



CHRISTINA
STEAD
satirist

Anne Pender

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For Grace and Louisa

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Contents

Dedication	
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
<i>Chapter One</i>	
Paris and the ‘Gilded Postwar Harlequinade’: Christina Stead’s Early Satires	27
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
‘Fantastic Outrage’ and ‘A Faint Odour of Malice’: Towards a Degenerative Satire in <i>Letty Fox: Her Luck</i> and <i>Miss Herbert</i> (<i>The Suburban Wife</i>)	58
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
‘A Wilderness of Lies’: History, Truth and the Development of Christina Stead’s Satire during World War II	91

<i>Chapter Four</i>	
‘What’s Wrong with My England?’ Christina Stead’s Satirical History in <i>Cotters’ England</i> and the English Short Stories	126
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
Christina Stead’s Encyclopaedic Vision: <i>I’m Dying Laughing</i> and Twentieth Century History	167
Conclusion	199
<i>Appendix One</i>	
Christina Stead’s Satirical Novels – Composition and Publication Dates	203
<i>Appendix Two</i>	
Types – Known from All Time	204
Endnotes	207
Bibliography	225
Index	243

Introduction

Christina Stead was an accomplished satirist yet critics have chosen to ignore the satire in her fiction. In this study I will look at Stead's novels as inheritors of a tradition of satire that dates back to the Roman satires of Horace and Juvenal. My focus is on Stead's attempt to interpret the history of her own period through satire.

Understanding Stead as a satirist allows us to draw on elements of each of the critical perspectives brought to bear on Stead's fiction from 1934 until the present day. Through this perspective we are freed from thinking of her as an exclusively modernist, realist, expressionist or socialist realist writer. We are enabled to see her as an author whose work encompasses modernist and realist elements as well as offering glimmers of a postmodernist aesthetic. Acknowledging Stead as a satirist also allows us to move towards a view of her work that places her political interests and historical knowledge within a new framework: that of the satirical novel.

The argument in this work is twofold. I seek to establish Stead as a satirist by demonstrating the way in which she adopted the

techniques associated with satire. I analyse the way Stead castigates folly and vice, just as her classical predecessors did, paying careful attention to the tone and style of her denunciatory prose. However, Stead's satire was experimental and transformed the genre as her career progressed. Unlike Juvenal, Stead resisted making moral judgements and her characters are more complex than those found in many traditional satires. Furthermore, in presenting an historically interpretive kind of satire, Stead speculates on the reasons for various social phenomena; thus her satire is analytical. For example Stead analyses the degeneracy she witnessed in the United States of America and the wretched social conditions in England after the war, rather than simply describing them.

Christina Stead's satiric style is evident in her very earliest fiction. Her strength as a satirist is apparent in some of *The Salzburg Tales* (1934) and *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) but it becomes palpable in *The Beauties and Furies* (1936) and in *House of All Nations* (1938), in which Stead begins to present a history of her own times. Each of the satires that follow the encyclopaedic *House of All Nations* forms part of an historical project in which Stead explores the failure of radical political action amongst various members and factions of the left in both the US and England.

Stead's autobiographical novels, *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) and *For Love Alone* (1944), are her least satirical novels. However there are elements in these works that can be regarded as satirical. Satire is frequently blended with other modes of narrative and, in these novels especially, is more usefully recognised as a mode or spirit than as a distinctive genre. Stead explores the ideological blind spots of one 'New Dealer', Sam Pollit, in *The Man Who Loved Children* and exposes some of the more sinister eugenicist theories current during the 1930s in both this novel and in *For Love Alone*. Stead also examines a host of

oppressive features of a male dominated society in these two works. However, the focus of the two novels rests on the protagonist's psychological world and her personal struggle within her milieu. In other words, the historical dimension of these texts is less important than the psychological and artistic journeys charted in each of them.

From *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946) onwards, however, Stead experimented with novelistic satire in a variety of forms. The war economy and the politics of sexual repression and collusion, are the subjects of both *Letty Fox* and *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)* (1976). Stead's focus shifts to American foreign policy, particularly the isolationism of the war years, in two consecutive novels, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (1948) and *The People with the Dogs* (1952). In *Cotters' England* and the English short stories, Stead laments the failure of British socialism whilst she satirises Communist idealism, betrayal, hypocrisy and hysteria in her final, posthumously published, novel *I'm Dying Laughing* (1986). I will argue that this last novel stands as one of the most significant novels of the post-war period.

Writing in 1992, Susan Sheridan floated the idea that *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dogs* extend the scope of satire, but she concluded that Stead cannot be called a satirist in the traditional sense.¹ Sheridan's conclusions arise out of a rather narrow view of satire in which the satirist must retain a fixed distance from her targets. Sheridan points to the ambivalence in some of Stead's portraits and sees no consistent condemnation of vice and folly in the satires. Whilst distancing Stead from the classical satirists, she suggests in her conclusion that Stead's deviations might be looked at in terms of the satire women write.

For the most part, however, critics have not perceived Stead's fiction as satire and their focus on narrative and characterisation, on Marxist discourse and on the psychology of the writer, has not done full justice to the encyclopaedic satirical vision apparent in

Stead's oeuvre. Similarly, few critics have sought to understand Stead's fiction in sequence, or to examine her novels as parts of a whole. Very little attention has been given to the continuities apparent in the works in terms of their composition history and composite life.

Beyond the evidence of the novels themselves, we find in Stead's notes (held by the National Library of Australia) various documents revealing her long-term interest in satire. The very earliest document is a hand-written verse satire Stead wrote during her early Paris years. In her notes for characters and in her diaries Stead demonstrates a consistent interest in satire. Moreover Stead's enduring interest in puppetry also reveals her preoccupation with voice, dialogue and types.²

Stead's notes for a speech entitled 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', (written just before she began work on what became *Letty Fox*) also convey her interest in satire. In this speech delivered in 1939, Stead explained why she favoured a novel with many characters:

Who can take sides in this easy going style? Each new creation is a new comment and the reader really has to make up his own mind through his experience of life in the book. This... wonderfully helps the appearance of reality and again gives the feeling of satire... It also escapes the accusation of 'thesis'—a shallow critic's criticism.³

In the speech Stead drew a strong connection between character and satire, insisting that when a reader is confronted by many characters in the novel, the voices of each character compete with one another so that the voice of the satirist is not the overwhelming voice in the novel. She argues that the many-charactered novel does not present the world in black and white. For Stead the choice of satire was partly philosophical, springing from the assumption that truth has no 'fixed form'. Yet she also

seems to hold to the view expressed by Frank Palmeri, that narrative satire does not claim access to a truth that transcends particular social conditions.⁴ Stead commented in the speech that the many-charactered novel was peculiarly suited to presenting the world of her own times, a period she called the 'age of transition'. It is therefore important to acknowledge the historically referential elements of Stead's satire. As a result, I take issue in this study with interpretations of novels such as *I'm Dying Laughing* as primarily moral comment on human behaviour throughout history.

From *Letty Fox: Her Luck* onwards, each novel is subversive, many-charactered and, in Stead's words, a highly conscious 'novel of strife'. Stead told Bill Blake when she was writing *Letty Fox*, 'I feel splendid, nastier and more Stead-ish each day', affirming her enjoyment of her writing at this time.⁵ In Stead's notes, I found a set of pages listing 231 'types' under a heading 'Types. Known from All Time'. Some of them are further divided into sub-types and names of her friends are placed alongside a few of the types. (See Appendix II) Every one of Stead's characters can be found here, though they are not named. Some of the types listed are predictable, for example the 'dandy', 'the miser' and 'the coquette'. Others are original, for example 'the lackadaisical romantic ideal shopman', 'the woman writer (generally unfriendly)', 'the suburban housewife', 'animal haters', 'puppet haters' and 'the great talker'. The types are very specific and the fact that there are over 200 types listed shows Stead's precision of observation, her interest in 'humours' and her seriousness in this task. It also reveals her enjoyment in thinking of people in this way.

In another folder we find Stead's 'Notes on Character Observation—On first sight and Afterwards' and 'Clarification of the Plot—How to Approach and Write the Great Scene'.⁶ The notes outline Stead's approach to character, and build on her sense of people as types, illuminating her semi-scientific method

of classifying people. For example Stead exhorts writers to consider the following characteristics:

1. Esteem old wives' saws [*sic*] until proven otherwise; examine commonplaces, accepted lies.
2. Remember first logic of—age, sex, domestic and marital standing, finances...
3. Occupation: does this give a special viewpoint?
4. Indications given by race, body-build, colouring, skin, age, gait, tics. Examine systematically, beginning with crown of head proceeding to feet.

In Stead's satires the narrative focuses firmly on the characters as representative of their period, and the reader is given clear cues to read them in this way. Thus in her first full satire, *House of All Nations*, we are told that Jules, the chief of the thoroughly unethical Banque Mercure, is an imaginative member of the 'disordered gilded post-war harlequinade', a reference to the decadence that followed World War I. In Stead's final satire we are never in doubt as to Emily Wilkes's status as a representative of contemporary America; her mouth, we are told, like that on the Statue of Liberty, is 'three feet wide' (6), and 'all her tragedies... explicit in the dying corrupt civilization of our times'. (152)

Stead's diaries from the initial period of writing *I'm Dying Laughing* also reinforce the idea that she wished to present Emily Wilkes as the 'stamp of the nation'.⁷ These diary entries record the work Stead was undertaking in order to research the kind of milieu in which Emily Wilkes Howard lives. Similarly in Stead's Horatian satire *The People with the Dog* the protagonist Edward Massine and his family become representative of American isolationism and decaying liberalism, but they never lose their intrinsic interest as characters. Stead's genius in the satires rests in portraying characters who are not simply mouthpieces of ideology

(in contrast to Susan Sheridan's suggestion)⁸ but who epitomise their cultural and political milieu whilst maintaining their strength and integrity as individual characters.

In the satires, Stead's energies are exercised in the battles between individuals and their society, or perhaps more accurately in their engagement with history, rather than in exploring the individual's psychic quest, no matter how politically resonant that quest may be. For example in *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone* Stead focuses on Louie and Teresa and their quest for personal fulfilment and liberation. In contrast Stead's portrayal of the 'quests' of Letty Fox and Emily Wilkes is no less psychologically convincing but it is more important in terms of its allegorical and historical resonance. The representative power of her characters provides a nexus for the satire and for the political reflections of the novel. Thus Stead's highly individuated protagonists contribute to the allegorical thrust of each novel, through which the satire is conveyed.

Of even greater importance to this study than Stead's diaries and notes on writing the novel, are the hundreds of pages of historical notes she took in order to prepare herself for writing. For example, her notes on pre- and post-war American history reveal hours of study of newspapers, contemporary magazines and works of non-fiction. As I discuss in Chapter 5, Stead chronicled the events that became important in her novels; for example she prepared a daily diary-style document, detailing the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee for every day of 1949. In Chapter 5 I consider Stead's extensive notes for *I'm Dying Laughing* these notes gradually blend into narrative, revealing a subtle shift from the notes and commentaries to fictional prose.

Similarly, Stead's notes in the National Library of Australia reveal that she undertook a study of the state of contemporary England by going to stay with the Dooley family, a family she

deemed somehow representative of post-war England. Stead also combed through books on the early history of the Newcastle region before writing *Cotters' England*. The notes detail the climate, geography and early history of Northumbria. Taken together with Stead's serious attempt to offer 'thick description' after staying with the Dooley family, the notes show us the intensity of her drive to present an ongoing satirical history in fiction.

In her biography of Stead, published in 1993, Hazel Rowley popularises the psychoanalytical approach to Stead's fiction pioneered by other critics.⁹ Rowley portrays an author for whom childhood deprivation forever inhibited her relationships with people, particularly women. This portrait is inaccurate. In a large collection of letters written to Stead by her literary agent, Cyrilly Abels, it is clear that the two women enjoyed a close and supportive friendship over many years.¹⁰ Moreover Rowley's portrait, like that promoted by the earlier critics, obliterates some of the essential qualities of Stead's art. Whilst the biography offers a comprehensive account of Stead's life, Rowley portrays Stead as a bitter and perverse woman, constantly repeating her destructive behaviour patterns, and obsessed with using real figures in her life to create her characters.

The problems with Rowley's interpretation of Stead's fiction are not confined to the biography, however, but are symptomatic of a general confusion about the purpose of satire. Rowley seems unwilling to understand the distortion and exaggeration in Stead's fiction as a feature of satire, but reads it as evidence of neurosis on Stead's part, and restricts her biography to a search for the 'models' for Stead's characters.¹¹

Rowley takes care to establish that Stead's characters (read in this study as highly representative figures—and satiric targets) were always her friends. However she does not connect this with the fact that the authenticity of these real and recognisable lives

gives the satire greater potency and referential strength. For example, the characters participate in what we know to be actual historical events: Robbie Grant is a war profiteer and Emily Wilkes is a genuine socialist who appreciates the difficulties of living up to this ideology whilst also being steeped in the ideology of American capitalism. The proximity of these characters to the activities of actual figures gives the satire additional resonance.

Acknowledging the influence of documentary realist conventions, Rowley observes Stead's efforts to ground characters in 'reality' and her consequent use of documents, letters, actual conversations and 'scrupulous observation'.¹² This recognition, however, does not alter Rowley's censorious conclusions about Stead's use of 'real' people. Rowley and a host of other critics have not considered Stead's commitment to satire, and therefore the imperative to use historically real and authentic figures. Satirists are constrained by their form, and criticisms of Stead on the grounds that she should have disguised her characters more successfully (as have been made by Bill Blech's daughter, Ruth Hall, and are implied by Rowley)¹³ simply ignore this precept of satire. Distortion is clearly fundamental to all satire. However, the fact that Stead did not merely 'invent' her characters is also significant in her role as a satirist. Stead attempts to balance the demands of the 'typical' and representative character with the exaggeration inherent in the satiric portrait.

Hazel Rowley interprets Stead's use of real people in her novels as evidence for a kind of pathological insecurity and nastiness rooted in envy. This raises a related problem in the way critics regard satire and the satirist. For Rowley's condemnations of Stead conform to a wider denunciation of satirists, whereby critics name some particular animus as the reason for the anger unleashed in the satire. In a collection of essays entitled *Theorising Satire*, the editors assert that much of the satire of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while claiming social

reform as its purpose, was in actuality, intent on savaging someone or something that irritated the satirist personally.¹⁴

This criticism dismisses and ignores the importance of the historical content of the satire, trivialising it by consistently looking to the satirist's animus to explain the art. The Australian satirist, David Foster, also contends that the satirist, like a fighter 'sets out to draw blood'.¹⁵ Whilst Rowley does not couch her explanations in such terms, preferring to use the language of psychology, the substance of the criticism is the same: that satire is not so much an aesthetic form as a psychological failing in the satirist. In contrast to the portrait in Rowley's biography, Stead's fiction reveals her transcendence of her own relationships with real people through her art.

Critics such as Ann Blake at times rely on a similar kind of reasoning in attempting to explain the emotional background and content of a novel such as *Cotters' England*.¹⁶ Blake asserts that Stead did not like England, as if this sufficiently explains her indictment of the country and its post-war malaise. Although Blake pays attention to Stead's sympathy with the politics of the left and to her insistence on the power of the material conditions of a life over personality, she still reverts to the personal and interprets *Cotters' England* as 'a precise dramatic version of Stead's own furious disagreement with Anne Dooley, the model for Nellie.'¹⁷

It seems that satire, even more than other forms of fiction writing, elicits crude biographical argument. In my study of Stead's fiction I propose that whether or not Stead liked a person or place was irrelevant to her decision to satirise it. We know that Stead immensely enjoyed living in New York City and yet she satirised it with caustic vigour again and again, in novels such as *Letty Fox*, *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, *The People with the Dogs*, *The Puzzleheaded Girl* (a collection of novellas) and *I'm Dying Laughing*. Similarly Stead's affectionate relationship with her

husband Bill Blake did not prevent her from satirising him in various guises, from the entertaining but ineffective intellectual Alphendéry in *House of All Nations*, to the charming but naive and hapless fall guy David Flack in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*.

In this study, I will examine the intellectual dimension of Stead's satire. When critics rely on their knowledge of Stead's likes and dislikes to explain an attitude adopted in her novels they fail to appreciate the complexity of her art, and the nature of satire. They therefore miss this intellectual dimension of her fiction. Moreover, in disallowing the possibility of a character or place as representative of a period and ideological moment, their criticism ignores Stead's contribution to satire. Unsure of how to interpret the denunciatory anger in Stead's novels, and the furious abuse meted out by her characters in their unforgettable tirades, Stead's critics have often overlooked an important facet of her satire. For the energy, intellectual excitement and sheer engagement of abuse in Stead's fiction provide a degree of dialectic strength in the prose that carries both allegory and theme in the novels. Far from being embittered and closed off from debate, abuse, as Howard Jacobson points out, 'craves conversation'.¹⁸

Stead's satirical novels can be seen in terms of a tradition of the satirical novel that extends back to the eighteenth century, but has antecedents in earlier works such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the prose fiction of Rabelais and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. In fact Stead's *Salzburg Tales* borrows from Chaucer and her novels are littered with references to Rabelais. In *The Beauties and Fries* and *Letty Fox: Her Luck* Stead experiments with the satirical romance in a mode that draws on Cervantes. Stead's fiction also inherits a tradition of parodying the conventions of the novel form that dates back to Fielding's parody of Richardson's *Pamela* in *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews* (1741)—Fielding's novel being the earliest satirical novel in English. Stead parodies the *Bildungsroman*, the romance novel and the epic family saga.

