *Dolores Claiborne* (1992), *Gerald’s Game* (1992), *Insomnia* (1994), and *Rose Madder* (1995).

Though domestic violence and abuse have been omnipresent parts of every society and culture in the history of mankind, they were not recognised as a social issue until several decades ago. In the 1960s, when Stephen King’s novel *Dolores Claiborne* is set, not only was it still perceived as normal but even a socially condoned and tolerable component of marriage (O’Neill 152). The novel takes place in the aftermath of Vera Donovan’s death, when her housemaid Dolores Claiborne is falsely accused of murdering her. Written in the first-per-

¹ Since in many sources “domestic violence and abuse” are abbreviated as DVA, the same abbreviation will be applied in this paper hereafter.

son perspective, the novel represents Dolores's statement to the police. James R. Guthrie points out that this choice of narrative structure allows King to develop his main female character much deeper and into more internal detail than if he had chosen a different variant of narration (79). Despite being innocent of Vera's death, Dolores admits to a murder she committed thirty years prior, when she estimated that the only way to stop her husband's abuse of her and their children was to end his life. In her confession, written as a stream-of-consciousness, single-chapter monologue, Dolores relives her sixteen-year-long marriage to Joe St. George, his death, as well as the subsequent ostracism by the Little Tall Island community who believe she killed him, although there is no proof. As she focuses on the negative aspects of their marriage, Dolores recounts the gradual breakdown of their relationship through numerous accounts of Joe's mistreatment of her and, later, of two out of their three children.

Dolores's statement to the police is not linear—she moves back and forth between the present and the past. Vera's death, as the reason for the questioning in the first place, becomes an account of secondary importance, whereas the details about her relationship with Vera, and especially about her marriage to Joe and his death, become the central part of the statement. She is aware that the police are not interested in that but still decides to tell everything in a confession-like manner: "I'm gonna tell you three a hell of a lot startin right about now Oh, gorry! I'm gettin to it, Andy, if you'll just give me a little peace! I'm just tryin to decide if I should tell it back to front or front to back Tell you what: I'm gonna compromise. Instead of telling her front to back or back to front. I'm gonna start in the middle and just kinda work both ways" (King 3–5). Such recounting, which is, according to Maslida and Wajiran, typical of a trauma survivor, is characterised by "non-linear plots, repetition of events, or fragmented narratives" (132), all of which are present in Dolores's monologue.

The St. Georges' marriage is afflicted by physical brutality, emotional harassment, and manipulation, sexual abuse, and financial exploitation, which are the most common types of DVA (Postmus et al. 3). Joe, as the family's primary violator, frequently physically assails Dolores, insults and emotionally abuses their two older children, Selena and Joe Junior, sexually abuses his teenage daughter, and misappropriates his children's savings. Given the societal passivity and the rigidity of the patriarchal community represented in the novel, perpetrators such as Joe are protected by the law and hence able to inflict harm on their family members with low risk of facing consequences. Unlike other women on the

island, many of whom are in a position similar to hers, Dolores refuses to accept such a fate for her and her children. Once she fully grasps that the subordinated position of a woman and a wife in a rural area at the time impedes her from taking legal action and that no person would come to her rescue, she decides to take matters into her own hands.

Scholars have largely neglected the novel, focusing mostly on the 1995 film adaptation and the corpus of research on the topic that mainly consists of students' theses, indicating a significant research gap in academia. But the few papers that have been written about the novel so far generally put abuse as the focal point of their research. In her book on monstrous female characters in Stephen King's oeuvre, titled *Monstrous Femininity in Stephen King's Fiction* (2021), Korinna Csetényi briefly reflects on the novel and states that Dolores's motherly love "prove[s] to be stronger than the wifely obedience and submissiveness expected from women" in "a depressingly masculine world where women had little power and where domestic violence was referred to as 'home correction'" (98–99). James R. Guthrie, whose 2009 MA thesis *Three Decades of Terror: Domestic Violence, Patriarchy, and the Evolution of Female Characters in Stephen King's Fiction* deals with domestic violence and patriarchy in several of King's novels, sees Dolores as a realistically portrayed female character with "both good and bad traits" (83) through which "King effectively convinces readers that murder is a viable and justifiable option for some women" (100). In her own MA thesis, *'Sometimes Being a Bitch is All a Woman Has': Stephen King, Gothic Stereotypes, and the Representation of Women* (2012), Kimberly S. Beal examines domestic abuse in the novel through the lens of everyday Gothic and the extent to which Dolores embodies various Gothic stereotypes. She sees the novel as depicting "the horror of the domestic space" (57) in which the female protagonist is forced to rely on herself in order to survive, and Dolores as a deliberately realistic and relatable character (75) who showcases how she navigates "the horror that millions of people around the world face each day" (62), which is exposure to domestic abuse. Another MA thesis, *Eclipsing the Patriarchy: The Power of Intergenerational Female Connection in Stephen King's It, Carrie, Gerald's Game, and Dolores Claiborne* (2023), by Jennifer L. Smith also concentrates on the female characters' endeavours to free themselves from the constraints of the oppressive patriarchal society. As for Dolores, the author emphasises that she is forced to "operate outside the legal system" (32) to escape from her husband's abuse, because "[l]egally speaking, Dolores has no recourse