Stead's prose is patently satirical, offering a series of attacks on historically specific targets by way of irony, parody and ridicule. It is difficult to arrive at a satisfactory definition of satire, however, as the term suggests not only a type of literature but also a mode and spirit that may find expression in numerous genres. For example, there is a strong satirical flavour in many of the episodes, speeches and descriptions in three of Stead's novels not normally regarded as satirical: *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone*. Acknowledging the satirical force of these novels, as well as the more obvious satires of Stead's later years, reinforces the idea of satire as a mode of writing rather than as a distinctive and narrowly defined genre.

WHAT IS SATIRE?

The word 'satire' dates from the sixteenth century and comes from the Latin word *satira*, a later form of *satūra*, meaning 'medley'. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* entry states that *satūra* in this case is elliptical for '*lanx satūra* a full dish, a hotch potch'. The *Companion* further defines satire as a poem, or prose composition 'in which prevailing vices or follies are held up to ridicule'.¹⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines satire as 'a discursive composition in verse treating of a variety of subjects, in classical use a poem in which prevalent follies or vices are assailed with ridicule or with serious denunciation.'²⁰ The dictionary definition explains that the word is a specific application of *satūra*, feminine of *satūr* or full, related to *satis* meaning enough. The *lanx satūra* or full dish referred to in the definitions was a dish of fruits and foods comprising many ingredients, offered to the gods.

One of the most compelling aspects of Stead's fiction is its fullness and variety, and its excessive richness of language, ideas and emotions. Therefore the definition draws us to the most striking quality of Stead's style: excess. For several decades critics

defended Stead from charges of excess in her style. But excess is part of satire. As Northrop Frye states: 'A deliberate, rambling digressiveness... is endemic in the narrative technique of satire.'²¹ In Stead's fiction, excess becomes synonymous with all sorts of corruption at both the personal and political level. Stead excels in dramatising the interaction between the two and this is where her satire takes on the ills of the twentieth century in the most radical, vitriolic and impassioned way.

At the literal level, Stead's works deal with excessive behaviour—overeating and gross self-starvation, insatiable lust and rampant materialism. But the excessive behaviour of Stead's characters is not only revealed through their gluttony, sloth and greed but also through the endless verbal excess to which they subject all who come into their orbit. It is in Stead's portrayal of monstrous maniacal monologists that her distinctive satirical style emerges. As Auden stated: 'The commonest object of satire is a monomaniac.'²²

Northrop Frye draws our attention to what he calls the golden age of English satire (the age of Robert Burton, Thomas Nashe, John Marston, and Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty who translated Rabelais) in which 'creative exuberance' is marked by the brilliant

verbal tempests, the tremendous outpouring of words in catalogues, abusive epithets and erudite technicalities which since the third chapter of *Isaiah* (a satire on female ornament) has been a feature, and almost a monopoly, of third-phase satire.²³

The term 'satire' originally referred to a poetic form developed by the Romans. Quintilian deemed satire to be a Roman phenomenon, in spite of the fact that he would have been familiar with Aristophanes and other Greek forms of satire.²⁴ Quintilian was talking about a specific genre of poetry and not a satiric mode

or spirit, which was evident in Greek literature.²⁵ Gilbert Highet proclaims satire as the 'literary equivalent of a bucket of tar and a sack of feathers' and declares its purpose to be to 'cure folly and punish evil'.²⁶ Highet's moralistic view of the purpose of satire is a common one. Northrop Frye argues that 'satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured'.²⁷ Scholars have often insisted upon the moral stance, conservative nature and reformist intentions of satire, when in fact much satire, including that of Christina Stead, is amoral, anarchic and radical in viewpoint. But there is no doubt that the satirical novel exposes folly and vice, using a mixture of rhetorical strategies and literary devices.

Critics frequently regard satire as a low, parasitic or compromised genre, unable to rival tragic drama and epic poetry,²⁸ and a form of writing that simply cannot live up to the complexities of the novel.²⁹ Similarly many critics have failed to see the contemporaneity of satire, its powerful relationship with its own times and its capacity to interpret the history of its own period, stressing instead its universal moral qualities. The concreteness and historical referentiality of satire has been noted by various critics, however, such as Leonard Feinberg and Edward Rosenheim. Satiric targets must be, as Rosenheim suggests, discernible, historically authentic identities.³⁰ Of course the verifiable object of attack need not be a particular person but may be an institution, belief, ideology or idea.³¹ Drawing on the work of Hayden White, I will argue that Stead's satire is grounded in social history and concerned to portray actual historical conditions; at the same time Stead speculates on the underlying ailments of ideology during critical periods of the twentieth century.

Moreover, Stead's satire is distinguished by its inclusion of all the relevant historical information needed by the reader. In other words the reader does not need to 'read history' in order to understand the historical dimension of Stead's texts. Therefore

her fiction avoids what has been seen as a problem by some commentators on satire—its ephemeral nature.

HORATIAN AND JUVENALIAN SATIRE

Stead's fiction reveals the influence of Roman satirists as she experiments with both Horatian and Juvenalian modes. Horatian satire is characterised by irony, urbanity and a gentle tone of mockery, with an emphasis on wordplay, parody and humour. Horace also makes skilful use of the rhetorical flourish. Less didactic than Juvenal, Horace's satires reveal a fine focus, wit, scorn and perhaps a more detached tone than those of the later satirist. Nevertheless, Horace is frank and sometimes sarcastic in his condemnations of greed, lust and ambition. Indeed some of his satire is obscene—particularly Book I, Satire 2, in which he derides sexual depravity and the folly of promiscuity:

In avoiding *one* moral fault fools rush into its opposite.
 Maltinus minces around with his tunic trailing low,
 another has it hoisted obscenely up to his crotch, the refined
 Rufillus smells of sweet cachous, Gargonius of goat.
 There's no middle way. There are some who refuse to touch any
 women

unless their feet are concealed by a flounce sewn on their dress;
 another must have the type that stands in a stinking brothel.
 The sight of a certain aristocrat emerging from a brothel drew
 a famous remark from Cato: 'Keep up the good work!' he said.
 'Whenever a young man's veins are swollen by accursed lust
 he's right to go down to that sort of place instead of grinding
 other men's wives.'

'I'd hate to be praised for a thing like that,'
 Cupiennius says. (He fancies cunts which are dressed in white.)

Book I, Satire 2³²

More vituperative than those of Horace, Juvenal's satires rail with indignation and deliver a graphic rhetorical attack on the particular vices of Rome in Juvenal's time. Horace's precision and elegance makes Juvenal's poetry seem slightly raw and crudely emotional at times. Gilbert Highet identifies the Horatian satirist as someone who basically likes people but finds them to be fools, and the Juvenalian as one who despises people, and wishes to wound them.³³ This polarisation of the modes is not particularly helpful, however, in understanding Stead's satire, which draws on both traditions.

Juvenal continued and built upon the tradition of satire found in the work of Ennius, Petronius, Lucilius, Persius, Horace, and Martial.^{34 35} In his sixteen satires Juvenal offers a gritty and lively report of Rome in its declining years, when the society was corrupt, violent, licentious and decadent. Although the Roman Empire did not break down until 150 years after Juvenal's death, Juvenal's Rome, under the despotic reign of Domitian and then Trajan and Hadrian, was a pale imitation of the earlier republic. Juvenal registers his disgust with the society at every level. He denounces the debauchery and idleness of the so-called nobility (particularly the women), the privations of the poor (and poor writers particularly), the incursions of the newly rich tradesmen, the greed and chicanery of a society that worships money, the folly of poor parenting, the privileges of soldiers and the tolerance of homosexuals. Juvenal's anger and brutal contempt distinguish his satire from that of Horace, Persius and Martial. His satire is obscene:

... She's no joke to cross,
 And her face is a grisly fright. Not till the evening
 Does she visit the baths: only then are her oil-jars and
 The rest of her clobber transferred there. First she works out
 With the weights and dumb-bells. Then, when her arms
 aching,

The masseur takes over, craftily slipping one hand
 Along her thigh, and tickling her up till she comes.
 Lastly she makes for the sweat-room. She loves to sit there
 Amid all that hubbub, perspiring. Meanwhile at home
 Her unfortunate guests are nearly dead with hunger.
 At last she appears, all flushed, with a three-gallon thirst,
 Enough to empty the brimming jar at her feet
 Without assistance. She knocks back two straight pints
 On an empty stomach, to sharpen her appetite: then
 Throws it all up again, souses the floor with vomit
 That flows in rivers across the terrazzo. She drinks
 And spews by turns, like some big snake that's tumbled
 Into a wine vat, till her gilded jordan brims
 Right over with sour and vinous slops. Quite sickened,
 Eyes shut, her husband somehow holds down his bile.

Satire VI, 'Why Marry? A Gallery of Women'³⁶

The satirical targets of Stead's satire at times resemble those of Juvenal. For example, Stead viciously denounces the excessive materialism in the US, the litigious and mercenary zeal of the people, corruption in business, the stupidity and naivete of parents, the predatory behaviour of homosexual women and the deterioration of democratic values. Stead writes with vehement ethical intensity about these and a number of other issues, but she also departs from both Juvenal and Horace. Firstly, as Stead's career progressed, her satirical fiction became much more analytical than that of either Horace or Juvenal. Stead speculates on and explores the reasons for particular social conditions, concentrating for example in *The People with the Dog* (her most gentle satire) on housing in New York and the ramifications of radical isolationism, whereas Juvenal simply registers his disgust with what he finds in Rome. In *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* Stead

implies that there is no difference between men and women in their capacity for scheming and manipulation; however she contextualises women's behaviour against a backdrop of social disadvantage and repression. Juvenal, on the other hand, castigates women in particular for their venality without providing this background.

WOMEN AND SATIRE

The verse satire of Rome began a tradition of misogynistic male-authored satire with female objects. There can be no doubt that Roman society privileged men over women and that the Roman satirists present variations on the theme of man as 'free-thinking male, the male right to speak; man as humorous human, the male right of self-definition; man as thinking being ... man as performing voice'.³⁷ In his study of the Roman satirists, entitled *Writing Down Rome*, John Henderson identifies the fact that some of the best invective found in Roman satirical verse involves women. He explores the wealth of '*pornoglossia*' the verbal violence which exercises social control over women and finds civic solidarity in sexist discourse.³⁸ Henderson treats the extravagant displays of patriarchal phallogocentrism in the poetry of Lucilius, Horace, Persius and Juvenal as paradigmatic.

That strident criticism of women is paradigmatic in satire helps to explain the fact that women rarely adopt the genre. If we look at the history of satire, or the history of the satirical novel, we find few women satirists. More specifically we find few women satirists whose satire resembles that written by men. Even in the contemporary arena women satirists such as Fay Weldon and Alison Lurie favour ironic social satire following the tradition of Jane Austen and George Eliot who wrote a satire of the salon. Brigid Brophy, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood have veered away from realism towards science fiction, magic realism and

baroque fantasy as vehicles for their satire. One further explanation for this phenomenon is the fact that women are not traditionally expected or allowed to be obscene, vulgar, vicious or angry, or to command an encyclopedic knowledge of history and politics.

Christina Stead's satire is all the more remarkable because it breaks down the division between men writing political satire and women writing social satire that has largely prevailed in English literature. Stead's satirical fiction draws on the tradition of biting satire and even reverses the paradigm by taking men and masculinity as its objects. It is angry, obscene and grotesque. Moreover it takes full advantage of the techniques of invective, denunciation, mockery, distortion, exaggeration, sarcasm and wit in order to arouse contempt in the reader for its satiric targets.

Stead's satire also shows the influence of Charles Dickens. In particular we are reminded of Dickens's satirical style in the crowded metropolitan settings of Stead's novels, her use of the grotesque, her palpable sense of injustice in social affairs, her powerfully comic characterisation, her enjoyment of extended metaphors as well as her excursions into fantasy. Stead's fiction, unlike that of Dickens and the Roman satirists, while replete with moral outrage, resists any final moral judgement; her attitude towards her characters is ambivalent. This is related to Stead's comprehensive approach to the ills of the society she satirises. Stead's satire is important in this dimension as it allows her fiction a richer tonal range and greater complexity of characterisation.

Stead's novels progress steadily from the Horatian satire of her earlier fiction such as *The Beauties and Furies* and *House of All Nations* to the more Juvenalian satire of later novels such as *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *Cotters' England*. However, in *The People with the Dogs* published in 1952, Stead returns to the lighter, more urbane Horatian mode of satire, and there is a blend

of modes in Stead's final masterful satirical novel, *I'm Dying Laughing*

The fact that critics have never fully responded to the satirical force of Stead's novels must be set against the general dearth of criticism on satire, and its lowly status in the hierarchy of genres. This is surprising as so many novels (not to mention plays) of the twentieth century operate in satirical modes. The satire of the twentieth century in Britain and the US takes many forms. In the early part of the century it ranged from the richly allusive blend of parody, naturalism and fantasy in Joyce's *Ulysses* to the much more narrowly focused attacks on the Bloomsbury group in Roy Campbell's *The Georgiad* and the social satire of Anthony Powell, Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. Later in the century, the acid satirical comedy of Kingsley Amis dominated the genre in the UK.

That the postmodernist novel is also frequently a satirical novel makes this lack of interest in satire even more perplexing. For example, the fiction of Vladimir Nabokov, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon and William Burroughs is distinctly satirical. Pynchon's use of fantasy and fable and his sweeping surveys of contemporary life link his novels with the allegorical works of Salman Rushdie. Rushdie's novels however, preserve the strong comic elements of traditional satire. Stead's satires, particularly *I'm Dying Laughing* though essentially comic, convey a sense of tragedy and loss in a way that breaks the boundaries of conventional satire. Whereas the work of Nabokov and Burroughs seems dissociated from the political, Rushdie's fiction, like that of Christina Stead, is highly attuned to *realpolitik*

Whilst there is a body of critical and theoretical material on satire, there is very little recent criticism and much of the existing criticism deals primarily with Augustan satirists. Even contemporary critics devote their energies to questions of stylistics, rigid rulemaking and an overarticulated description of

the nature of satiric writing, rather than addressing any of the broader philosophical or political questions raised in modernist or postmodernist satire. The technical aspects of satire are fully explored by numerous critics such as Feinberg, Rosenheim, Hight, Frye and more recently by Dustin Griffin. Michael Hodgart takes an historical approach to satire but his work still restricts itself to a view of satire as an inferior form.

In recent years, two studies of satire have partially broken this deadlock. Steven Weisenburger's *Fables of Subversion* published in 1995, examines the modernist satires of Nathanael West and others as well as the postmodernist satires of Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis, in the context of the American postmodernist novel and twentieth century history. Weisenburger passionately challenges the idea proposed by New Critics that satire is currently a minor form,³⁹ and Northrop Frye's contention that 'it has gone stale and mouldy, and at best is something to be rescued'.⁴⁰ Weisenburger distinguishes between generative satire (satire that retells a fable of a past utopian society and essentially supports the status quo) and degenerative satire (subversive satire that is truly oppositional and subverts hierarchies of value in American society, even those of narrative itself).⁴¹ He focuses on a mode of satire that became prominent between 1930 and 1980 and includes the work of West, Flannery O'Connor, John Hawkes and Robert Coover. Weisenburger's analysis of the growth of American satire this century is relevant to Stead's developing experiments with the genre. I argue in this study that much of Stead's satire can be seen as degenerative.

However the term 'degenerative' could also be used with reference to the Roman satirists. It is not only a feature of modern and postmodern satire. In his recent study of Latin poetry, *Writing Down Rome*, John Henderson sets out to demonstrate that 'a great streak of mockery runs through the mighty canon of Latin classics' and that many of these Latin texts 'smudge substantial lines of

cultural power.⁴² Henderson refers to the ‘caustic catachresis’ of Plautus, Terence, Catullus, Horace, Virgil, Persius and Juvenal wherein these poets satirise their own urge to satirise and subvert Roman values, even those embodied in the act of writing poetry itself.

Frank Palmeri notes the appearance of the parodic satiric narrative between the two world wars in place of the social and psychological novel of the first part of the century. It is no coincidence that Stead was beginning her career at this time and that her first works, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The Beauties and Fries* register this change from a predominantly social/psychological novel to one that is chiefly satirical.

Palmeri argues that certain historical moments, in which cultural paradigms collide, seem to induce or favour the writing of narrative satire. Clearly each of Stead’s satires is embedded in a particular cultural and political milieu in various nations, and her satire registers opposition and despair at specific political events and ideological pathologies. World War II can definitely be seen to have produced a collision of social paradigms.

This collision of social paradigms in the inter-war and post-war years seems to have produced satire in abundance. In Stead’s first novel *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* with its pervasive imagery of decay, imprisonment and darkness, we are forcefully reminded of the satire found in the work of other satirists of the period such as George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh and Aldous Huxley. Like Stead, these three authors were writing from the end of World War 1 through to the onset of the Cold War. In his study of the three satirists, Stephen Greenblatt observes the ‘dehumanisation, futility, madness and evil’ depicted in their works, drawing on Northrop Frye’s description of the demonic imagery present in satire.⁴³ Significantly Stead also portrays madness, futility and dehumanisation in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (with less emphasis on any concept of evil) and her use of demonic imagery recurs in

all of her satires, from *The Beauties and Furies* right through to *I'm Dying Laughing*. While the prose texture, characterisation and preoccupations of the work of each of these three satirists is appreciably different from much of Stead's work, there are significant similarities.

My analysis of Stead's fiction departs from Greenblatt's analysis of satire in several respects. For example, Greenblatt emphasises the use of caricature in the satirical fiction of Orwell, Waugh and Huxley. While Stead's satirical targets are subject to exaggeration, they are also portrayed as normal, rational and attractive figures, as I discuss in Chapter 3 with reference to *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*. Whilst Stead distorts, and features the grotesque in her satires, she generally avoids caricature. As a result the satire produces a heightened sense of realism, and normality of character.

In a novel such as *The Beauties and Furies* there is much that calls to mind the work of Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford, and in the later American satires there are echoes of Nathanael West and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Whilst the direct influence on Stead's fiction of nineteenth and early twentieth century novelists such as Zola, Balzac, Dickens, Doestoevsky and Lawrence has been noted by Stead's biographers and critics, the striking correspondences between the satires of both American and English satirists of Stead's own period have gone unnoticed. In this study I make comparisons between Stead's work and the satirical fiction of Orwell, Waugh and Huxley. I also note the correspondence between Stead's later satirical novels and the plays of Arthur Miller, and draw some parallels between Stead's views and the political opinions of writers such as Orwell, Lillian Hellman and Miller, as expressed in essays, interviews and memoirs. Miller, Hellman and Stead occupied the same milieu yet Stead's place within it has not been adequately recognised.⁴⁴ This study is organised into discussions of various novels according to their

chronological order of publication, with the exception of the discussion of *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)* which appears in Chapter 2 and is therefore a little out of publication order. Stead experienced long delays between composition and publication with some of her novels (particularly as her career progressed, and her political sympathies became stronger), making the publication date an unreliable guide to the context of the particular novel. In order to minimise confusion I have included a table in Appendix I documenting the period in which Stead was writing her satirical novels against their eventual publication year.

In essence I read Stead's work as predominantly satirical in technique and tone; I argue that the novels form part of an historical project and that their referential elements reflect a significant feature of satire. Once the satirical force and apparatus of Stead's fiction is recognised many of the peculiarities of her writing that have puzzled critics solve themselves. My argument attempts to show the importance of reading Stead's fiction as an historical/satirical project rather than concentrating on single novels in relative isolation from one another. I therefore demonstrate Stead's contribution to the development of the satirical novel and redefine her place in twentieth century literary history.

This book is arranged into five chapters, each one examining a different facet of Stead's satire. Chapter 1 focuses on the linguistic flair and exuberance of Stead's witty Horatian satires, *The Beauties and Furies* and *House of All Nations*, drawing attention to the nature of her early experiments with satirical fiction and the genesis of her satirical history. Chapter 2 addresses Stead's use of the picaresque in *Letty Fox: Her Luck*; Stead's peculiar form of humour, her fascination with American society and the vast shift in tone and satirical perspective in the later novel that addresses similar themes, *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*. In Chapter 3 I examine the move in Stead's satirical writing to Juvenalian satire and to the composition of paradigmatic satires. I concentrate on

the denunciatory power of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* with its stinging attacks on war profiteering in the US and the culture that encouraged it, in contrast with Stead's post-war Horatian satire on liberalism, *The People with the Dogs*. Chapter 4 takes up Stead's satirical history, focusing on the use of dialectic and abuse in *Cotters' England* in addition to her use of socialist realist techniques in the English short stories. My final chapter on *I'm Dying Laughing* demonstrates the way in which Stead brings together each of the elements of her satiric armoury in this master satire and deals with Stead's encyclopaedic analysis of Western civilisation, the dynamism of her comic style and her interrogation of history and narrative.

Chapter One

Paris and the ‘Gilded Postwar Harlequinade’: Christina Stead’s Early Satires

The Beauties and Furies, Stead’s second novel and third book, was published in 1936. It is her first fully fledged satire. *House of All Nations*, published two years later, is the first novel in which Stead presents a sustained interpretation of an historical period through her satire. Both novels are raw and experimental and suffer from stylistic and structural weaknesses. However, the two satires reveal Stead’s dawning interest in, and her formidable talent for this genre.

At the time, Stead described *The Beauties and Furies*, as a ‘sexual drama’.¹ Curiously, later in life Stead claimed that the book was not about a domestic situation but a preface to *House of All Nations*?² This comment points to the significant connections between the two earliest satires. Both novels are set in Paris, during the early 1930s and each novel provides a study of Parisian society at the time.

Paris is then the paradigmatic place³ of both satires, just as mid-town Manhattan is the paradigmatic place of *A Little Tea*, *A*

Little Chat. Stead is always ambivalent about the ‘places’ of her satires, each of them characterised by an inordinate energy, vitality and corruption that is both alluring and damning. Paris and New York are alternately celebrated and denounced over the course of Stead’s career, the two cities coming to represent old and new world decay. It is significant that Stead’s ‘human comedy’ begins and ends in Paris. *I’m Dying Laughing* Stead’s final novel, split as it is between the two cities, completes Stead’s exploration of Western civilisation in decline.

These early satires display Stead’s linguistic flair and prodigious wit. Both *The Beauties and Uries* and *House of All Nations* are spectacularly wordy, showy novels in which Stead appears to develop her satiric armoury. For example we see her experimenting with the Horatian style of satire, introducing historical material and producing an encyclopaedic vision through the allegorical world of banking. Both of these novels are benign rather than brutal satires. In them we see Stead’s early use of the Horatian mode, as opposed to her preference for Juvenalian satire in later novels. In this mode Stead is indulgent towards her characters and creates a sense of them as intriguingly amoral.

In her attempt to perfect her satiric method, Stead seems at times to over describe. The effect is of the author inviting the reader to revel in the joys of didactic prose. For example: ‘All the morning Elvira was wayward, languid, idle, untouchable: she looked youthful when she was so.’ (68)⁴ Similarly in *House of All Nations*: ‘The room was hot with dandyism, mystery, international secrets, fantasy, millions.’ (674)⁵ and:

The news, after Jules’s sensational and daring gambling, his speculations, his splendid show, his lone-hand game, his ineffable dudery, the lavishness of his domestic and business establishments, created a great stir. (767)

This breathless profusion of images graphically conveys the excesses of Jules's life. Stead's preference in these early novels for layered description and verbose reinforcement of the central idea produces a raw power of language that gives the satire a simultaneous ebullience and trenchant rhetorical quality. Stead's use of invective, abusive aphorism, denunciatory epithets and the satiric catalogue heightens this rhetorical effect in both satires. A distinct sense of display of form emerges in both the novels. In addition a zest and gaiety exists in these novels that does not endure throughout her oeuvre. However, on occasions, the verbal extravagance of the two novels undermines the purposefulness of the satire. Unlike her later satires the satiric project in these two early satires manifests itself less clearly. In writing *House of All Nations* Stead set out to record her own experience working for the Travelers Bank in Paris during the early 1930s.

Prostitution of one kind or another is the theme of both satires. Not only does the title, *House of All Nations*, refer to an infamous high class Paris brothel, but Stead explores the myriad varieties of prostitution in an era of lax morals and social ferment. Stead does not simply record and document the times but also offers an interpretation of them. As if to announce her Horatian mode, Stead presents an epigraph to *House of All Nations* from Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* which translates as:

...one is compensated or indemnified in the loss of one's innocence by losing one's prejudices; in the society of rogues, where vice shows itself unmasked, one learns to understand them.

House of All Nations presents an encyclopaedic account of stock market manipulation and 'contre-partie' dealing as well as a stinging indictment of greed and chicanery both within and outside the Banque Mercure. Hazel Rowley, commenting on

Adam Constant's words quoted above and the equivocation of the entire narrative towards these 'insane freaks', expresses confusion about Stead's purpose:

Readers are ultimately uncertain as to whether the novel is a hard-hitting exposure of international stock manipulation or a playful and indulgent satire.⁶

The genius of Stead's novel is that it is both; it offers a scathing attack on international banking at this time, in the form of witty, playful and scabrous satire. Typically Rowley relies on autobiographical material to explain Stead's ambivalence in the narrative, stating 'But no wonder Stead equivocated: Bill Blech was one of the pimps.' There is no doubt a grain of truth in this explanation. Bill Blech worked in the Travelers Bank also. It was through him that Stead got her job with the bank. Added to this, Stead's and Blech's employer at the bank, Peter Neidecker, knowingly allowed Stead to spend much of her time at work on her own writing, supplying her with a plushly furnished office to herself.⁷

However compelling these reasons for Stead's attitude toward Neidecker and his cronies may be, they are insufficient as an explanation for her portrayal of character in a novel about a fictional bank, and for her choice and use of genre. The need to fall back constantly on Stead's personal relationships in an attempt to understand her art, makes Rowley's analysis patronising and simplistic. Satire is by definition equivocal, ambivalent, hard-hitting and playful. It is perhaps the Horatian element of indulgence towards the characters that confuses Rowley. But Stead's note of indulgence gives the satire its moral interest and complexity.

Both *The Beauties and Fries* and *House of All Nations* are quirky experimental satires full of ingenious but largely benign

rhetorical performances. In each novel Stead uses the satire to comment on the history of the particular time, though *House of All Nations* displays a sharper historical focus, a more explicit use of allegory, and a greater satiric range than the earlier novel.

THE BEAUTIES AND FURIES

Christina Stead's first comprehensive satire bears the marks of her earliest period of writing. It is a blend of realism and fantasy. In its less naturalistic passages it resembles some of the highly allegorical and grotesque *Salzburg Tales*. Even the naturalistic prose that makes up the bulk of the text is sometimes stilted and overblown, and one of the major characters, Annibale Marpurgo, is a kind of sorcerer. The fantasy elements add to the romantic whimsicality of the novel but at times diminish the satirical vigour.

Incredibly, Stead's publisher Peter Davies sent her the page proofs of *The Beauties and Furies* from London to New York, where Stead was living with Bill and his mother, requesting that she 'cut out all the sections relating in any way to ordinary life and make it an "idyll"'.⁸ Had Stead done this, the satire would have been considerably diminished, if not ruined. Davies's request seems to have been one of many made by Stead's publishers that reveal a profound lack of understanding of her work. Fortunately in this case the suggestion did not derail publication altogether. On publication, however, the strange mixture of the real and the fantastic only served to confound critics.

The Beauties and Furies is the story of Elvira Western, an English beauty lured to Paris by the ardent pleas of a young student, Oliver Fenton. Elvira leaves her staid well-to-do English doctor husband of eight years to live with Oliver while he works on his doctoral thesis on the French workers' movement of the late nineteenth century. The satire of the novel centres around the decadence, pretentiousness and parasitic behaviour of the two

lovers in their pursuit of self-gratification. Sham socialists and counterfeit intellectuals are the targets of the satire here in the first display of Stead's life-long irritation with such pretenders.

Oliver Fenton is an early, more callow version of Jonathan Crow and many of the conversations that take place about women and their invidious position in the political economy foreshadow those of *For Love Alone*. Stead is somewhat indulgent towards Oliver in this Horatian satire. She adopts a gentle mocking tone of disapprobation rather than one of vehement contempt. Similarly, Elvira can be seen as a forerunner of Eleanor Herbert, a woman completely manufactured by her culture and complicit with it. Elvira is derided by the satire but not with a fraction of the virulence unleashed on the protagonist of *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*. In *The Beauties and Furies* the absence of vitriol allows the satire to sustain itself as a romance.

The Beauties and Furies was clearly an experiment for Stead, a foray into the world of satire. The alternately alluring and disconcerting blend of romance and fantasy in the novel softens its satiric thrust. The erotic descriptions of Coromandel's encounters with Oliver add to the romance in the novel and also serve to illustrate Oliver's transparent and pathetic egotism. It seems as if Stead deliberately restrains the satire by infusing the plot with sorcery and the prose with self-consciously whimsical and rococo conceits. The fantasy elements, specifically in the parts where Marpurgo works his outlandish 'magic', threaten at times to diminish the naturalistic substance of the novel, but Marpurgo's arrogance and hypocrisy strengthen the satire in other ways. Moreover, the extremes of corruption and fortitude embodied in Marpurgo and Coromandel heighten the sense of moral 'dialectic' in the satire.⁹

The satire mocks the idea of progress in history at every turn, through the various references to fear of a right wing coup and the general panic about whether France can resist the fascist fervour

of her neighbours Germany and Italy. Progress in enlightened relations between the sexes also proves impossible in the city of light and love. Stead focuses her exploration of the depravity, exploitation and immorality of the period in her portrayal of the ubiquitous prostitutes in the satire. Always hungry, the prostitutes of the Left Bank recite Baudelaire as a 'bait' for pretentious students like Oliver. Stead satirises the men's sentimentalised notions about these women in a chilling dialogue.

Throughout the novel the poetic beauty of Paris is set against the grimness of conditions for the working poor and the violent political skirmishes that took place in 1934. A pervasive sense of menace and decay provides the background to the 'sexual drama' acted out in the bars, hotels and cafes of the city. Stead's description of the 'metropolis of sin' in the satiric catalogue quoted below gives her 1930s documentary style a Dickensian quality. The crowded squalor of the metropolis and the insistent detail, so much a feature of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Hard Times* and *Bleak House* are mirrored in Stead's two earliest satires. Similarly Stead's profusion of images, the presentation of episodes and short scenes in rapid succession and the fantastically grotesque characters of these novels, particularly Marpurgo and Raccamond, imbue these early novels with a Dickensian aura.

We are also reminded of Alvin Kernan's definition of the 'scene of satire' as 'always disorderly and crowded, packed to the very point of bursting. The deformed faces of depravity, stupidity, greed, venality, ignorance, and maliciousness group closely together for a moment...'¹⁰

Similarly Stead's descriptions reflect Kernan's appreciation of the 'jumble of material things'¹¹ inherent in satire:

A puff of heat and the smell of roasting chestnuts welcomed Marpurgo as he turned down the rue du Faubourg Montmartre, one of the busiest streets in Paris. His gaudy, busy, populace-loving soul

rejoiced as he thrust through the small-shouldered crowd, past the glass doors and nickel bars of cafés serving late breakfasts of coffee, beef extract, white wine and little breads, past the loafers standing in the doors of bag-shops, shoe-shops and theatres, of passport-photographers, erotic underwear manufacturers, past pimps, pickpockets, unemployed workmen and theatrical artists, girls with shiny bags and high heels, restaurants and every brand of little commerce. (36)

Stead's satire is full of 'gaudy, busy, populace-loving souls'. Marpurgo is the first of many who wander the streets of their cities, 'rejoicing' in the crowd, the smells and the interminable commerce around them. It is in such passages that the satire, with its vigorous listing of particular types of people reminds the reader of a Hogarth painting or a scene from Dickens. In expressing Marpurgo's familiarity with his milieu, Stead invites the reader to immerse him or herself in the quotidian, the metropolitan and the profane.

But the sense of decay offered in these two satirical novels is less oppressive than that of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* in which the city is associated with images of paralysis and disintegration. The grotesque imagery of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is stranger and more sinister than the images of decay in *The Beauties and Fries* and *House of All Nations* in which Stead's levity diminishes the sense of menace. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, with its depiction on the very first page of scavengers who live on the edge of the world, therefore, has more in common with the satire of George Orwell than Stead's first two wholly satirical novels in which the comic mode takes precedence.

In contrast to the squalor of Paris (the 'metropolis of sin') evoked by some parts of the satire, Stead describes the city, with its languid charm, as one of the 'beauties'. Unlike most of her later satires, Stead's paradigmatic place here is one of striking moods

and gentle beauty. Stead's language is lyrical. For example the sky is frequently described in its pastel hues, as 'rose aproned' (101) and 'mallow-leaf'. (232)

The vivacity and whimsical humour of *The Beauties and Furies* immediately invites a relaxed complicity from the reader. It seems at times to be a blend of the styles of Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford. The portrayal of Oliver and Elvira in their shallow, hedonistic pursuit of gaiety is very similar to some of Mitford's characters. For example Elvira, sounding like a Mitford heiress, says on finding herself to be pregnant, 'Oliver, it would be fearfully inconvenient if we had a baby, wouldn't it?' (119) The novel also resembles Mitford's fiction in its frothy exuberance and absence of moral condemnation.