with which she can fight back” (32). Similarly, in an intertextual analysis in her chapter “*Gerald’s Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*: Stephen King and the Evolution of an Authentic Female Narrative Voice” (1998), Carol A. Senf focuses on the parallel between the protagonists of the two novels, linked by the solar eclipse during which Dolores has a vision of Jessie, the protagonist of *Gerald’s Game*. Despite their social status and age difference, both women are exposed to violence at the same time—Jessie is sexually molested by her father just as Dolores is running away from an enraged Joe and luring him towards the well, where she would later end his life. Senf argues that the two thematically intertwined novels represent King’s significant endeavour to develop an authentic female narrative voice by depicting “ordinary human women with ordinary human problems, including child abuse, bad marriages, and institutions that favor men over women” (96). Finally, in one of the most referenced papers on the topic, “Stephen King’s *Dolores Claiborne* and *Rose Madder*: A Literary Backlash Against Domestic Violence” (2007), Amy Canfield focuses on domestic violence in the novel. The author also puts Dolores in the spotlight and states that she was “abused because [she] *could* be, because portions of society allowed it and condoned it with inaction” (398).

Given the scarce number of papers on DVA and trauma in the novel and the uniform character of interest of their authors, the novel can still be observed from a variety of original standpoints. For instance, there is a lack of focus on the children that are also a part of the St. George household and exposed to abuse and traumatised as well, with Selena being sporadically mentioned in academic papers, and Joe Junior and Pete being completely omitted. This article will therefore primarily rely on papers discussing DVA in general and, having recognised the long-standing consequences of violence and abuse, will also apply Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory. Thus, the aim of this article is to provide insight into the various types of DVA present in the novel and to analyse the ways each individual character and family as a whole are exposed to each type of violence and abuse. The article will also try to offer an application of Caruth’s trauma theory on examples of abuse in the novel with the aim of proving that the theory can be used when reading *Dolores Claiborne*. After providing the definitions and the predominant classification of (domestic) violence and abuse, the subsequent part of the article offers the application of the classification on the events in the novel and the analysis of how each type of DVA affects the characters that are exposed to it.

(Domestic) Violence and Abuse: Definition, Difference, Classification

In order to properly identify and analyse elements of domestic violence and domestic abuse in the novel, it is important to start by defining violence and abuse as their hypernyms. Though generally perceived as interchangeable, the terms abuse and violence are not entirely synonymous, and, by analogy, the same is applicable to domestic abuse and domestic violence. Violence is an aggressive act, usually physical in nature, which, according to Fowler, “causes destruction, pain, or suffering” with the intention “to hurt, damage or kill someone or something” (n. pag.). An important element of violence that differentiates it from abuse is that it is sporadic, infrequent, or even isolated. Domestic violence, then, is an act of violence perpetrated by an intimate partner or a family member. The amalgamation of violent acts gradually turns into abuse, which can even be defined as such in a broad sense of the term. A more direct definition of abuse, provided by Fowler, states that it “is a form of sustained emotional and physical mistreatment” (n. pag.) which results in the victim’s physical and/or emotional distress, and in most victims may even cause trauma. Other than being prolonged and continual, rather than occasional, another element that differentiates abuse from violence is that it covers a wider variety of aggressive behaviours than just the physical, such as sexual, emotional, financial, discriminatory, racial, verbal, psychological, and many other forms. Due to its duration and intensity, abuse is usually found in interpersonal relationships where two or more parties have unequal amounts of power. Abuse frequently appears in specific relationships such as familial and romantic ones; in these cases, it is called domestic abuse. The term refers to abusive acts in which the abuser is related to the victim, is in an intimate relationship with them, or lives with them.

Given the numerous types of DVA that may arise, authors and scholars provide similar, but varying classifications. The most commonly accepted one is the classification proposed in the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (better known as the Istanbul Convention), according to which there are four most common types of domestic violence: physical, sexual, psychological (emotional), and economic (financial) (3). This typology is grounded in the internationally recognised definitions of domestic violence and is accepted by most scholars researching the topic of DVA (e.g. Helfrich et al.; Slabbert and Green). The novel’s characters endure all types of domestic abuse, which both creates a toxic household and invites further violence, either in the form of the perpetrator’s actions becoming ever more

aggressive or in the form of the victims' violent response. Exposure to such intensive, systematic abuse results in trauma that becomes a shared experience for Dolores, Selena, and Joe Junior. This article will aim to show that all of the above-mentioned forms of DVA are present in the St. George household, which accounts for Dolores's ultimate extreme action, as well as for the consequential traumatization of the survivors of the abuse.

Different Forms of DVA in *Dolores Claiborne*

During the sixteen years of Dolores and Joe's marriage, DVA has been its integral part from the very beginning until the moment of his death. The primary perpetrator is Joe St. George, Dolores's husband and the father of their three children—Selena, Joe Junior, and Pete. Most of the abuse is directed at Dolores, but Joe goes so far as to be abusive towards Selena and Joe Junior as well. Even if some of the actions described below may not seem so traumatic when observed individually, the sum of such incidents may be even more damaging than a single severe act of violence. Forter agrees and even refers to such mundane, day-to-day abuse as a “traumatogenic social process” (qtd. in Ozipko 262), which he defines as acts of DVA that are “*not* punctual, that are more mundanely catastrophic than such spectacular instances of violence as the Holocaust” (qtd. in Ozipko 260). By invoking the Holocaust as a publicly recognised and extreme form of intense violence, the author contrasts it to minor instances of cumulative and socially normalised violence imbued in everyday life, which gradually turn into abuse. That is the case with Dolores and her children, whose daily exposure to violent acts, such as an occasional slap or a seemingly innocuous insult, also generates trauma over the course of time.