At another level, however, the characters are closer to those of Waugh. Oliver's boundless opportunism and infantile ego and Elvira's selfish instability convey a similar decadence to that of John Beaver and Brenda Last in Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* (1948). Waugh's novel is much darker than Stead's but some of the themes also echo those found in Waugh's fiction of the late 1930s. For example, the sense of an old civilisation crumbling and old values being eroded emerges through the romantic descriptions of Paris, and Stead's portrayal of the lace-making craft and its mechanisation. Marpurgo and his employer Antoine Fuseaux lament the passing of a gentler era:

Raguse is a gentleman manufacturer. We're not in the candlestick age... He ought to wake up and realise lace is proletarian now. (41-2)

The sense of lost aesthetics is strong in the passage in which these lines appear but Stead is clear-eyed in her acknowledgment of her own period as 'the age of vandals'. A few pages after the discussion about 'proletarian lace' Georges Fuseaux articulates his own sense of despondency and proffers a view of history:

When I first went into this business I had a few illusions. I thought I was doing something for the women when I got out a nice new pattern or bought up a good line and let them have it cheap. I thought the things went on getting better from year to year and the human race was benefited—progress, you know... Now I see there just ain't any progress. Progress is just a train that stops at every station to take up the eight-o'clock workers and drop them in town, and then stops at every station coming back in the evening to put them down again. (51)

Once again the character expresses a sense of disillusionment in what was his falsely egalitarian perception of modern lace-making techniques. In this passage Stead presents a patently anti-progressivist notion of history.

The satire of the novel is most acute in its portrayal of Oliver and Elvira and their narcissistic and infantile behaviour. Oliver's socialist sympathies emerge as pretentious. Both Oliver and Elvira entrench themselves as captives of their class and gender, all the while mouthing a critique of conventional morality. Posturing in the bars of Paris, Oliver and Elvira play at grand romance, but their love is shown to be nothing but self-love. Stead gently satirises hackneyed notions of romantic love, and also mocks clichéd notions of conventional married love as necessarily stultifying and unfulfilling. The satire focuses on three love triangles, Oliver's boundlessly fickle nature and Elvira's self-centred indolence. While Stead mocks every character for his or her inability to love exclusively and truly (Oliver even says to Elvira 'If I had not met you it would have had to be another like you' (92) and she says to him 'all men are the same, practically' (80)), at the same time the satire sparkles in its portrayal of promiscuity and infidelity. The sordid and the erotic are perilously close as the novel becomes a kind of bedroom farce, with Marpurgo manipulating the action.

Oliver's idealistic enthusiasms are ridiculed from the very outset as are Elvira's equally rigid prognostications about socialism. Their thoughts are exposed as trite and outrageously self-important. Describing their retreat to Fontainebleau, the tone is heavy with irony and highly amusing:

They could only stay in Fontainebleau a week. They heard that Trotsky was living incognito in Barbizon.¹² This displeased Oliver, and the brown twiggy forest road, along which amazons sometimes rode, heard his partisan acerbities.

One day, she put her hand to his lips. 'I hate politics, Oliver.' He pointed with a grim smile to the Palace, in whose grounds they walked. 'You are different from me: that nonpareil recalls to me the ruined people that built it. I look at nothing without asking, whence, why, whither?'

'Under socialism, you'd never have a thing as beautiful as that,' said the woman. 'Life would be robbed of beauty. You would have everywhere clinics for consumption and workmen's accidents. I prefer it this way... How beautiful is this silence, even this melancholy isolation! I love the decay of this palace, this tomb closed on so many rowdy centuries... I love decay,' she cried restlessly, with tears in her eyes. 'I hate the athletic, gymnasium world of oudarniks you want to build.'

'And I couldn't be bothered working at all if I didn't believe in the edification of socialism. I am a man, I want to join the front ranks of the first men of our time: I want to work marvels and see the future.' (92)

A few minutes later Oliver declares fatuously: 'I'm not at all heroic, you know: I like marshmallows and ice-cream sodas. I wouldn't give up my afternoon porto for the proletariat.' (93) In spite of his misogyny and parasitism, Stead enjoys Oliver and each

of her other satiric targets in this novel. While mocking his puffed up heroism, she indulges him by allowing him to defend vigorously the lot of the workers against Marpurgo's cynical put-downs. Returning from a United Front meeting Oliver is fired up with proletarian pride:

He had been called 'comrade' so often during the day, had seen so many red flags and so many sinewy arms lifted into the air, had heard the 'Internationale' and 'The Young Guard' so often, that he was no longer himself, a piecemeal student grubbing on collegiate benches, but a glorious foot-soldier in an army millions strong, sure of battery, but sure of victory. (138)

Through speeches like the one Oliver makes to Marpurgo about the United Front we receive the specific historical references of the text, the panic about fascism through which Stead attempts to capture what she perceived to be the spirit of the Front. This element of the novel refers to a widespread feeling on the left that the right had used the street agitations of 6 February 1934, in which people were killed and wounded, to seize the left's rightful control of the Parliament.¹³ At the same time, Oliver's feisty retort to Marpurgo reinforces the sense of Oliver's romantic view of the uprising. Marpurgo's chilling predictions of a 'Nazi paradise' in France are met with indignant rage:

Isn't it better to have socialists and communists a majority in the parliament and the city council than to have a majority of foul Chiappe and his gangsters?¹⁴ (141)

However as the story continues we are only too aware that Oliver is a 'piecemeal student grubbing on collegiate benches'. He accepts whatever handouts and largesse are on offer, even money from Elvira's husband, while spending his time with Coromandel, Blanche and various other women.

In Elvira, Stead presents an articulate woman who marshals the discourse of the woman as victim, but steadfastly refuses to seize her independence. For all her talk of the need for equality in relationships we are told right at the beginning that 'She wanted so to keep him enslaved, not to gratify him.' (31)

In a comic passage early in this erotically charged novel, the narrator describes Elvira during one of her long, sensual baths. Prior to this scene, which takes place when Oliver and Elvira have been together only a short while in Paris, we learn that 'She loved taking baths of all sorts, hot-water baths, Turkish baths, sunbaths. She lived through her skin and would have liked to have slaves to massage her and roll her in oils and powders.' (34)

Stead's extended description of Elvira's bath presents a gently mocking satiric portrait not merely of a sensualist, but of a woman whose beauty is her sole source of power, and who can only conceive of herself as the object of another's desire. Deriving inordinate pleasure from looking at herself, Elvira needs to be constantly looked at by others, admired, worshipped and indulged. Far from this being a function of Stead's own insecurities about her appearance, or evidence that she herself could only 'appraise a woman's beauty with the sexualised gaze normally associated with males', as Rowley suggests, Stead portrays Elvira with insight and understanding.¹⁵ This remarkable episode reveals the sophistication of her analysis of a woman imprisoned by a manufactured and imposed sexuality. The writing is striking for its penetrating psychology and deft humour:

She got up, walked languidly to the dressing-table, undressed and made poses before the long mirror. Then she walked slowly, with a childish swagger, to the bathroom, turned on the water, and lay naked on the bed till the bath filled. She spent a long time in the bath, massaging herself, washing herself over and over with love for her soft skin, watched herself floating in the green water, like a strange

sensuous water-animal, and got out to get her hand-glass so that she could see how she looked to strange eyes. She examined her head, neck and breast, grimaced to see how she looked when she was crying. (69)

Elvira is totally self absorbed; her obsession with her appearance and with her own material comfort to the exclusion of everything else reinforces our sense of her shallow, almost amoral nature. Only one other character in Stead's entire cast is as meticulous in his bathing ritual as Elvira: the rogue war profiteer Robbie Grant of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* While the decadence and vanity of such self regard is noted, Stead's portrayal of Elvira is not as damning as that of Grant, nor is it as censorious as her revelations of Eleanor Herbert's sexual exhibitionism in Stead's later novel *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*. Instead she portrays Elvira as a pathetic, weak and insubstantial creature of exquisite beauty. Elvira's sensuality is a point of interest in the satire, like the eating habits of other satiric targets in Stead's oeuvre: destructive and decadent for its excess—not inherently bad, but prostituted.

Stead's derision of Elvira is as blatant and abundant as Elvira's vanity and hypocrisy. But she denounces Elvira through humorous exaggeration. For example at one point she describes Elvira in conversation with Oliver: 'She let her eyes, universes of self-absorption, roll over him.' (77) Stead's tone and imagery here is reminiscent of Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock':

Then gay ideas crowd the vacant brain,
 While peers, and dukes, and all their sweeping train,
 And garters, stars, and coronets appear,
 And in soft sounds, 'Your Grace' salutes their ear.
 'Tis these that early taint the female soul,
 Instruct the eyes of young coquettes to roll.
 Canto I, lines 83–88

When she learns she is pregnant Elvira is horrified by the prospect of losing her beauty and of living poorly, and after much indecision ultimately returns to her prosperous husband Paul. Stead renders Elvira's distress and superficiality with graphic imagery and an amusing satiric catalogue:

She scanned the faces and get-up of every mother with a child, thinking, 'I will be something like that.' She saw this evening that they were dusty, drawn, violently fatigued and acid faces: the children looked like blobs of flesh, their clothing rubbishy. 'Oh, not for me,' she thought, and a slight nausea began in her. She thought of her eight long quiet home-years since she married Paul, her polished floors, washed carpets, recovered chairs, her new bed-linen which felt like silk, her underclothing of silk and lawn all put away in piles, her curtains, silver dressing-table ware, vases, doyleys, the olive, yellow and smoke-blue bedroom, the red and walnut dining-room, her work-basket with an olive silk bag. She thought of her soaps and cleansing materials always in stock, and her dusters neatly arranged, the coats hanging in their entry, the shawled trees waving against the sky in summer... If she had a baby, she would have to have a home at least as large, a nurse who would sleep with it in a separate room, and look after the washing, the bottles. She could not have it in a hotel, with Oliver without a position... (133)

Once again Stead conveys the satire through a list of material things—ironically, the ordinary household items Elvira treasures. The level of detail in Stead's prose and her attention to the specific qualities, colour and place of each thing is a feature of satire that Stead adopts here and returns to again and again in each work after this.

The satire climaxes in a speech Elvira makes before Oliver, Paul, Elvira's brother Adam and Paul's cousin Sara, who have all arrived in Paris to attempt a reconciliation between the estranged couple. Seated at a cafe they are forced to listen to Elvira's self-

congratulatory declamations and clichéd conclusions about womanhood. Her language is spectacularly trite and her earnest, confessional tone ludicrous. Referring to Paul she claims ‘he turned me into a cabbage to ornament his back garden’ (174) whereas Oliver has ‘made me creative’. (176)

As I have suggested Elvira frequently articulates views about the position of women in society that are taken up with greater seriousness in *For Love Alone*. For example she is incisive in her candid remarks to Oliver towards the end of their romance:

After all, we’re both in the same game, in the end. You’re living on what you can get by retailing a sort of scholastic small-talk, and I’m living by yessing men. I’m luckier than they are, that’s all. That’s why the marriage system holds up under all the attacks. The profits are better than free love. (345)

Her own behaviour, up until this cynical admission, consistently undermines the currency of her views, but like Marpurgo, and many of Stead’s other satiric characters, she is both satirist and target at different stages of the novel. In her disappointment with Oliver and his constant infidelity she is biting:

‘What a damned traitor!’ she cried, beside herself with impatience. Her smoke-trails, as she paced about, were like wraiths waiting about the ceiling to topple on Oliver’s much-cursed and oft-coddled black topknot. (You sinful, swart, shallow skull, you oval nut with dark shrivelled juicy sweetmeat inside, already consumed by too much passion and irregularity!) (349)

It is via the enigmatic sorcerer figure Marpurgo that Stead produces much of the satire directed towards the two protagonists, Oliver and Elvira. Marpurgo’s commentary on the lovers and his cynical conversations with them provide some of the sharpest satire in the novel. Marpurgo declares Paris hard to leave:

'She has many beauties—and furies.' (226) He refers sarcastically to Oliver's three lovers as Alecto, Megaera and Tisiphone.¹⁶ But Marpurgo is also a figure of fun. He is villainous and treacherous but through his plotting Elvira learns of Oliver's numerous infidelities. While Marpurgo does not escape Stead's lashing tongue, he frequently pronounces on the doomed state of Paris society and the current factional strife. This 'acid misanthrope' makes some astute observations: the 'chattering café crowd make me tired with their scandal-mongering. You feel they know all about people but the truth.' (219) A lonely and melancholy man, Marpurgo is a creature of envy. He, too, is intellectually pretentious, a 'self-styled Trotskyite'¹⁷ with no real beliefs of his own, reading English philosophy journals and *Éditions du Carrefour* 'He did not understand it well, but he was a slave of symbols, and this was a symbol of "culture"'. (243) Constantly mimicking and ridiculing others, Marpurgo's verbal excesses become the focal point for much that is excessive and overblown in the novel. Through this grotesque 'resourceful mountebank' Stead exercises her developing linguistic muscle with humorous but often uncertain results. For it is never clear what Marpurgo's real place is in the narrative and his sorcery does not amount to anything significant.

Rather, Marpurgo's function seems to be as a vehicle for Stead's display of wit. His invective is astonishing for its vehemence and for its use of strange and archaic expressions. His language is that of a wizard, a trickster of Jonsonian or Faustian colour:

I'm a virtuoso in decadence, disintegration, mental necrosis: if I sit at home, I corrode myself: I can't work in a vacuum. Out, I gather little eschatological flowers to meditate in the hectic nights of the bacillus of Koch. Each of your sorrows is for me an hour of nepenthe: in that hour I build up an endoped dome of misery and failure, doubt

and dissolution, ridicule and insufficiency beyond inferno, Eblis, opium, Xanadu... (302)

The first of Stead's monomaniacs, Marpurgo, is a master of abuse, and his language is both amusing and chilling. Towards the end of the novel he berates Oliver and condemns himself:

You're a pure physical function, docile to your moons, appetites, secretions: you think to give your brain the little bit of exercise for which it was, by Lamarckian generations, fitted. Religiously, you're a eudaemonist: in economics, a utilitarian, I'm sure: Marxism is just the newer label for a smart young man who must be up to date. (324)

In the final analysis Marpurgo is far more corrupt than either Elvira or Oliver. As Coromandel's father suspects, 'Marpurgo was a shuttle, void of guts, spinning out his thread endlessly.' (258)

Coromandel Paindebled, whose name alone signals Stead's satirical impulse, emerges as a beautiful, strong minded young designer and operates as an unusually attractive figure; for Stead's satires rarely portray minor figures of such mettle. However Coromandel is also gently satirised. When Oliver first goes to her house she is identified as 'the youthful Juno'(164) and she is described as a flower:

...young, softly nurtured, thriving. She had a pale rose flush at the moment, and a fine waxy bloom. (165)

Coromandel's fevered imagination and her intense desire for love is deliciously mocked in an episode in which she spends an evening with Marpurgo, who casts a spell on her. The rich texture of Stead's prose here distinguishes the strand of fantasy from the realist bulk of the novel. In addition its stinging quality also serves to reinforce Stead's sustained satire on human folly and love.

Even as she ridicules Coromandel and her libidinous fantasies, Stead indulges her character by offering us her naive sensual subconscious life. While the juxtaposition of fantasy sequences and satiric romance is somewhat uneasy and shifting in *The Beauties and Furies*, Stead's whimsical and sensual language contributes a dream-like comic backdrop to the rather more mercenary transactions that take place in the romance between Oliver and Elvira, as well as Oliver's many dalliances with prostitutes. Moreover the imaginative range and comic licence of the fantastic sequences in the novel link this kind of satire very strongly with satire from both the eighteenth century, in particular that of Swift, and with the 'magic realist' satire of Salman Rushdie in our own period. Although Stead never worked in this kind of mode again in her novels, her experiment with a particular kind of satire marks an important first stage in her development as a master satirist.