When discussing traumatic events in literary works, it is important to mention Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, her seminal work published in 1996, is one of the most important contemporary contributions to the understanding of trauma, which combines psychoanalysis and philosophy with literary theory. Many of the concepts she proposes, such as the unclaimed experience, belatedness, repetition compulsion, and a non-linear, repetitive narrative structure used to represent trauma, can be observed in *Dolores Claiborne*. Trauma, according to Caruth, can be simply defined as a “wound of the mind” (4), and more complexly as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response

to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11).

Physical DVA

According to Helfrich et al., a person subjected to physical DVA is exposed to any of the physically violent acts that include, but are not limited to, kicking, hitting, punching, choking, being threatened with a weapon, being thrown, physically restrained, or exposed to any kind of physical punishment (10). Physically violent acts are usually easiest to notice since they often result in visible damage, such as bruises, cuts, fractures, or other types of bodily harm.

In the last couple of decades, there has been a shift in the perception of societal acceptability of physical DVA, which is now generally perceived as completely unacceptable, yet still under-acknowledged (Rakovec-Felser 66). Nonetheless, not even a century ago, physically violent acts in the family were not only not frowned upon, but even condoned, and were seen as necessary measures of correcting unwanted behaviours as “[b]attered wives were discouraged from filing criminal charges against their husbands [and] urged to accept responsibility for their role in provoking the violence” (Siegel 2170). In the 1960s setting of the novel, physical DVA is still a common affair and this subordinated position of women is normal even to them. Dolores recounts being hit by Joe at the very beginning of their marriage. During their honeymoon, Joe accuses Dolores of being flirtatious with another man and beats her for it: “He grabbed me, and turned me over his knee, and paddled me with his shoe” (King 64). However, at that point, being only eighteen, Dolores does not perceive it negatively, but rather as Joe’s form of showing affection: “I actually thought it was a kind of love-play, him pretendin to be jealous to flatter me—that’s what a little ninny I was” (64). The fact that Dolores is completely unperturbed by Joe’s actions at the time is the direct consequence of the gender and power dynamics of the period.

It should also not come as a surprise that Dolores “thought a man hittin his wife from time to time was only another part of bein married” (King 64) given that she was exposed to interparental abuse in her childhood and early adulthood. This aligns with the transgenerational cycle of violence, a theory according to which being exposed to violence in early childhood, mainly at home, leads to a higher rate of perpetration of violence in adulthood and augments the chances of having a twisted perception of the severity of violence and abuse

(Widom and Wilson 27–28). When speaking of her childhood, Dolores says: “My own Dad used his hands on my Mum from time to time, and I suppose that was where I got the idear that it was all right—just somethin to be put up with” (King 64). She recalls an incident when her father came home to an empty dinner table and found it good enough a reason to hit her mother in the face and throw her on the ground, after which Mrs. Claiborne proceeded to offer her husband beer and lemonade, prepare him dinner, and fulfil her marital duties later that evening. While Dolores was growing up, such matrimonial hierarchy was called “home correction” (66)—the implication that it is a man’s duty to steer his wife and children in the right direction by employing violent acts whenever he sees fit, and Dolores explicitly states that she grew up with that idea. Naughton et al. state that there is substantial evidence that links exposure to DVA during childhood to an individual’s negative cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social development, which potentially continues into adulthood (3103) and can serve as an excuse for Dolores’s hard exterior, which she develops as a defence mechanism. It could even be argued that Dolores’s lack of reaction to DVA in her own marriage for fourteen years is the consequence of trauma stemming from her childhood, but King offers no further textual background which would substantiate the claim.

In her testimony to the police, Dolores’s accounts regarding Joe’s physical abuse are sparse, but she lets the reader know that “he hit [her] quite a lot” (King 62) and that he was potentially even more aggressive than her father was towards her mother, since unlike his father-in-law, Joe would hit Dolores with his fist. Dolores’s account makes it unclear at which point during that fourteen-year period she transitions from interpreting beatings as a form of love to realising that physical abuse should not be normalised in a marriage. Dolores’s overall statement implies that daring to rebel against a husband’s corrective method would be an unprecedented occurrence on the island and society in general. This is corroborated when a local woman sees a bruise on Dolores, which she mistakenly interprets as Joe’s doing, so she compassionately comforts Dolores and says “I’ve been through it and I know” (82), and goes on with her day despite “knowing” that another woman in her vicinity is being violently beaten by her husband. This seemingly innocuous statement vividly summarises the overall gender and power dynamics of the Little Tall Island community—women, as subordinated constituents of a marriage in relation to their husbands, are supposed to accept and push through the instances of physical violence without any

revolt whatsoever. As the other married women, Dolores endures Joe's physical abuse, which lasts for fourteen years. However, Dolores decides that she should be the one to end it by retaliating physically for the first time.

One evening, Joe strikes her lower back with a wooden log, leaving her unable to stand up for twenty minutes simply for laughing at him. That night, Dolores waits for both Joe and the children to fall asleep before she smashes a pitcher on his head. When he intends to strike back, Dolores threatens to kill him with a hatchet and tells him that it was the last time that he was physically abusive to her: "Your days of hittin me are over, that's all I want to say. If you ever do it again, one of us is goin to the hospital. Or to the morgue" (King 76). The sole act of physical violence conducted up to that point by Dolores marks a turning point in their marriage in several ways. Firstly, the power roles are reversed, and Joe's authority is fractured as he is now more afraid of Dolores than she is of him. Analogically, Joe's masculinity is disrupted since he is unable to perform sexually as of that moment, which emotionally burdens him. During one of the times that he is unable to engage in intercourse, he shows vulnerability for the first time and cries in front of Dolores because of it.