Each of Stead's satiric victims in this experimental satire is treated with indulgence and Stead draws on a tradition of satirical romance and fantasy in what is an uneven but aesthetically mesmerising creation. *The Beauties and Furies* can be seen as Stead's first satirical novel. With its alternately romantic and squalid descriptions of Paris, its collection of 'flabby souls' and its lamentations upon a declining culture, the novel provides a very strong introduction to Stead's next satire, *House of All Nations*

HOUSE OF ALL NATIONS

House of All Nations is Stead's first encyclopaedic satire. It is also her first sustained attempt to produce a history using the vehicle of satire. The tone of the novel is more cynical than that of *The Beauties and Furies*, and there is an impending sense of disaster throughout. Stead vividly portrays the recklessness of the era, the moral poverty and spiritual torpor that coincided with the rise of Hitler. More specifically she chronicles the financial alarm and

instability that beset Europe at the time. Set in Paris in the years 1931–2 the novel is an epic work, detailing the machinations and fortunes of the Banque Mercure, based on the Travelers Bank, where Stead and Blech worked from 1929 until 1934.¹⁸ Stead admitted later in her life that it was as close a picture of the Travelers Bank as she could paint without running into libel problems.¹⁹ Ruth Hall, Blech's daughter, also maintains that Stead's depiction of the Travelers Bank in *House of All Nations* was fair.²⁰ From her comfortable office at No. 18 rue de la Paix, Stead spent her time making notes on characters and conversations.²¹

It wasn't until 1936, spending the summer in Spain, that Stead began to write *House of All Nations*. She spent her days writing and her evenings discussing the characters of the bank with Bill who wrote out a summary of the significant political and financial events between May 1931 and July 1932.²² The novel was completed the following year, and published, to mixed reviews, in both England and the US in 1938.

House of All Nations is a curious blend of Dickensian grotesquerie and 1930s documentary realism. In this novel Stead abandons fantasy for realism, offering a highly ambitious mock epic satire of character and history. Like *The Beauties and Eries* the prose style is didactic, blunt and at times the excessive quality of Stead's language gives way to overwriting. The novel is overly long, the relentless twists and turns in the plot become tedious and the characters are too numerous to hold the reader's attention. Yet this is the novel in which Stead's distinctive satiric aggression becomes apparent for the first time.

The energy and excitement of the novel and Stead's sense of adventure is captured in the one hundred and four scenes that replace chapters. Stead was interested in cinematic techniques²³ and on the whole the scenes give the text a dramatic immediacy and fluency often lacking in Stead's other novels. In the comic one-liners that litter the conversations of the novel, there is a

touch of the glamorous Hollywood style gangster or tycoon, or perhaps as Bruce Holmes has suggested of Jules, an air of Mr Gatsby.²⁴ To foreground the cynicism and greed of these men, Stead lists some of the more outrageous one-liners on an opening page under the heading 'Credo'. In doing this she prefaces her work as moral satire.

As I have suggested, in both *The Beauties and Fries* and *House of All Nations* Stead focuses on a specific locale, the paradigmatic place—Paris, and the life of pretentious intellectuals and corrupt bankers. In the Horatian mode of these early satires she is as interested in exposing vice as celebrating the energy and gaiety of the 1930s, a period of decadence and social chaos. While in a strictly formal sense the two satires can be said to present a blend of fiction and history, as Bruce Holmes suggests, the two genres cannot be separated so readily in these or Stead's other satires. History inheres in the characters and their conversations and is not just apparent in isolated passages. Stead's themes are rooted in historical particularities. To borrow David McCooey's terminology, each book offers a kind of testimony, a social document containing verifiable material, even though it is technically a novel and therefore not subject to the checks of autobiography or history described by McCooey.²⁵

When Adam Constant declares of the bankers 'I'll show that they are not brilliant, not romantic, not delightful, not intelligent; that they have no other object but their personal success and safety' (80) the irony is palpable, for the strength of the satire is in demonstrating the 'brilliance, romance, intelligence and generosity' of these 'gangsters'.

Stead revels in the amorality of her satiric targets in this novel as she explores the relationship between character and history with humour and insight. It is her understanding of the 'great exploiters' and their deeds that proves remarkable in the novel—the fact that this is not simply a lengthy indictment of greed. Like

a good historian Stead attempts to treat her characters, her historic figures, with empathy, and to look disinterestedly at them. She does not apologise for their behaviour: on the contrary she castigates and denounces. Her project is to understand the ideological context and historical conditions that led people to behave in the way that they did. It is not redemptive. Rather, Stead brings the details and idiosyncrasies of certain personalities to life, magnifying and exaggerating in order to maximise her satirical effects.

Decline and social turmoil are constant topics of conversation in the bank, with the bankers becoming alternately complacent—‘Life goes on! Life goes on under the corruption of the Roman Empire’ (17)—and panic-stricken about their own fortunes. But their smug observations of England’s misfortunes are prescient in this study of Europe in collapse: ‘Nothing that can happen now can benefit the British Empire. It can only disgorge.’ (335)

House of All Nations is littered with images of decay and pestilence. Bald and unequivocal, the narrative frequently offers summaries, and the language becomes stronger as the novel continues: ‘The world was really crumbling: all speculators hoped to make money out of the death and decrepitude of something or other.’ (634) There are frequent allusions to venereal diseases, strange behaviour often being attributed to their effects: ‘every man in the board room, from time to time, was suspected or known, or reported by his best friends, to have just contracted syphilis or gonorrhoea.’ (635)

Through her pervasive imagery of decay Stead builds up the allegory of the bank as representative of society: corrupt and diseased. Right at the beginning, we are immersed in imagery of desiccation and plague, when Alphendéry, who frequently reflects the view of the narrative as a whole, visits Jean Frère’s country home, where:

...swarms of small black caterpillars had attacked a great number of green things in the neighbourhood. They ate up the leaves and

covered the bare branches with their horrible black masses and their giant white cocoons. They confirmed Alphendéry's worst suspicions about the country. (75)

But it takes the bankers some time to show concern about 'the country'. It is a game of holding out for as long as possible, before the inevitable collapse.

Predicting ruin for the English royal family Alphendéry warns: 'You've got to be careful with the King... He'll be a danger one of these days like all stale, rotten, institutions. One party will use him and then one class or another will have to get rid of the whole family.' (325) 'Stale, rotten' institutions crowd together in this 'novel of strife'. Banks, city governments, the judiciary, the aristocracy are all revealed to be corrupt and parasitic. While the satire surveys each institution, it offers an anatomy of the bank and its clients. Again Stead offers an explanation for the decadence and recklessness of the clientele, not content with mere denunciatory description. Alphendéry explains the 'cosmopolitan clients':

...Jules with his imaginative schemes, lavish spending, gay antics, disordered gilded post-war harlequinade, his playing bowls when the Armada is sailing down on him, appeals to these war boys, who have never settled down from flying, thieving, rampaging, giving orders, camping with the boys, raping the girls, spending their leave in cabarets and all the other sublunacies of the day, as it saw the sun fourteen years ago. These rich young men had a grand spree then and they never want to grow up. Jules understands them. (326)

House of All Nations stakes up the theme of decline first explored in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, but with renewed urgency and vigour. The declining economies of Europe produce a siege mentality in the Banque Mercure, where opportunism is rank, where cynicism reigns. 'The history of everything is down from

now on' exclaims Jules, 'The only investment now is in a crash. I saw that in 1929... We've got to get ready to make money in a declining economy!'(105–6) The novel is full of lengthy conversations and polemic, in which Alphendéry and others speculate on what the ailing government of Ramsay MacDonald can do in England—increase taxation, devalue the pound, print currency or issue more bonds; what will happen in all the other European nations; and how they can capitalise on the crisis. But the situation in the banking world is so grim that Bertillon is tempted to 'scram'. The collapse of major banks all around them, the threat of war and the bankruptcy of so many nation states forces Jules to consider 'shutting up shop'; he exclaims 'Don't you see the time is close when they simply won't let us make money any more?' (195)

Stead refers to the collapse of the Credit-Anstalt, the bank that provided funds for the bulk of Austrian industry and the demise of German banks,²⁶ the 'overthrow of the Labour Government, with the formation of a National Government "to save the pound"' (463) This historical detail is interwoven with the socialist analysis of Alphendéry, reinforcing the strong documentary quality in the text but also giving this banking novel rhetorical flair. That Alphendéry's macroeconomic analysis is almost always in direct contradiction to the 'titanic pickpocketing' schemes of the bankers sustains the ironic tension between the protagonists of the satire throughout. The humour of Alphendéry's lugubrious and brilliant diatribes also strengthens the satiric portrait of this chronically irresolute man. That Alphendéry's gargantuan knowledge of economics proves so ineffectual also contributes to the irony of the novel.

History is presented by the narrator both through the drama but also with the same dispassionate tone and steely precision that becomes so much more prominent in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *I'm Dying Laughing*

The panic deepened in France despite all efforts, and by June, 1932, all values, however expressed, whether in paper or gold, were at the lowest point of the century. Recovery attempts had begun on a grand scale.

In the USA the fall of the Dawes Bank in Chicago foreshadowed the moratorium of March, 1933, but the panic was staved off in order to produce an election boom for Hoover: a campaign was worked up even before the Kreuger suicide and crash.

In England the government reversed the price of gilt-edged by conversion, and the English, in the hope of profit in the Empire, accepted the conversion, and paid their taxes as they were requested. The world was really crumbling... (633–4)

In this passage we see Stead's use of a more polemical style usually found in history texts. The final sentence is the only reminder of an engaged satirist and comic storyteller at work. The genius of Stead's satirical history in *House of All Nations* emerges through her speculations about causes; she doesn't simply point to the usual reasons given for this state of collapse, that is, the appalling pressure of debts brought about by war reparations which were deemed 'wicked' and 'absurd' by H.G. Wells.

Instead she reveals the human dimension of the capitalist system at this stage of twentieth century history, and the greed that leads to financial collapse. The banks, of course, are simply microcosmic nations, with no real commitment to communal survival or group prosperity. That the corruption is so entrenched in France provides, for Stead, the final irony. For France is the country in which Stead's satiric history begins and ends. The gerontocracy of France that was so stable at the beginning of the 1930s, elaborately allegorised via the gold standard in the novel, has utterly collapsed by the end of the decade.

Jules Bertillon, the director of the bank, is one of Stead's major satiric targets in the novel. Yet he is one of her most alluring creations. Many of the characters, including the socialists Alphendéry and Constant, fall under his spell. Described as 'a fragile, tall, elegantly dressed young man, with a bowler hat, a fur collar, and an antique Dutch face, with long nose tip biting the air', (18) Jules provides the focus and moral complexity in this satire. Jules Bertillon is modelled on Peter Neidecker, who during World War I had made money, while in the American Air Force, by selling New York telephone directories to Germans wanting to find addresses of their relatives in order to write to them soliciting money.²⁷ Although he knew nothing about banking, he opened the American & Foreign Discount Corporation in 1923 and his two brothers became co-directors.²⁸

Jules's outrageous and irrational behaviour provides much of the humour in *House of All Nations*. He cautions Alphendéry never to write anything down:

Many a promising career has been cut short by a conscientious typist and a bookkeeper with his books balanced. Surround me with dullards and loafers, O Lord: spare me the office boys who study bookkeeping and the bookkeepers who study banking and the office managers who read pamphlets on will power. I don't want those who believe in my game... The best people for a man like me are dopes and communists. (63)

The genius of this satire manifests itself in the way Stead portrays a man of amoral nature so attractively. In Scene Nine, 'Jules Bertillon', the narrative is acerbic and censorious; there is no disguising his unsavoury character and yet the man is grandiose, splendid, roguish and ingenious:

A robber by instinct, sharpshooter of commerce by career, nourished by corruption (one of his grandfathers served his time), child of his

age, Jules Bertillon was born to profit greatly by it, without understanding it in the least... Besides, this, he was full of a fantastic, ingenuous, and disarming charlatanry... (86–7)

Jules's larger-than-life presence in the novel gives the satire its momentum. From the very outset when we learn of his grand office, with its 'beautiful French desk, a high-backed carved Italian chair in which Jules sat, flanked by two branched upright Italian bronze candlesticks, six feet high', (19) the finery of Europe all around him as he commands Europe's wealth, the reader is alternately shocked and impressed by this 'empty, amoral life'. Stead forges a dramatic tension between Jules's loyal employee, Michel Alphendéry, and Bertillon, which provides the moral essence of the satire. Michel's unstinting loyalty to the bank is a mystery to Jules, who knows Alphendéry views the business as 'pure theft' and 'titanic pickpocketing', and yet continues to work for him on a mediocre salary.

Alphendéry longs for his freedom from the bank, frequently declaring he will leave and fight the Communist fight. But he 'was bound to the bank by money needs and affection for the Bertillons, as well as inertia'. (230) We are told by Rowley and Williams that Alphendéry is based on Bill Blech and certainly the narrative sympathy for this character and others like him in the various novels, such as Baruch Mendelsohn, James Quick and Flack, in addition to the evidence we have about his work at the Travelers Bank, suggest strong correspondences. It is through Alphendéry that Stead demonstrates narrative contempt for the bankers but also conveys a sense of their ethereal charm.

Aristide Raccamond, the melancholy flunkey at the bank, is the most loathsome and most comic of Stead's satiric targets in *House of All Nations*. Yet ironically it is Raccamond who seeks to unmask the bank for the 'bucket shop' it is. Determined to succeed at the Banque Mercure, Raccamond stops at nothing to

win the business of his clients. He is described by the whining Rosenkrantz as:

A big flaccid pale-green watermelon, one of these overfat Mediterraneans with a nose from Carthage, shoe-black melancholy eyes, the melancholia of obesity. An energetic fellow though, steaming with sweat and ambition, envious. He cherishes the bank like an orphan child... (178)

The irony of the whole Raccamond crisis, which marks the climax of the satire is that Raccamond, while a transparent opportunist, is actually appalled by what he sees as the illegal operations of the bank and the danger to its clients.

Stead's *pièce de résistance* in this satire of greed and violence is an extended scene entitled 'A Stuffed Carp'. It is in this scene that we see Raccamond at his most abject. The episode of the stuffed carp dinner is one of Stead's most brilliant pieces of writing. While it encapsulates most of the themes of this immense novel, and many of Stead's enduring satiric themes, it also has a stand-alone quality and typifies Stead's trenchant wit and penetrating humour. Unlike other memorable dinners in Stead's corpus such as the riotous feasts of *I'm Dying Laughing* at this meal the guests do not even enjoy their feasting, force-fed as they are by their hosts, Mr and Mme Haller. Clifton Fadiman read the manuscript for Stead and made comments on this scene.²⁹ He suggested some cuts:

Scene 50 This, I say deliberately, is one of the great comic scenes in English literature—but you overwhelm the reader, just as the Hallers overwhelm poor Rac.

(Someone, probably Stead, has placed a question mark in pencil against this comment but every other comment has been ticked.)

Before the 'prodigious gorging' Marianne Raccamond is forced to admire hand embroidered slips and lace tablecloths, Persian carpets, solid silver tea services, unused fur coats and five chests of silk shawls. Stead's portrait of the Hallers in this novel bears some resemblance to that of the Veneerings and the Podsnaps in *Our Mutual Friend*. Through these characters Dickens indicts snobbery and social aspiration—classical satirical targets. It is significant that the habitual violence of this feeding is unnerving and amusing, not simply grotesque. However, unlike the fine meals enjoyed by Emily in *I'm Dying Laughing* the food in this episode is not only unappealing but seems to be presented with astounding kitsch.

The guests are forced to drink foul tasting liqueurs before their meat course, the Raccamonds stoically submitting to everything forced upon them. Aristide is described as already pale at the entree stage, but the guests are resigned: 'The ordeal of the meal had to be gone through, themselves fighting off the rich, relentless, noble food as best they could.' (275)

Amidst discussions of Lenin, the stock market, the Russian economy and where to purchase fine bread in Paris, the meal reaches its obscene climax:

...Mme. Haller trotted in, jolly, bearing a larger dish, on which was a huge stuffed jellied and nobly decorated carp, the pièce de résistance of the Haller feast, a dish Mme. Haller invariably spent the previous twenty-four hours preparing. Behind her, Anna was perilously toting red-bordered Sèvres plates, silver, a little crystal dish with extra pieces of roe, jelly, and stuffing, and a small dish of macaroons. (283)

In a suitably grotesque linking of the sexual and gustatory Stead offers the ghastly image of Sophy Haller serving up the carp to Aristide, for she had only made the dish for him and his wife:

Some strange feminine instinct prompted Mme. Haller to feed that great mountain of flesh till his eyes popped... She had the pleasure of hearing the great blubber of voracious male, Raccamond, whose appetite attracted her dreadfully, almost sexually, say, 'You are the best cook I ever knew or heard of, Mme. Haller...' (283–4)

With her quirky humour Stead lightens the mood with the next course, tinned Australian peaches, 'the very best'; the tin is held up at the table after Sophy retrieves it from the garbage so that Marianne will be able to recognise the brand 'Yanco'. This incident serves to reinforce Stead's humorous mockery of the Hallers' insistence on 'noble foods'. This line of satire is continued in conversation, as Sophy insists Aristide finish off the last titbits of carp and roe as Georg exclaims of Lenin:

He acted as a cathartic; the ruling classes in Russia had stuffed themselves to bursting on interest. You see, the financial papers enable the people to see the Fat People eating... Now human nature teaches us, we know by instinct, that there is something wrong when five per cent of the people stuff and ninety-five per cent have almost nothing to eat and no money to put into interest-bearing bonds at all. (289)

The scene represents a savage satire on greed, wealth, gluttony and power. It also captures Stead's notion of capitalism in its death throes, the useless wealth and excessive materialism depicted with brutal humour. But most of all it demonstrates just how 'compliant and prostituted' are the likes of Raccamond and his wife, who would suffer this ritual humiliation for the sake of gaining banking business from the Hallers.

In *House of All Nations*, Stead's moral perspective and satirical purpose are much weightier than in *The Beauties and Eries*. In both novels Stead self consciously narrates and much of the text is

given over to displays of wit and verbal play. Stead's later satires place more emphasis on first-person speech and the excessive language is more subtly integrated with characterisation. While these two early satires reveal Stead's initial experiments with the genre and her determination to record her times, it is perhaps the exuberance of language as well as her indulgent treatment of rascality that distinguishes them from the later Juvenalian satires. Stead's description of the assembled wedding guests of Toots Legris and Duc-Adam Lhermite in *House of All Nations* is evidence of this display; it is laced with irony and provides a masterful satiric catalogue, expressing wit, contempt and historical perspective. The journalistic style gives way to a much more scathing analysis of the guests, in which Stead's sense of disgust is palpable and comprehensive. She denounces the entire French establishment in this comic satiric catalogue:

It was a garland of youthful vanity and superannuated cunning, hoary rank and young money, famous beggars, notorious debtors, unsuccessful rakes, lordly borrowers, impenitent usurers, princely automobile salesmen and brokers' runners of Bourbon blood, shady viscounts, distinguished pillars of cafés, illustrious readers of the *Journal des Débats*, people who trusted to the Council of State in an emergency, people who trusted to the Republican Guard, to Mr Chiappe,³⁰ and to General Pétain. All of them were news items, and a certain number had money themselves. (347)

In these first satirical novels Stead embarks on her history of the decline of the West through a comic indictment of prostituted love, and through her anatomy of a French bank during the 1930s.

Chapter Two

‘Fantastic Outrage’ and ‘A Faint Odour of Malice’: Towards a Degenerative Satire in *Letty Fox: Her Luck* and *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*

Letty Fox: Her Luck first published in 1946, marks a change in the tenor of Stead’s satirical writing. Stead creates a female picaresque, and focuses on the political economy of sex from the point of view of a young and ‘typical New York girl’. The result is a witty and acerbic satire on the sexual politics of America at mid-century. *Miss Herbert* published thirty years later, also deals with female sexual transgression and continues Stead’s study of the ‘Woman in Seven’.¹ ‘Woman in Seven’, as well as ‘A Natural History of Woman’, were the titles Stead gave to a series of proposed novels in a set of notes. Each novel was to explore a different life stage of a woman. The list was compiled as follows, with some of her book titles alongside each stage.

1. The Child
2. The Young Girl

3. The Young Wife
4. The Wantoning
5. The Second Wife
6. The Woman of Forty
7. The Old Woman

Miss Herbert, probably envisaged as 'The Young Wife' as well as 'The Woman of Forty', contrasts the levity and Bacchanalian charm of *Letty Fox* with a far more restrained, vehement, at times bitter satire.

In both novels Stead takes up one of her perennial themes and tackles a taboo: the missing discourse of female sexual desire and its corollary, ill fated female sexual aggression. In the two novels Stead presents an account of the sexual lives of Letty Fox and Eleanor Herbert, investigating sexual promiscuity without conventional moral censure. With their graphic depiction of two sexually adventurous young women and their distinctive amorality, *Miss Herbert* and *Letty Fox* make an interesting comparison because in their specific political contexts they reflect both the development of Stead's attitude to women's sexuality, and a significant development in her use of satire between the early 1940s and late 1950s.

In some ways, *Letty Fox* and *Miss Herbert* are not easy to compare. The circumstances of the writing and publication of the two novels varied considerably. Stead began writing *Miss Herbert* in 1955, at a particularly low ebb in her career, and draws on her own experiences in England after the War. Whilst *Miss Herbert* did the rounds of publishers in the late 1950s, it was not accepted for publication until the mid 1970s. The novel did not receive favourable reviews. *Letty Fox* was published in 1946 to mixed reviews, but created in Rowley's words 'a *succès de scandale* *Letty Fox* sold 12,000 copies over the next few years and was at the time Stead's best-selling novel. Neither of the novels is widely read today.

In *Letty Fox* Stead commences her satirical history of the failure of American radicalism. Yet *Letty Fox* takes up many of the themes of Stead's earlier novels, satirising, above all, the strained relations between the sexes in a society dominated by money. Stead returns to the subject of youthful socialists and their ineffectual politics, and portrays the decadence of the bourgeoisie, as well as the social and sexual repression of the war economy. But for all its seriousness, *Letty Fox* rollicks along, revealing a good-humoured scepticism and enjoyment on the part of its author.

The elements of celebration and abandonment are part of the texture of *Letty Fox*, but these are totally absent in Stead's later novel, *Miss Herbert* with its vitriolic attack on the cultural construction of the feminine, and the collusion of British intellectuals with reactionary forces at the time of the War. Nevertheless, *Letty Fox: Her Luck* and *Miss Herbert* form a kind of dialectic on women and class that can be seen as central to Stead's interrogation of social mores and political ideologies in both the US and Britain during critical decades of the twentieth century. Sexuality and ideology are inextricably linked in the lives of both Letty and Eleanor, and in the terms of each narrative.

Both novels invert the familiar Don Juan stereotype, making the Don Juan figure female, though this is carried to extremes in *Letty Fox*. In both works the female protagonist takes on the role of sexual predator as Stead parodies the popular romance genre as well as the idealised (and colonised) female ideal portrayed in women's magazines, novels and guidebooks. The genre of the *Bildungsroman* is also satirised in a number of ways as neither Letty nor Eleanor find a satisfactory niche or career, nor do they achieve happy partnerships.

The parodic inversions and moral nihilism, or at least the moral ambivalence, of both texts creates an unsettling effect. It is this subversive pessimism combined with the absence of reformist

intent or positive values that makes both of these satires degenerative. The term degenerative here refers to the way in which the texts challenge the legitimacy of all social structures, including to some extent narratives and texts themselves.²

Before examining *Letty Fox: Her Luck and Miss Herbert* closely, I want to consider some of Stead's early views of satire, which she expressed in a paper delivered at the third Annual Congress of the League of American Writers in New York on 4 June 1939. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, the timing of this paper is important in terms of Stead's development as a satirist, in that it reflects her thinking about fiction writing and character shortly before she began work on *Letty Fox* in 1941.

As we have seen, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel' explains what Stead sees as the inherently satirical form of a novel with many characters, as opposed to the novel with two or three characters. Stead saw the 'many-charactered' novel as wholly appropriate to her times. Her rationale for this produces a magnificent view of satire. Stead believed in the powers of the many-charactered novel to present her idea of the relativity of moral values and to present the colour, the vaudeville and diversity of the social organism, claiming this kind of novel 'is as essential to metropolis as the many-windowed wall'. With her characteristic dry humour she explained that:

...it is impossible to write a novel about a crowd of amiable and charming characters: therefore we will have a parade of enormities, abuses, defects or mere incongruities which gives off a strong odour of insecurity, a faint odour of malice, even though no malice be intended.³

The last part of the paper reveals an ambiguous attitude to what sounds like the socialist realist novel. Given that Stead was addressing a group of writers at a time when socialist realism was

gaining ground, she seems to have attempted to cover this kind of novel, as she talks about the temptation of the writer to create:

...a synthesis: a form of the unattainable, a conception of the soul of man, by creating man in gigantic proportions... an individual... to master an organised society... The great story, the writer may think, would be this—a sea of many lives, the world of today, from which rises a greater life, drawing sustenance from them, acting, sinking, back to them—Dimitrov, Lenin, the section organiser?

Significantly, in her own novels Stead resisted this temptation and created ordinary, venal figures that do not ‘embody a conception of the soul of man’. The use Stead made of the many-charactered novel is a far cry from the hypothetical ‘great story’ and there are no such heroes. All of her novels from *Letty Fox* onwards are bleak ‘novels of strife’,⁴ satirising capitalists and socialist pretenders from various points of view and with equal venom.

Stead’s explicit statements about the value of the ‘many-charactered novel’ allies her with the great satirical dramatists such as Ben Jonson and novelists such as Balzac. As mentioned in the Introduction, in her notes (now held in the National Library of Australia) we find a set of pages listing 231 ‘types’ under the heading ‘Types. Known from All Time’⁵ (See Appendix II). Stead’s types are reminiscent of the humours of Jonson’s plays. The sharpness of Stead’s wit and her cast of rogues, combined with her meagre interest in showing virtue, are also something her fiction has in common with Jonson’s satires.

Compiled in 1950, the list reveals Stead’s interest in satire, in ‘humours’ and types, and her devilish enjoyment in conceiving of people in this way. Importantly, Stead resisted the socialist realist concept of the ‘typical’ character but was drawn to the idea of ‘types’. The list of types demonstrates Stead’s growing interest in

satire and associated forms during the decade in which she would have conceived and written *Miss Herbert*. While she did conceive of characters as types, she certainly did not produce novels of moral satire, in which there is a clear standard of behaviour from which the ridiculed characters depart. On the contrary Stead's characters constantly elude our moral judgement. The explanation she gave for her approach to writing reinforces this point.

My method of proceeding is not moral, that is to explain that my characters are good or bad according to current morality; but simply to explain how human beings really live: for generally morality is, like law, constantly outmoded, by living human behaviour. I try to describe what is, not what ought to be according to current moral ideas, nor according to my own aspirations. This is the attitude of the naturalist...⁶

Similarly, Stead's advice to her students on writing dialogue demonstrates her new interest in the 'outer' rather than the 'inner' life of her characters, and her desire to capture the variety and multiplicity of life around her. During the period Stead was writing *Letty Fox*, a satire in which the nuances of speech and idiom sparkle, Stead gave a course for would-be writers, called 'Workshop in the Novel', and placed strong emphasis on dialogue.

Stead urged would-be novelists to 'keep notes on speech for it is something you can't remember like faces, attitudes and characters' and to develop dialogue from what 'you hear all around you: from the street, and "Time" a smart little paper, and newspaper men, laundryroom men, shopgirls and Hollywood flybynights.'⁷ The main vehicle for Stead's satire is speech, dialogue and monologue. It is through speech that Stead is able to gain distance from her characters and thereby create a sense of moral ambivalence. From *Letty Fox* onwards it is the mainstay of Stead's satire.

LETTY FOX: HER LUCK

Letty Fox is a ribald, pungent and comic novel about a young girl growing up in New York in the 1920s and 1930s. It is also the story of middle class life in the US from 1925 to 1945. Like a twentieth century *Moll Flanders*⁸ the novel reflects Stead's first impressions of the United States of America, based on her visit in 1935 when she called it 'the land of boundless importunity'. Stead was shocked at what she saw as the crass greed of American society, in which 'money covers all sins'.⁹

Letty Fox reveals Stead's fascination with such a society and its 'acute worship of Mammon' through her sharply ironic picaresque tale of the sexual adventures of a young woman. Stead's affronted bewilderment seems to drive this novel but there is also a curious sense of amused detachment from the entire pageant of this story, connecting it with traditional satire in some important ways. The excessive materialism and ruthlessness of American society staggered Stead, who argued that social divisions in the US were 'harder, crueller' than in Britain 'and there is no joking about them.'¹⁰ Rowley notes Stead's cynical formula for social correctness in New York, in spite of Bill's assurance that the situation was much more complex. She recited the formula to Florence James in a letter:

1. Be Anglo-Saxon.
2. Be hideously rich.
3. Buy and dress with a superfluity unknown to European women.
4. Go to the places mentioned, like the Gold Room at the Gotham.¹¹

Stead's sense of fascinated outrage permeates the text, and is registered through the humorous names of characters such as Gallant Stack, Solander Fox, Captain White, Cissie Morgan, Clays Manning, Lucy Headlong, Persia, Dora Dunn and Betty Looper as

well as through the humour of the characters themselves. Among Stead's notes for the novel held in the National Library of Australia are two 'songs' about a character called Letty, which reinforce the lighthearted note of this satire and its relaxed tone.¹²

As in *Don Juan* the relentless monologue begins with a summary of the narrator's problem:

At this time, I had one aim—that was to marry. I had given up going to family parties simply because cousins younger than me were married...

I felt I must marry in order to get my own property, even though I am long past my majority. My own standpoint was different. I felt that if I had the money I would attract a husband in a short time. (9)¹³

Then, as in *Don Juan*, the narrator's voice continues for the next five hundred pages. Through Letty's voice we receive not only the story of her relentless search for a husband, but a very worldly and satirical account of the marriage game under late capitalism. Whilst the satire attacks the greed, hypocrisy and chicanery of modern life, unlike *Don Juan* it never offers any kind of redemptive hope or moral correctives against which these abuses can be understood. By focusing attention on the humour, pathos and irony of *Letty Fox: Her Luck* I do not intend to undermine the seriousness of the satire. When defending the novel from the charge of obscenity, which led to the book being banned in Australia, Stead explained the work: 'It is a serious, realistic novel, not obscenity. It is meant as a satire on American divorce and sexual customs...' ¹⁴ Her later comments reinforce the satiric intent of the novel. Responding to Guy Howarth's description of the novel as a celebration of female freedom, Stead wrote:

Letty Fox is not a heroine of feminist freedom: everyone in the USA understood perfectly that she showed the error of feminine riot!

What end was there for her but deterioration, a miserable middle age, desperate abandon, or a total acquiescence with conformity.¹⁵

But if Stead sounds censorious here, the tone of the novel is anything but censorious. The humour, picaresque style, and lack of moral commentary preclude any explicit judgement such as that made in her retrospective comment. Yet the humour itself embodies pointed satire and damning social analysis. Stead's notes for the novel make it very clear that she was disturbed by the institutions of marriage and the law:

There are queer instincts in human nature... There is an instinct to jail: people get an intense pleasure out of getting someone else under lock and key. Wives jail their husbands of course: wives always live in jail... if we change laws completely or live under socialism, we can be free women, but women must really have a voice in state moreover it must not be an army state... police and army means subjection of women...¹⁶

It is true that Letty Fox is not a feminist heroine but the sentiments expressed through the satire of Letty and her family express many feminist values. Stead's fiction, in spite of its lack of consistent moral argument, is written with ethical intensity. This intensity is apparent even in the raunchy satire of *Letty Fox*. Women have not traditionally written bawdy satirical novels, making Stead's tale significant in itself. While there are numerous references to sexual encounters and sexual love in the novel, as there are in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, there is only one actual description of a seduction. Nevertheless the book was banned in Australia, though not in the US.

In 1947 the Australian Literature Censorship Board considered *Letty Fox: Her Luck* to be unsuitable reading matter, declaring Letty to be 'oversexed'. Interestingly their statement reveals confusion as to Stead's intentions, confusion brought about by the nature of the

satire: 'Whether the authoress wishes to expose rampant immorality, or believes that, as an artist, she is bound to objective chronicle, is hard to say. In any case she has been injudicious.'¹⁷ The Customs Clerk concurred with their view and wrote:

The general tone of the book is indecent and vulgar and grossly over-emphasises matters of sex... The literary merit of the book appears to be very slight indeed, the style being a verbose gabble, full of slang and practically devoid of distinction or variety. It is not so much a story as an interminable succession of episodes, practically all vulgar or indecent, and most of them concerned with sexual immorality... It is considered that no one would be the wiser for reading the book, and its perusal might well have a harmful effect.¹⁸

Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, published in 1963, but also set in New York during the 1930s, bears a strong affinity with Stead's novel. Both works are Horatian satires and both focus on the struggle of their female protagonists to express themselves sexually and creatively within the confines of liberal New York society. *The Group* was also banned in Australia.

The *New York Sun* denounced *Letty Fox* as obscene, 'a quagmire of promiscuity and misinformation about New York'.¹⁹ This charge that the novel presented misinformation about New York must have galled Stead for she had spent at least five years studying her subject, the young women of New York. She focused her study on Bill Blake's daughter, Ruth, and her friends who were frequent visitors at Stead and Blake's various apartments. As Rowley notes, Stead was intensely interested in the lives of the next generation of women and whether or not their enhanced sexual freedom had made a difference.²⁰ What she found was disappointing, for most of the young women were still 'just as hell bent' on securing a husband, and pleasing men in general.²¹ Stead collected advertisements and letters in women's magazines in order to help her with her novel. She also observed at close range

the ramifications of Bill's separation from Mollie Blech as well as his own mother's attitudes to women and marriage.

At first the reader may be tempted to consider Letty, the narrator and protagonist, as a kind of arbiter of morality, both an observer of the society and a questing participant, like Teresa in *For Love Alone*. Of course Letty is an astute observer but also a participant in the 'whole sordid mess' of her society. Whilst Letty is not an unreliable narrator in the conventional sense, it becomes obvious very quickly that she herself is corrupt and streetwise and in some ways a rather shallow, conformist young woman. In her conversations with her much more idealistic sister Jacky, Letty's unquestioning acceptance of some unpalatable social truths is made obvious. Furthermore, we learn very early on that she is single minded and callous in obtaining what she wants. In the first few pages we find that she grabs an apartment from a family in desperate need by secretly offering the superintendent's wife extra money, even as the family is moving in. But as the novel continues she shows her indefatigable survival skills and her internalising of the distorted values of her milieu.