The pitcher incident, as the first instance of physical violence directed at Joe, and not conducted by him, proves to be one of the focal points of the plot. During her statement, Dolores keeps coming back to that night. Though at first it may seem that she keeps repeating it only because she sees it as the time that the power dynamics in the household shifted, another plausible explanation for it can be found in Caruth's theory. Repetition compulsion is a common trait of trauma victims, who revisit key events that shaped their trauma (65). Given that the victim is never fully conscious during a traumatic event (Caruth 17), trauma is not fully processed in the moment. Maslida and Wajiran add that "traumatized individuals unconsciously return to past moments to try to process unspoken experiences" (134). So, other than being a turning point in Dolores and Joe's marriage, this incident is clearly also a source of trauma for her: after that night, the nature of Joe's abuse changes and it becomes much more vile, harmful, and dangerous. He no longer abuses Dolores physically but opts to employ or intensify more subtle and cunning forms of abuse: emotional, sexual, and economic. These forms of abuse harm and traumatise her even more than the physical pain.

Emotional DVA

Emotional or psychological DVA includes behaviours such as verbal abuse, intimidation, threats, lying, accusations, manipulation, infidelity, forced compliant behaviour, and other actions that undermine the victim's self-esteem and self-worth (Slabbert and Green 238, Helfrich et al. 10, Naughton et al. 3104). Slabbert and Green summarise the research of several authors whose conclusions are that emotional DVA is generally as destructive as physical DVA, but more frequent and harder to detect (238).

As with physical DVA, the main emotional abuser in the family is Joe. However, in this case the abuse transcends the relationship between partners and befalls their two eldest children as well. The following paragraphs offer an overview of the relationship between Joe and each of his victims of emotional DVA. The youngest son, Pete, is omitted from the analysis since Joe deems him his successor and therefore treats him more favourably than Selena and Joe Junior.

As previously stated, Dolores describes the first fourteen years of their marriage as being dominated by physical abuse, which Joe abandons after the pitcher incident and resorts to psychological torture. However, verbal abuse is a constant feature of their marriage. Given their strained relationship, almost every sentence that Joe directs at Dolores contains some form of a verbal insult. For instance, Joe regularly mocks her appearance by saying insults such as that her “ugly face can't hold a candle to [her] ugly disposition” (King 123) and refers to Dolores as a “bitch” (216) or a “cunt” (74). Many of his insults are gendered in nature and, by employing such demeaning gendered language, Joe not only intends to insult and hurt Dolores, but to accentuate her belonging to the weaker sex. Dolores, though, seems unperturbed by such remarks and often responds in a similar manner, mainly cynically or sarcastically. Rather, the psychological abuse she suffers from Joe is either indirect or consequential. For instance, Joe indirectly hurts Dolores emotionally by harassing their children, be it sexually (Selena) or verbally (Joe Junior), and consequentially agitates her the most once she finds out about his financial malversations.

The real emotional abuse begins when Joe shifts his attention to Selena, knowing that it would hurt Dolores more than any physical blow. At first, Dolores notices Selena becoming distant and cold towards her and unexpectedly amicable towards Joe, which hurts her. What Dolores fails to notice at the time

is that Joe has distorted the facts about the pitcher incident to turn himself into the victim and Dolores into the abuser in Selena's eyes. The false affection with which Joe begins showering Selena is not a display of proper parental love, but a tool to harm Dolores where it hurts the most. In doing so, Joe completely disregards the potential consequences such actions might cause in a teenage girl's mind, which highlights his utter selfishness and perverted willingness to emotionally exploit not only his wife but also his own daughter. In retrospect, Dolores recognises that "he knew how much [she] loved Selena, and he must have thought tellin her how mean and bad-tempered [she] was—maybe even how dangerous [she] was—would be a fine piece of revenge" (King 85). Soon enough, a sudden change that ensues in Selena's behaviour and appearance worries Dolores even more, because Selena is now entirely distancing herself from her family.

Since the whole novel is written from Dolores's point of view, in analysing the relationships in which Dolores does not partake directly, the reader must rely on the correct interpretation of events in her accounts. That is why little is known about the nature of Joe and Selena's relationship during her childhood before the pitcher incident. Dolores implies that he does not treat her lovingly by saying that, during her culinary beginnings, Joe would criticise and mock Selena so much if something was not right that "he sent her cryin into her room more'n once" (King 86). Selena's relationship with her father improves once Joe decides to take revenge on Dolores through her children, principally Selena, who is fourteen years old at the time. Rizvi and Najam note that psychological abuse is the most developmentally damaging form of abuse during puberty, which is linked to a range of serious negative outcomes, including depression, emotional unresponsiveness, helplessness, impairment of cognitive development, inability to trust, aggression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies (256–57), many of which Dolores notices in Selena's behaviour. Girls are also generally more prone to developing internalising symptoms when exposed to DVA (Lloyd 4).

Selena's witnessing of Dolores threatening Joe with a hatchet proves crucial to Joe's manipulation strategy. This evening ends up being traumatic not only for Dolores and Joe, but Selena as well. Despite not being a direct part of it, the sole sight of it puts an emotional strain on Selena, who decides to adapt her behaviour to humour her father, whom she perceives as the victim: "I made up my mind to make it up to him. Before I went to bed, I got down on my knees

and prayed. ‘God,’ I said, ‘if you keep her from hurting him any more. I’ll make it up to him. I swear I will’ (King 108). Even though she must have witnessed Joe insulting or hitting Dolores at some point during her childhood, seeing him bloody and teary while being threatened with a hatchet incites her to conclude that he deserves her pity and help. Having seen only a portion of Dolores and Joe’s confrontation that night, Selena misinterprets the situation, placing Dolores in the abuser’s position and Joe in the victim’s. Not until she comprehends that Joe is abusing her does Selena manage to understand what really happened that evening. “Traumatic experience . . . suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (Caruth 91–92). Joe uses Selena’s trauma and her alienation from Dolores to his advantage and starts emotionally exploiting her by giving her unprecedented attention while simultaneously feeding her false information about Dolores, causing the two to drift apart. He convinces Selena that Dolores does not want her family members to be happy and that he is endangered by her: “He quit givin her the lowdown on politics in favor of givin her the lowdown on me, how crazy I could be when I was riled, and everythin that was wrong with our marriage. Accordin to him it was mostly me” (King 109). Since Dolores is no longer Selena’s confidante, her emotional support system is disrupted, which provides Joe with the opportunity to damage her further. Once he begins abusing her sexually, he does it under the mask of a beleaguered husband whose needs are disregarded by his wife: “he couldn’t help it, he had to ask—she was nice to him, I wasn’t, a man had certain needs, and that was all there was to it” (110). Joe also convinces her not to tell anyone because of Dolores, who would “drive her out of the house” (111) or “kill both of them” (110) if she found out what was happening.

Once that the incubation period of the trauma is over and Selena fully grasps that the situation has gone too far, Joe persuades her that there is no turning back while putting the blame on her: “She said she didn’t want to do it, and he said that was just too bad, but it was too late to stop. He told her she’d teased him until he was half-crazy, and said that kind of teasin’s why most rapes happen” (King 111). At this point, Selena is completely aware that she is being abused by Joe, but is convinced that it is her fault, as well as that she cannot confide in her mother, brother, nor her friends. She begins exhibiting numerous traits of an emotionally abused child: she begins isolating herself from others, showing signs of depression, abstaining from her usual activities, avoiding her family

members, and not taking care of her appearance. Dolores points out that the two most worrying changes are the absence of joy in her eyes, as if “[t]he light that’d been there before had gone out of em” (90–91), and that she stopped talking to everyone. Selena later confesses that she had considered escaping from home, but Dolores concludes that even “the thought of suicide had done more’n just cross her mind” (114). By the time Dolores finds out, Selena is already emotionally shattered: “I can’t stand it anymore, Mommy . . . I can’t. I feel so dirty and confused, and I can’t be happy no matter how hard I try” (103).

Unfortunately, Selena is not the only child Joe emotionally abuses. In previous research not much attention is given either to Joe Junior or Pete, who have been sidelined in favour of Selena (to an extent) and especially Dolores, two characters whose connection to Joe are much more directly described in the novel. Nevertheless, it is important to investigate the effect Joe’s abusive behaviour has on Joe Junior, especially given the gender bias: men are often overlooked in the analyses of DVA because “gendered assumptions of DA neglect the experiences of male victims, making them more likely to ignore or minimize their experiences and less likely to reach out for assistance” (Lysova et al. qtd. in Moore 2). The relationship between Joe and his middle child has always been strained and Joe Junior is the child that receives the least attention from his father. It is possible that his animosity stems from the discrepancies in their personality. While Joe is a selfish and hedonistic ruffian and an on-and-off alcoholic, his older son is an intelligent bookworm and shares no interests with Joe. Because of how Joe treats him, Joe Junior feels uncomfortable in his home, “hardly ever smile[s] or laugh[s]” (King 130), and is constantly reprimanded by his father: “He’d no more’n come into the room and his Dad’d be on him like a weasel on a chicken, tellin him to tuck in his shirt, to comb his hair, to quit slouchin, to grow up, stop actin like a goddam sissy with his nose always stuck in a book, to be a man” (130). For that reason he grows to resent Joe and Dolores goes so far as to say that she can “see real hate in that boy’s face” (130) when looking at his father. By exposing her to her son’s discomfort in his own home and his strained relationship with his father, Joe indirectly extends additional emotional abuse to Dolores through the suffering of yet another of their children.

The way Joe treats Joe Junior is not the only reason why his son hates him; it is also because he understands what Joe is doing to Selena. Joe Junior becomes his sister’s protector by coming home earlier or being underfoot as much as he can, which is a gargantuan responsibility for a twelve-year-old boy. He feels un-

ease around Joe, so he avoids being in his presence or communicating with him more than necessary. A representative example of their dysfunctional relationship is when Joe Junior writes an outstanding history paper, which has the potential to be published, but he refuses, knowing that Joe would harass him about it. Such high quality of the paper is partly due to Joe Junior purposely choosing to write about Joe's most detested president, meaning that he was more driven by spite than the motivation to excel. Given all these reasons, Dolores remarks that he does not see his house as a true home and that "[t]o Joe Junior, that house was just the place where he came after school, the place where his father ragged him n called him a book-readin sissy" (King 297). Just like he does with Dolores, Joe insults his son by ascribing him feminine traits on a regular basis and by using gendered language.