Letty's precocious commentary on her family makes her both the vehicle and the object of the satire. Privy to the adult conversations of her charming but ineffectual father, Solander Fox, and his friends, Letty assumes the life of a libertine. She is established as an anti-heroine as the novel continues, but also as an ordinary New York girl, with a soft spot for her Uncle Philip Morgan, a hapless Byronic figure who eventually commits suicide because of the unhappiness his romantic entanglements cause.

Early in the novel Letty and her sister Jacky eavesdrop on a conversation between their father and two Uncles. Solander reveals that he is happily in love with a woman called Persia and not his wife, Mathilde Fox, mother of the two girls.

My father laughed and said quickly, 'Don't tell me, Hogg, that you think we live in a monogamous, one-family society here in the USA? ...

Now, Hogg, if you saw a bunch of Iroquois or Sioux with our organization, you'd say they were polygamous.'

Letty continues:

Cheerfully, he kept it up. Both were embarrassed, Hogg the moralist, and Philip, the many-marrier. Philip spoke very morally. My father, a decent-living, attached, affectionate man, was a pocket Rabelais. Impossible in a family like ours, full of court scandal, to keep the various sexual knots and hitches from our sight. (53-4)

Letty brings us the stories of each of these sexual knots and hitches as she begins a series of her own. Stead centres the satire on the various charades of monogamy in New York during the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Letty's reference to her father, Solander, as a 'pocket Rabelais' registers Stead's explicitly satirical perspective on her characters.

The allusion also has resonance in terms of the development of Stead's satire. In *I'm Dying Laughing* the references to Rabelais express far more sinister forces than they do in this, Stead's most liberal satire. The entire society turns out to be conducting a gross charade by maintaining the institution of marriage, the goal to which Letty aspires throughout the novel. Yet the point of marriage is alternately crystal clear (in materialist terms) and horribly unclear (in philosophical terms) to Letty. Many explanations for the state of affairs are proffered by various characters in the novel.

Among the thousands of opinions and complaints about marriage purveyed by the various women in the novel, there is no consistent authorial viewpoint. However it is Solander and Persia (supposedly based on Stead and Blake) who seem reasonably contented in spite of their unmarried state and Solander's weaknesses. Stead engages sympathy for her characters through affectionate and gentle humour, but this sympathy does not constitute a moral sanctioning of their behaviour.

The satire is whimsical in that it celebrates the notion of romantic love and revels at times in the decadent and thoroughly undisciplined behaviour of most of the characters in this picaresque novel. It is an Horatian satire in the sense that our sympathy (limited though it is in a light satire) is solicited for almost every character by turns. Moreover our affections and sympathies are aroused by the most immoral characters, for example Uncle Philip, in spite of his constant philandering. Similarly Grandmother Fox, a woman capable of extraordinary emotional blackmail and deceit, arouses our pity. The comic energy and detail of the novel infuses many of the more amusing incidents with poignance.

Stead celebrates female desire and sexual enjoyment, portraying Letty as plucky and earthy. Letty herself is then satirised by the text. She becomes a victim of her own 'riot' to use Stead's word.²² But Letty does not portray herself as a victim; she is too hard-headed for that. However it is clear that sexual passion cannot always be separated from emotion and she constantly underestimates and confuses her own capacity for love. The irony of her name reinforces the satire Stead presents. Letty is manipulative but is really no fox. Street smart, but without cunning, she cannot 'snare' a man for 'keeps', and is frequently hurt by her conquests.

Letty is the female version of Don Juan, but the novel is full of the male kind. In her treatment of each one Stead mocks the accepted norm of the Don Juan figure. The most pathetic but highly amusing figure is Uncle Philip, whose constant pursuit of women and the love ideal is farcical in the novel, as the libertine becomes more and more wretched with each disgraceful new dalliance. Luke Adams, the man Letty thinks she loves, is weak and oafish; her middle-aged Dutch boyfriend Cornelis, who makes her swear not to fall in love with him, is fickle and oppressive; Bill van Week, the man she ultimately marries, is a

hardened Don Juan, twice married and still involved with her cousin Edwige; and Solander himself is satirised as the impotent libertine—indecisive in his treatment of wife and lover, and susceptible to blackmail by his daughter.

While there is a strong sense that *Letty Fox* does away with the specific targets of traditional satire, there is also a salient mood of anger and resistance towards the political economy of sex in the novel. It is no coincidence that Stead opens the novel in pre-war New York and that Letty enters the ‘marriage market’ during the War. The ‘war’ for sexual independence is far from over. The new climate intensifies the normal sexual competition in which women must participate. In spite of their perceived new found sexual freedom, women find themselves preyed upon with a brutality that makes a complete mockery of their freedom. The incident towards the end of the novel in which Letty and an old school friend are harassed by two young soldiers in a bar shows Stead in a moment of involvement with her characters that again shifts the ground of the satire.

Once I was with Isabel Cartwright, this ugly, clever girl I had been with at high school. She was a doctor of medicine now, and we had been to an old school-tie affair. Afterwards we dropped in at a place we had known for years, taking no notice of a couple of flying dinosaurs in soldier-suits drinking there, even when they came up and tried to sit in our booth. I simply said, ‘You’re making a mistake, boys.’

One of the boys, with a Texas accent, who was stinko, said, ‘Then what are you here for?’

‘This is the result of self-appointed Southern chivalry,’ said I to Isabel, ‘or the war of the US with Texas is still being held.’

I said to the boys, ‘Come on, heave yourselves off that bench and leave us alone; we’re not in business.’ (476)

Letty's comments elicit a tirade of abuse from the young men whereupon the two women are forced to leave the bar.

This episode gives the ending of the novel an even greater poignancy. Letty gradually tires of sexual tourism, and marries Bill Van Week. The ending is ironic as the story concludes with Letty newly married and pregnant, and with the revelation that Bill is a disinherited millionaire. Moreover the conventional happy ending of the romance novel is seriously undermined by this outcome, as we are fully aware of Bill's philandering, money troubles and extravagant ways. In producing this ending Stead is presenting no resolution to the problems her satire raises throughout Letty's story. Letty the 'fox' is trapped in the same 'sordid mess', to use Stead's own term, as each of the other women in her world. In Letty's own terms she has both succeeded and failed, in making this marriage.

While the satire of the novel addresses the sexual politics exhaustively, Stead also takes up the theme of 'play radicals', satirising the fast burnout of the radicals of New York, their ignorance and lack of real commitment to the struggles at home and in Europe. Stead uses the satire to move outward from the individual's life into the public arena. Letty is a participant at the margins of pretentious liberation movements, but also a careful observer.

Letty Fox enraged the communists (particularly those readers of *New Masses*, who took themselves seriously), who labelled Stead's unflattering portraits as grim caricatures. Barbara Giles summed up their irritation in a review in *New Masses* which concluded that the portrayal of a 'play-radical' like Letty, 'the most unnatural, and least interesting and important of revolutionaries'—without the contrast of one genuine Communist—grossly distorted reality.²³ Yet in her treatment of the vapid socialists we see Stead's unsparing satire. Even the purest socialists are found wanting. During Letty's visit to the strange Norman mansion belonging to her art teacher, Lucy

Headlong (undoubtedly a reference to Thomas Love Peacock's nineteenth century satire *Headlong Hall* (1816)), Letty remarks of one of the dinner guests, 'the young man [is] a rising dramatist, one of those socialists who are extreme puritans, who detest all satire and have nothing of the Molière in them'. (338)

Stead's prescience in this novel and her adaptation of satire as a form of social history and social opposition links it inexorably with the powerfully subversive satires of the postmodernists such as Nabokov, Pynchon and Rushdie that follow. Stead's creation of Letty Fox as an allegorical figure of class and nation is not as fully realised as Eleanor Herbert in *Miss Herbert*, where Eleanor becomes synonymous with middle class England, or indeed *I'm Dying Laughing* in which Emily Howard is an allegory for the United States in its period of decline. Nevertheless we can see Stead experimenting with Letty as an allegorical figure, and with her milieu, heady New York, as some kind of version of modern America on the brink of collapse.

Curiously, Jean Baudrillard later comments on the very aspect of New York that Stead dramatises in *Letty Fox*. The idea of New York as a paradigmatic place is also central in Jean Baudrillard's postmodernist travelogue, *America*. Wondering how people can live in New York, Baudrillard imagines that it would take superhuman strength to survive as a couple in such a 'whirl of a city':

Only natives, gangs, mafia families, secret societies, and perverse communities can survive, not couples. This is the anti-Ark. In the first Ark, the animals came in two by two to save the species from the great flood. Here in this fabulous Ark, each one comes in alone—it's up to him or her each evening to find the last survivors for the last party.²⁴

Whereas Stead satirises promiscuity, not as immoral in and of itself, but as a sign of deterioration in a society, Baudrillard points to the fact that although sexuality is 'everywhere on display, it no

longer has the time to realise itself in human love-relationships. It evaporates into the promiscuity of each passing moment'.²⁵ Stead's New York prefigures Baudrillard's sense of postmodern American primitivism in the violence of its relationships: the damage humans do to one another foreshadows Baudrillard's assessment of 'the very violence of the [American] way of life'.

While Stead points to the falling standards of civilisation, Baudrillard identifies the United States 'with its space, its technological refinement, its bluff good conscience... [as] the only remaining primitive society'.²⁶ Baudrillard describes the buildings of New York as 'anti-architecture'. Echoing Stead he points to 'the gentle hell of the Roman Empire in decline'.²⁷

Christina Stead offers no vision of utopia in *Letty Fox*. Like many of her other novels, this picaresque presents a dystopic 'other' place in a strange interlude in the text, when Letty visits Headlong Hall. But even in this somewhat disturbing episode Stead is explicitly satirical. When Letty spends a few days at Lucy Headlong's country house, the house is empty except for Lucy, herself and a servant. This contrasts with the tradition of *Headlong Hall* and many English satires dealing with country houses and house parties full of knaves and fools.

Moreover Letty is haunted by something indefinable. Unable to sleep, she experiences a strange fear tinged with a curiously disembodied sexual desire, as she lies awake at night, disturbed by the 'strange spirit of the place'. Not only is she unused to the stillness and quiet of a place that is not New York, but she is unsettled by the 'ineffably inhuman' (339) life all around her. The episode is not unlike Michael's insomniac sequences in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* in which he yearns for some understanding of the life force around him. For Letty:

It was not terror, and never once did I think of Washington, the gardener, or the too easy access to the servants' quarters, or the

lunatic asylum, not far away. Nothing moved in the woods, but the scuttling animals round the house. All night, in the corpse-pale moonlight they moved, thought, hung about the foundations, and then footed it undangerously away. I did not sleep. When I got up in the morning, I found my skin luminous, my eyes languidly bright, and my hair finer than it had ever been; of itself it fell into delicious tendrils. (339)

Letty's experience of the sound of animals and life around her revisits the 'howl of empty Creation, horrified at being there with itself in its singleness', as experienced by Teresa in *For Love Alone*.²⁸ In *Letty Fox* Stead further develops this idea of dystopia, in the mis-match and utter alienation of humanity from the greater life force around it.

When Letty decides to leave Lucy's house she makes an ironic joke about her decision, exclaiming 'This is heaven, but I am not yet dead, unfortunately, and I must work'. (339) Stead renders the strangeness and discomfort of Letty's experience in this joke, but also her obdurate sense of the emptiness of creation. The nihilism of this is confronting for the reader, but serves to intensify the revelry and enjoyment Stead exhibits in the rest of the satire, reminding us of Stead's description of Marpurgo, and his 'gaudy, busy, populace-loving soul'. It casts a different light on the culture of excess portrayed throughout Letty's monologue, reinforcing the note of celebration and delight in the decadence and strife of life in New York.

MISS HERBERT (THE SUBURBAN WIFE)

Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife), published in 1976, is one of Stead's most disturbing satires. In a number of ways it continues the themes of *Letty Fox* but the tone is far more scornful, the mood of the novel much darker and the narrative voice more unstable. It is therefore a degenerative satire. Referred to by one reviewer as a

twentieth century *Vanity Fair*,²⁹ the novel announces itself as satire simply through the ludicrous names of some of its characters: Mrs Mallow Bounce, Lord Exitt, Cope Pigsney to name a few. It also charts the erotic life of a woman from youth to middle age. Rather than being in any sense a celebration of eroticism and a more free-wheeling sexuality, however, *Miss Herbert's* a study in its perversion.

As with the reaction to several of Stead's other later satires, the richness of the allegory in *Miss Herbert* has gone largely unnoticed by critics.³⁰ In one of Stead's sets of early notes, held in the National Library, there is a folder labelled in Stead's handwriting, 'ELEANOR—the lady on the telephone) the Middle class Woman—Lady and Slut', which reveals her attitude to her character very forcibly.³¹ Yet in the novel there is no such clarity. *Miss Herbert's* one of Stead's most elusive works because the style ranges away from her characteristic exuberance and verbosity. It is restrained, flat, cold and unnerving. But the contempt of the tone only creeps up on the reader gradually. The first section of the novel, entitled 'Playtime, Maytime', beguiles the reader into a kind of admiration and concern for the young Eleanor Brent who is described as:

A nobly built beauty, playing-fields champion, excellent student, loved at home, admired at school and by men, she had been happy and confident always. Her future was planned, too; she was 'an engaged girl'. But with all this, she was unsettled; she was only quite happy with women friends. (5)³²

Some of the early chapters are reminiscent of *The Beauties and Furies*. For example the young Eleanor Herbert resembles Elvira in her narcissistic sensuality and self-absorption. But as a satire on the thuggery and corruption of Grub Street, sexual repression, and the narrowness of English middle class life, the novel begins to chart new and radical territory for Stead.

In the curiously flat prose of *Miss Herbert* we begin to see another dimension of Stead's style. This novel reveals her as a master of plain language, unsettling precision and unstinting focus. Stead produces a hauntingly original psychological power in *Miss Herbert*, which she also achieves in *The Puzzleheaded Girl* (1965), and the English short stories with which *Miss Herbert* has much in common. In *Miss Herbert*, as in the novella, there is no interest in the inner psyche of the protagonist or anti-heroine, because there is an implicit rejection of its importance, though there is a razor-sharp analysis of that person and sympathy with her ever-worsening predicament.

For Eleanor Herbert is a woman who is shown to be a completely 'manufactured' creature of her culture, speaking and thinking in the language of women's magazines and romance fiction. Again, Stead creates a person who is a kind of 'everywoman', a middle class English rose. Unlike *Letty Fox*, however, *Miss Herbert* is not picaresque, but traces the life of a woman through to the disappointments, failures and perversions of middle age. Whereas Letty Fox never received her author's total disapprobation, as the novel progresses Eleanor Herbert's shallow obedience to convention and her conservative political views are shown to be dangerous.

The shifting ground of the satire in *Miss Herbert* is even more pronounced than in *Letty Fox*. The extent to which readers have difficulty in reading and interpreting the narrative 'position' in the novel is borne out by the lack of criticism of *Miss Herbert* and the fact that it has been interpreted in two different ways. Firstly, *Miss Herbert* has been read as tragic, due to its portrayal of a woman who is crippled by middle class English values.³³

This reading, though not wholly inaccurate, acknowledges the social criticism in the work without noticing the satire and explicitly allegorical power of the central character. Secondly, Eleanor Herbert has been interpreted as a woman ensnared by the

vicious expectations arising from the cultural construction of femininity and as someone who collaborates in her own oppression. *Miss Herbert* does not lend itself to either reading however. Its shifting authorial viewpoint, satirical tone and distaste for its protagonist do not allow for the sympathy necessary in a feminist work or a novel that produces a convincing psychological portrait via the central character.

Despite the lack of strong evidence in the text to support their case, the daughter and grand-daughter of Florence James took exception to *Miss Herbert* on the grounds that Eleanor Herbert is a portrayal of James. In a recent documentary film about James they publicly denounced the work of fiction.³⁴ Curiously the reaction of the affronted relatives to the book reveals a misunderstanding of the purpose and power of satire, as well as a misreading of the work. Julie James Bailey and her daughter seem to have conceived of the book as an angry and unfair portrait of Florence. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, many satirists attract criticism for what is perceived as personal animus in their work. In this case the relatives claim that Stead misrepresented James's life as a result of jealousy and resentment.