Once Dolores decides to murder Joe, she tries to make the children leave home for the summer. Joe Junior is reluctant to go until his mother motivates him by saying to "[j]ust think of it as a vacation from his father" (King 177), which shows that a summer vacation is still not as good a motivation for the impoverished boy as is the opportunity to spend the entirety of summer away from his father. After Joe's body is found, Joe Junior struggles with guilt for feeling relieved and glad that h is dead. In a certain way, Joe continues harrowing Joe Junior even after dying, since the boy continues to feel discomfort for not mourning his father or harbouring more positive feelings about him, meaning that his traumatic response occurs only after his father's death. Joe Junior seeks comfort about it in Dolores and asserts: "I *tried* to love him . . . I *always* tried, but he wouldn't let me" (252).

In analysing the way Joe behaves towards Joe Junior when compared to his behaviour towards Selena and Dolores, an important difference between the three is that their abuser-victim relationship is the only one that does not contain any shocking events, but rather consists of individually small, day-to-day emotionally abusive behaviours. Those behaviours, mainly repetitive insults regarding Joe Junior's masculinity and demeanour, are still big enough to be traumatic, but the emotional harm does not appear to be processed as trauma at the time. As Caruth argues, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). Joe Junior's experience of abuse while living with Joe seems unclaimed until the latter's death, when the symptoms of trauma start

surfacing and Joe Junior begins processing the severity of abuse he has been exposed to, still without being able to fully articulate his thoughts and emotions. Dolores notices that “Joey took it harder’n [she] expected, actually. He lost some weight n had some nightmares, but by the next summer he seemed mostly all right again” (King 274). The emergence of nightmares, which are yet another manifestation of trauma in victims, implies the indirect return of trauma rather than its conscious processing, which is in line with Caruth’s theory that overwhelming, traumatic events are often processed through dreams (91). Nightmares appear as a result of an event experienced too unexpectedly to be fully grasped, which is why they come back to the survivor in the form of dreams (4). They wake up from such dreams in another fright as they recurrently remind the survivor of their accident, and they are “the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits” (59).

Sexual DVA

In the broadest sense of the term, sexual DVA includes sexual activities that occur without a partner’s consent, such as forced intercourse, purposely inflicted sexual injuries, inappropriate touching or comments, or any action to which a person is unable to consent or to fully comprehend (Helfrich et al. 10-11; Slabbert and Green 240). In the context of *Dolores Claiborne*, however, it is important to look into an even more appalling form of sexual DVA, which is children sexual abuse (CSA). Mathews and Collin-Vézina note that providing a uniform and satisfactory definition of CSA has been an ongoing problem since the 1970s due to its complexity, which the authors see as an aggravating factor in battling it (131). One of the most widespread definitions of the term is the one proposed by WHO, according to which “the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society” (qtd. in Mathews and Collin-Vézina 135).

Considering the gender differences in the 1960s, especially in rural areas such as the fictional Little Tall Island, many behaviours which would nowadays be considered sexually abusive were a normal occurrence in every marriage. The man’s position in his family would grant him the right to have his needs met in any way he sees fit, which implied the right to intercourse as a basic marital right. Despite their strained relationship, Dolores implies that she was

complicit with him exercising his right and explicitly states she “never denied him” (King 78), even though he lost his ability to perform after the pitcher incident. Apart from taking revenge on Dolores by manipulating Selena to turn against her mother, Canfield notices that “Joe’s focus on his daughter quickly turned not only violent, but also sexual” (393). Given that their relationship had been improving, at first his behaviour seems innocuous, even though it represented a form of grooming for future incestuous acts: “That was all it was at first, though—little strokes along the leg while they were sittin on the couch together and I was out of the room, little pats on the bottom when she brought him his beer out in the shed” (King 109).

Over time, Joe demands more from Selena, the details of which are not presented in the novel, but Dolores asserts that by the time she realised what was happening, “he’d done just about everything a man can do to a woman short of fucking her . . . and frightened her into doing any number of things to him” (King 109). Due to the immense strength of Joe’s coercive control over Selena, her understanding of what is truly happening is deferred, and she only comes to realise much later that their relationship has extended beyond that of a typical father-daughter dynamic and is deeply wrong. What is more, she blames herself for it and thinks that she is unable to stop the abuse. Another aggravating circumstance is that she has been stripping herself from her social support system: she brings contact with her closest friends to a minimum, ceases talking to Joe Junior, and, since at this point she still blames Dolores for threatening Joe with a hatchet, is withdrawn from her too. Her silence can also be interpreted as a traumatic response to the abuse. As per Caruth’s theory, trauma is often encoded in silence or ambiguity and may resist direct representation, i.e. it is not straightforwardly discussed. Caruth points out that in order to understand trauma in literary works, the reader needs to listen both to the explicitly uttered language of trauma and the implicit, untold silence, or rather, the “mute repetition of suffering” (9).

When Dolores finally manages to get Selena to talk, she inquires whether there has been penetrative intercourse, to which Selena responds “I haven’t let him . . . Not yet, anyway” (King 260). The latter part of the sentence serves as a sign of Selena’s despair and helplessness, as well as an ominous premonition of what may happen if nobody intervenes. When Dolores confronts Joe, he dismisses her accusations as false but inadvertently admits culpability by saying that “[s]he’ll be fifteen next month” (123) when replying to Dolores’s remark

that there can be no justification for “[w]hen a man just four years shy of forty asks his fourteen-year-old daughter to take off her underpants so he can see how much hair she has” (122–23). This comment provides insight into the complexity of his perversity: not only does he not see the problem in molesting his daughter but also justifies himself by stating that she is almost fifteen, an age which he obviously perceives as suitable for sexual actions with an older man and at which a girl is capable of making fully consensual decisions. Joe does not touch Selena anymore after the confrontation, but he continues ogling her since Dolores notices that “his eyes’d get all big and round if her bra-strap so much as fell down the side of her arm” (144). Unfortunately for Dolores, obstructing Joe’s intentions to sleep with his daughter is not the end to their troubles, because she soon realises that, other than emotionally and sexually, Joe has been nefarious in yet another way.

Economic DVA

According to Adams et al. and Postmus et al., economic abuse may be defined as “a deliberate pattern of control in which individuals interfere with their partner’s ability to acquire, use, and maintain economic resources” (qtd. in Postmus et al. 2). Such a form of abuse is often also referred to as financial DVA. Some of the examples of economic DVA are having money taken away, misappropriated or stolen money or assets, being forced to beg, being prevented from keeping or finding a job, etc. (Helfrich et al. 11).

Dolores and Joe diverge from each other even in terms of work ethic. On the one hand, Dolores has been working all her life and manages to keep a steady job as Vera Donovan’s housemaid for over forty years, even though the post is extremely demanding at times. Despite the conditions, Dolores is forced to keep the job, which she gets in the early stages of their marriage because she “had to find a way to put back some of the money Joe was drinking up through the week and losin in the Friday-night poker games” (King 16). On top of her main job, where she would work “twelve and sometimes fourteen hours a day” (109), she would often take up side jobs to earn additional money for her family. Joe, on the other hand, does not have a steady job and mainly works odd jobs, meaning that his income is fluctuating and not enough to rely on. Taking into account that he spends a significant portion of his earnings on himself, Dolores is arguably the breadwinner of the family. It does not come as a surprise that Dolores 154 prompts Joe that they put money aside for their children’s education and that he

is not compliant with the suggestion. Dolores is the one who deposits the majority of the money, while Joe does it only when Dolores compels him to do it.

After learning about what Joe has been doing to Selena, Dolores decides to use the children's savings accounts to flee with the children and slowly pay the money back once they settle. She is unaware that Joe has already withdrawn the money without her authorisation. Gender dynamics of the period play a role in this situation as well, given that Joe is able to withdraw money without Dolores's consent, whereas a reverse situation would require both spouses to concur: "If it'd been the other way around . . . wouldn't you have called Joe? . . . Pease looked at me n opened his mouth. Then he closed it again and didn't say nothing. He didn't have to. The answer was right there on his face. Accourse he—or someone else from the bank—would have called Joe . . . Why? Because Joe was the man of the house" (King 137–38). The unbalanced status of the spouses results in an unequal possibility to achieve financial liberty, and Ozipko points this out by stating that "Joe's gendered social status allows him to take ownership over shared property with no questions asked whereas Dolores's gendered social status does not signify" (33). Joe takes advantage of such sexual politics of the period to establish financial dominance and control over Dolores.

Learning about the money shakes Dolores to the core, and the accumulation of everything Joe has been putting her through emotionally exhausts Dolores:

My trip to the bank had been almost a whole month before, and it had been eatin away at me ever since, the way bat'try acid will eat a hole in your clothes or your skin if you get some on you. I couldn't eat a decent meal, couldn't sleep more'n three hours at a stretch before some nightmare woke me up, couldn't hardly remember to change m'own underwear. My mind was never far from what Joe'd been up to with Selena, and the money he'd snuck out of the bank, and how was I gonna get it back again (King 150).

The situation is exacerbated once Dolores learns that Joe has been spending the money,² most of which originates from her, and that he transferred the rest to an account only he can access. Joe has been insidiously stealing from his children at exact moments when he assessed that he would go unnoticed: "Joe'd

² The total amount in the saving accounts was ca. \$3,300. According to *CPI Inflation Calculator*, that amount in 1963 would translate to ca. \$35,000 in December 2025. Joe spends a little over three hundred dollars, which would nowadays be worth approximately \$3,200.

done it when he did because he knew I never put money in their accounts after Labor Day until I thought I had enough squirreled away in the big soup-kettle on the top kitchen shelf to take care of the Christmas bills” (King 133–34). Despite putting up with physical abuse for fourteen years, it is the burden of such emotional maltreatment that breaks a usually composed Dolores, and she bursts into tears in front of the callous and rigorous Vera, who gives her the idea to kill Joe. Such a sudden surge of emotions is typical for trauma victims: a belated response, according to Caruth, occurs after the incubation period, which is the time that passes between a traumatic experience and the first symptoms of the shock (16–17). Her understanding of the traumatic event(s) causing such a reaction is deferred to a time when she is able to comprehend them better due to being less overwhelmed than at the moment of happening. Further enraged once she remembers that he has jeeringly hinted at what he had done during their fight regarding Selena, which implies that he has no intention of correcting his wrongdoings, Dolores concludes that the only possible way to rid herself and her children of Joe’s abuse is yet another, final act of violence: only this time she would be the perpetrator, and Joe the victim. The fear of having “his” money stolen incites a drunken Joe to run after Dolores with the intention of physically hurting her, which is yet another display of his attempts to assert dominance through violence.

Conclusion

Exposure to intense DVA penetrates every pore of life of its victims, corrupts their quality of life, and at times even activates their fight-or-flight instinct. Dolores St. George is no exception: as the only adult victim of DVA in their home, she bears the brunt of the burden and takes it upon herself to save her children and herself, but she is unable to do so without employing violence as well. Even though this is a work of fiction, DVA and subsequent trauma are portrayed utterly realistically. The typology of DVA used in this paper recognises four main types of DVA: physical, psychological, sexual, and economic. The analysis of examples of DVA in the novel shows that either the protagonist or her children are exposed to all four most common types, as well as that all survivors develop trauma. During her marriage to Joe, Dolores is exposed to years of serious physical and emotional abuse, but the situation culminates once he begins emotionally abusing Joe Junior, and emotionally and sexually abusing Selena. Moreover, Joe shows that he has no scruples when he misappropriates

the money set aside for his children's education, with which Dolores intended to flee from him to save herself and the children. The emotional abuse itself paired with the emotional abuse that stems from Selena's sexual abuse is the most damaging form of abuse present in the novel. What is important to mention is that, whereas the definitions of those four types are clear, the boundaries between them are sometimes blurred, so the categories are not mutually exclusive and rarely exist independently. For instance, psychological domestic violence and especially abuse are frequently side-effects of another type of abuse. When Joe molests Selena, the sexual abuse of his daughter and the psychological torture of his wife are the direct results, while the psychological damage inflicted on Selena is an indirect consequence. Similarly, physically violent acts may also entail emotional consequences, which is exemplified in Joe's sexual incompetence following the pitcher incident.

Even after the primary abuser, Joe, dies, the repercussions are still palpable as all survivors remain traumatised in some way. Dolores stays alone, haunted by her role in Joe's death and by the events that led to it. She finds no peace even in her dreams since she, just like many other survivors of trauma, relives it in her nightmares: "For me, the price was a lot of nights when I woke up in a cold sweat from bad dreams n even more when I never got to sleep at all; that and the sound the rock made when it hit him in the face, bustin his skull and his dentures" (King 275). Besides being blamed by her conscious and unconscious, Dolores is also silently blamed by Selena, whose protection was the main incentive for Dolores's decision to murder Joe in the first place; and ultimately, she is publicly blamed by the police and the local community. Selena's trauma also lingers far into her adulthood: "I think my good girl went on livin here long after she'd shaken the dust of Little Tall Island off her feet; I think she lived here in her memories . . . in her heart . . . in her dreams. Her nightmares" (King 297). The shared trauma does not strengthen the bond between mother and daughter but rather causes a rift between the two. Selena strays away from her mother and even possibly follows her father's route in becoming an alcoholic. Another survivor of trauma, Joe Junior, harbours negative emotions of his childhood because of the abuse and a tense relationship with his father and is scarred by the guilt of feeling relief after his death. The consequences of the DVA they were exposed to outlive their abuser and continue to live inside them.

The author's choice of such narrative structure of the novel, written in a non-linear, repetitive form, skilfully encases the underlying trauma that is the

primary cause for such a long, uncalled-for monologue. The statement to the police is actually a traumatic response to the trauma Dolores has been harbouring for thirty years. Drawing parallels with Maslida and Wajiran's application of Caruth's theoretical framework to a different novel, Dolores's understanding of the events is belated as a response to the traumatic event, and she "struggles to make sense of past events that were overwhelming, confusing, or emotionally suppressed at the time" (135). The constant revisiting of some key elements of the story (e.g. the eclipse, the well, or the pitcher incident), reveals another trait of trauma in Dolores: repetition compulsion (65). By placing Dolores in an interrogation room for a murder she did not commit, King almost poetically provides her with the opportunity to confess to the one she did commit, as well as to utter the story causing her lifelong trauma, one that has remained unspoken for three decades. Works of fiction such as *Dolores Claiborne* may serve as a tool of sensitising readers to DVA and understanding the severity of the victims' trauma by illustrating its gravity and urging them to abandon their silent complicity. Though this novel, unlike King's others, is light on supernatural elements, it strikingly frames the horror of human nature, which can be much more unsettling than any paranormal horror, through the depiction of insidious abuse that operates within the private sphere of the family.

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PRIKAZI OBITELJSKOG NASILJA I ZLOSTAVLJANJA U ROMANU *DOLORES CLAIBORNE* STEPHENA KINGA

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Nasilje i zlostavljanje u obitelji među najrelevantnijim su društvenim problemima s potencijalno dugoročnim i pogubnim posljedicama, a *Dolores Claiborne*, roman Stephena Kinga iz 1993. godine obrađuje upravo tu temu. Protagonistica romana, Dolores St. George, izložena je zlostavljanju u obitelji tijekom braka s Joeom St. Georgeom, koji poslije počinje pokazivati obrasce zlostavljačkog ponašanja i prema svojoj djeci, što kulminira kada započne seksualno zlostavljati njihovu kćer Selenu. Nakon što on potroši sav novac sa štedne knjižice svoje djece, Dolores više nema mogućnost pobjeći s njima od njegove tiranije i nema drugog izlaza, nego na zlostavljanje reagirati činom nasilja te ona započinje planirati Joeovu smrt. U radu se najprije kratko definiraju i opisuju nasilje i zlostavljanje u obitelji, nakon čega slijede prikaz i analiza četiriju najčešćih tipova u romanu – tjelesnog, emocionalnog, seksualnog i financijskog. Činovi zlostavljanja analizirani u radu također su prikazani kroz prizmu teorije traume autorice Cathy Caruth. Analiza pokazuje da Joe provodi sva četiri glavna oblika zlostavljanja u obitelji: Dolores zlostavlja fizički, emocionalno i financijski, Selenu emocionalno i seksualno, a Joea Juniora emocionalno. Izravno i neizravno emocionalno zlostavljanje pokazuju se kao najštetniji i najtraumatičniji oblik nasilja nad članovima obitelji St. George.

Ključne riječi: nasilje u obitelji, zlostavljanje u obitelji, Stephen King, *Dolores Claiborne*, trauma