Hazel Rowley, with her usual eagerness to establish real-life models for Stead's characters, comments that 'Eleanor Herbert, is inspired partly—but only partly—by Florence James. For the rest the fictional character is an amalgamation of various women, including the landladies Stead had met as a "roomer".'³⁵ Rowley reports that Stead later told a friend she also had Dymphna Cusack vaguely in mind. For the record Rowley adds that '(In real life, Cusack was a committed socialist; Florence James, a liberal, mistrusted the Left).'³⁶

The extent to which Stead's narrative position eludes readers is not only a recent phenomenon. Before the novel was finally published in 1976 (nearly two decades after Stead submitted it for

publication), Cyrilly Abels, Stead's trusted literary agent in New York, advised her to delete the numerous anti-Semitic comments made by Eleanor Herbert and her renegade friend Cope Pigsney. She believed readers would consider Miss Herbert to be the heroine of the novel, and so construe her anti-Semitic ideas as those of the author. Early drafts of the manuscript have been destroyed but it is clear that Stead accepted her agent's advice unequivocally.

Eleanor's attractiveness and erotic appeal give her a thrilling and deluded sense of power over men during her youth. But the strange dissociation of emotion and the erotic life of the body continues during and after her marriage, and into middle age when her erotic power is waning. But Eleanor's narcissism knows no bounds. From the beginning of the story we know she enjoys posing for others, always wanting to be looked at and admired, even by friends. At a weekend gathering hosted by the austere Dr Helen Mack, we are told that Eleanor frolics and falls into the grass, runs into the house and ignores the advice of one of the other young women to leave nettle stings alone:

'But look,' said Eleanor, rolling up her sleeves to the shoulders. Then she began to undress, taking off her things, with measured graceful movements, as she looked at little spots of red on her arms, back, waist, thighs. She undressed completely, in case it was not nettle rash but some insect, and stood with the women round her, looking at her skin, unselfconscious, quietly sparkling, when they took (all but Janet) the attitude of maids-in-waiting. Janet, ashamed of this nakedness, went out to the verandah. Inside, Venus, in her young maturity, was examining her breasts, and comparing them with the breasts of the others; and in a low tone, she was asking them their advice... 'Men liked a developed figure.' What should she do? she asked Dr Mack. (10)

Stead's ambivalence towards Eleanor is striking in this passage. She creates a scene of homoerotic charm in which a group of women in their mid-twenties admire the beauty of the confident, successful 'engaged' one. There is no real authorial censure of such sensuality, except for a gentle note of irony in associating Eleanor with Venus, goddess of love, and a faint qualm about the atmosphere of languor and decadence among the women. Janet's 'shame' also suggests a kind of uneasiness amongst the women but does not reflect authorial censure.

Like Letty Fox, Eleanor initially plays the role of the sexual libertine, enjoying the adventures, risks and emotional detachment of her flings and encounters. In a parody of bohemian freedom, Eleanor sleeps with numerous visiting students from the Continent who pass her along from one to the next: 'She felt there was no harm in making love, if they could refer to Bertrand Russell, Bosanquet, Whitehead. It gave her confidence in herself: she felt she was still moving in intellectual circles and was respected for her opinions.' (31)

Eleanor's vanity is obvious in the initial scene where she undresses for her friends, but elicits our amusement. However, the novel subverts the cultural obsession with looking at women. Eleanor, we learn as the story progresses, is utterly incapable of love for anyone but herself, and even then it is a curiously vapid self love. It is only later when we learn more about Eleanor that this scene takes on more sinister significance. As the novel continues and Eleanor's erotic adventures become sordid, later turning into a kind of pornography, Stead questions conventional notions about posing and voyeurism.

Later in the novel we learn that Eleanor liked to undress in front of her window when the neighbouring young students could see her, and that she would bathe and sometimes even urinate within their view. Once again there is no authorial censure of this behaviour. It is almost as if Stead is throwing out a challenge to the

reader, anticipating a reaction of distaste, as Eleanor's sexual exhibitionism continues into middle age. Whereas we are not perturbed by her youthful exposure of her body (except perhaps by the fact that the women are all conscious of appealing to the male gaze) the desire of a middle aged woman to be looked at is socially unacceptable. It is, however, in the grotesque 'posing' described towards the end of the story that Stead's fascination with the variety and perverseness of sexual experience is most pointed. For it is here that Stead's satire on the nature of Grub Street culminates.

In order to survive in the mean world of freelance editing and writing Eleanor becomes a machine-like cutter and paster. She is literally a hack, butchering her manuscripts in order to make them shorter and more likely to sell. Eleanor is devoid of any conscience or understanding of the meaning of what she is doing; she thinks only of obliging the publisher and attracting more work. Her inability to connect writing and life is ruthlessly evinced in an episode in which one of her employers, the publisher, Geoffrey Quaideson, asks her to read a manuscript he has written. The scene is prefaced with a grotesque invitation by Quaideson for Eleanor to visit his country house and see:

my library where my whips hang. As I'm thin-skinned and cowardly, I'm very much interested in cruelty: I have a library of cruelty. Do you know how many ways death has been devised, and how they have schemed to have pain defeat time? No, of course not. But I think we liberal souls turn our eyes from the nasty and painful... If you'd care to come sometime, I'll arrange it with my housekeeper. Perhaps you can help me too—to give life to old instruments. (286–7)

Although Eleanor never takes him up on his offer she visits him regularly, in spite of his sinister suggestions, and in spite of the unsavoury contents of his manuscript. With her characteristic

stoicism she writes a report about his story ‘The New Curiosity Shop’ (for which she is not paid), in which a man tries to murder a woman client. We are told that while doing regular work for Quaideson’s publishing house Eleanor pays him a visit once a week, in the afternoons, at his rooms over an antique shop in which he has a share:

They had very soon become lovers of a strange sort, not of a sort she had ever known before; but this affair of ‘classic poses’ and ‘love portraits’ as he called them, were restful to her—she found them curious and amusing... She felt that for the first time she was beginning to understand ‘mature sex.’ She liked to stand exposing her smooth, powerful body in the quiet old rooms in some noble or perverse pose; she felt perfectly feminine. Mr Quaideson had explained to her in the beginning that love and pleasure were best in the imagination: nothing can disguise the crudity of ordinary sexual love! (288)

In this passage Eleanor literally becomes the sex object in a grim parody of sexual love. Stead satirises the perversity of such activity. However, Miss Herbert’s obvious pleasure in this weird posing and performing resists the usual analysis of the exploited woman. Yet there is no doubt from the context that she is being exploited. The pretence that the attraction between them is ‘mature’ makes it even more ludicrous. The grotesquely comic dimension of this scene contributes to Stead’s refusal to conform to a standard feminist critique of the interaction.

In fact the posing forms a metaphor for Eleanor’s entire emotional life—she is concerned always with how she looks, longs to be looked at, and her participation in life is as shallow as her rules for writing. She is slavish in conforming to a formula in all things but is completely without passion. The hollow relationship between the two ‘lovers’ is obvious, yet Eleanor refers to them ‘as very good, very dear, very sincere friends’. (289) In fact their relationship is a

travesty of friendship, characterised by exploitation on the part of Quaideson and Eleanor's chronic self-delusion.

Yet Stead does not condemn the pair in any absolute way nor is she particularly critical of what they actually do; in fact their actions are presented as curious. Eleanor's construction of this experience as 'perfectly feminine' reveals her distorted sense of her sexuality, and her enjoyment of being admired as an object is disturbing. However Stead makes no condemnation of this behaviour. Once again her dispassionate tone is unsettling in its ambivalence.

While Stead manages to induce sympathy of a kind for Eleanor, she does not encourage pity for this character. And it is in this lack of pity for Eleanor Herbert that the subversive edge of her satire is felt. We learn through the mechanics and drama of this satire that it is not Eleanor the person for whom Stead mourns. Stead laments the callousness and complacency of an entire class of Eleanors. For Eleanor and all her 'grubbing' becomes an allegory for Britain and its middle class intellectuals whose complacency contributed to Hitler's rise, and to the maintenance of social inequality after the War.

In the very midst of Stead's brutal portrayal of this side of Eleanor the reader's attention is focused on her desperate struggle to survive. Accepting old clothes from friends, with no money for heating month after month, hawking her services around miserable publishing houses, only her pride keeps Eleanor from working as a charwoman where she could earn twice what she does as a literary hack. In the cruellest of cruelly comic moments in this novel, we learn that Eleanor doesn't even know the meaning of the term 'Grub Street'.

She had never heard of Grub Street and did not care for the expression. After she had thought it over, she said sourly, 'Yes, I am eating my bread in Grub Street too, but if I were at the top I wouldn't mind at all. Yes, I'd like it.' (229)

However it is at the point when Eleanor's marriage to the oppressive Heinrich Charles disintegrates that the disturbing allegorical power of the novel is fully revealed. At this time Eleanor also chats at length with her brother, George, about her problems. Through their conversations, Stead focuses on Eleanor as the key allegorical figure:

It was the dark of winter. They were cold, tired, down. At night she would sit by the fire with George and in anxious quiet conversations discuss their troubles—national and personal troubles were all one... (164)

Eleanor's war with Heinrich, and England's war with Germany occur simultaneously. Refusing to acknowledge the problems she has with Heinrich, even when he abandons her, Eleanor denies class war and social injustices in her own country, insisting that the poor are contented and that there is no need for a republic in England.³⁷ Her naive certainty about both her life and her nation are heavily satirised:

She followed, in the minds and mouths of others, the nation's history, and once or twice, after political defeats, she felt herself in a blind end: 'What if we go down? If it's all been for nothing? If we've all been wrong? Can I live in a world where the British Empire does not live?' (165)

Unable to accept the failure of her marriage she is incapable of seeing anything wrong with the status quo in England at this time, or while being ruthlessly exploited by publishers later on.

Eleanor gradually got into the habit of resisting every word and allusion that did not lead to Britain's being champion. (167)

Vigorously resisting the radical politics of George and Lindsay Brent, Eleanor rejects what she hears about the extermination

camps, her language a parody of the paternalistic propaganda issued by the war machine:

She grew into the habit of blocking every question, always putting forward the commonsense view, throwing cold water on enthusiasm, discouraging fancies... 'I think we can leave it to our government to make wise decisions; they have all the information; our job is to get on with what's nearest to hand... I'm quite sure our journalists are directed and telling us what's best for us to know: they are given information we don't get...' (166)

In the richness of this allegory lies the source of *Miss Herbert's* power as satire. This is not simply a critique of fascism but a bitter attack on the liberal values in England that amounted to a kind of complicity with fascist forces, allowing so many lives to be lost in concentration camps on the continent. Stead denounces the values of liberal democracy and all its structures. In the courtship of Eleanor by the shady, bullying character Heinrich Charles, we see two prongs in the satire on Englishness, for Heinrich is determined to become as English as he can; he changes his name to Henry, wishes to join 'the Established Church' and hopes one day for a knighthood.

Eleanor's acceptance of Heinrich, who seems to be working with fascist groups in Europe, becomes a kind of parallel for British complacency and acceptance of Nazi atrocities. The irony is subversive and humorous all at once. When Heinrich reveals that he has some Jewish 'blood' Eleanor's response is laughable given what we learn about her racism as the novel continues.

'I don't think it matters, Heinrich,' said Eleanor, very practically. 'This is England, you know, and we need not mention it, though I am quite proud of it. They say a little admixture improves a race.' (81)

As Eleanor becomes middle aged and poor, and dependent on a coterie of right-wing publishers, her association with decline in England becomes more and more palpable. Her shabby appearance and reduced circumstances reflect the impoverishment of Britain after the war. Her work, adapting American manuscripts for English audiences, mirrors the genuflection of Britain to the hegemonic power of the US, at both the political and cultural level. At last her conversations with her friend Cope Pigsney embroil her in a communist witch hunt and identify her finally with the worst excesses of Cold War liberalism. Quaideson's words about liberal souls turning their eyes from the nasty and the painful take on an even more sinister meaning in the context of Eleanor's unwitting collaboration.

With Eleanor's evolution from the promiscuous young Venus to the reactionary and pathetic middle aged hack, the text shifts to become more vividly grotesque. Contemplating the expression 'Grub Street', Eleanor begins to feel wretched and defeated.

Sometimes after three days' work, she had only made fifteen shillings or five shillings a day with Rainshelter's. Those nights, when hungry and exhausted she had got into her cold bed and covered her head to get warm, a horrible taste had flowed into her mouth, a taste of human excrement, and she had cried to herself at the work she had to do. (230)

In this unforgettable expression—'a horrible taste had flowed into her mouth, a taste of human excrement'—Stead registers a sense of fantastic outrage towards Eleanor, and at the prospect of her decline. Stead's simultaneous sympathy and disgust towards her character culminates in these lines. It is a remarkable moment in the text. This graphic language marks Stead's mastery in portraying both a sense of her character's psychological anguish and abhorrent politics.

Stead's specific references to Grub Street invite us to read the text as a self-conscious lament of literary life, in a long line of satires bemoaning the commodification of literature. Indeed the novel can be seen in some respects as a rewriting of Gissing's *New Grub Street* published in 1891, or as a text that builds on Orwell's satire *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* from Stead's own time (1936).³⁸ While the allegory in *Miss Herbert* goes beyond a mere complaint about the commercial exploitation of writers and the degrading way in which their art is traded by greedy, right-wing publishers, there is much in the satire that corresponds with Gissing's view of the literary world.

Firstly, both works focus on the shabby genteel lives of writers, and the portrait of Gissing's protagonist, Edwin Reardon, is very close to Gissing himself, just as Eleanor Herbert, in her hack work, is drawn from Stead's own experiences. Eleanor produces fiction of little merit whereas Stead's novel, while not her most remarkable achievement, is a clever and disturbing satire (mirroring the contrast between Reardon's mediocre writing and Gissing's more powerful material). Perhaps the most striking correspondence between the two novels is the way in which both novelists carefully identify the way in which their characters fit into their society. Some fundamental Marxist assumptions about literature are present in the two texts as well.

Knowledge about Christina Stead's life makes it difficult to read the Grub Street section of *Miss Herbert* without thinking of Stead and Blake's London years after the war. Having fled the US in the face of the crackdown on communists, the couple suffered eight years as poorly paid literary hacks. They translated from French and German, edited and proofread; but their combined income was only 10 pounds a week, the wage of one skilled worker. Stead likened the conditions of this new proletariat of educated workers to the lace makers of Calais 'who did the finer work, not the machine work, producing lovely webs in hovels'.³⁹

Indeed Miss Herbert suffers the defeat experienced by her creator in this dystopia of modern work. Significantly they both decide to write about their experiences. Eleanor, at the end of the story, announces her intention to write the story of her own life. The irony of this is difficult to miss. Whereas Stead turns her experience into subversive satire, we can only guess what Eleanor Herbert's work will look like. This ironic fact of Eleanor's decision to write about her life, given that her writing is so lacking in merit and her life is so ordinary, sustains the undermining satirical thrust of the novel right up until the end.

In portraying Eleanor's own writing, Stead questions the role of narrative throughout the novel, satirising the clichés of the popular romance genre in which Eleanor Herbert writes and thinks. When Eleanor and her two children reluctantly move to her brother's farm while Heinrich disappears on one of his prolonged and mysterious visits to the Continent, Eleanor collaborates on a trashy novel with her father, entitled *Brief Candle*, that sells well but is little noticed.⁴⁰ (Perhaps it was a swipe at the collaboration between Florence James and Dymphna Cusack on *Come In Spinner* which Stead thought full of clichés. Indeed the farm called 'Commonwealth Farm' may be another caustic reference to the property in the Blue Mountains where Cusack and James lived at the time of the collaboration.)

Eleanor's role is to 'write in female psychology'. Here again Stead questions the idea that a person's gender relates to a particular understanding of the psychology of their sex, or that there is such a thing. Significantly her father resists many of her suggestions, claiming that he believes he has a feminine side to him. The novel *Brief Candle* and the process by which it is written register Stead's distaste for the genre and the practice of giving such works grandiose titles. But it is also part of the puzzle of *Miss Herbert* in which Stead embeds her anti-heroine in an inescapable layer of low culture attitudes and high culture aspirations.

Furthermore the title denotes the moral nihilism of the text and suggests something disturbing about Stead's view of the futility of narrative and 'tales told by idiots' 'full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.'⁴¹ The heroine of *Brief Candle* is an ailing *femme fatale* who casts a spell on an entire village. Just as Macbeth contemplates his own wretchedness in the 'brief candle' speech, so does Stead in *Miss Herbert*. There is a dry-eyed savage nihilism in *Miss Herbert* from which we can speculate that Stead wrestles with her own sense of futility. When we read the novel as a meditation on her own life, we perceive Stead's intellectual drive and vigour as strong and unique, just as in Macbeth's meditation on his own death of self, he expresses himself with passionate negativity. But the unsentimental power of the novel does not detract from the force of Stead's denunciation of all narrative in her disavowal of Eleanor's novel and her life—*Brief Candle*.

Miss Herbert can be read as a story about a failed novelist. As we know during the 1950s Stead was shunned by the literary establishment and lived like Eleanor Herbert in rooming houses around London, working as a clerk in a hospital to make ends meet. One target of the satire is therefore the narrative itself. Stead questions the value of a narrative about a failed and undistinguished hack in London. In her portrayal of the corruption of young writers of promise like Cope Pigsney, she questions the value of narrative in a society that ignores the text and tramples on its creator.

Anticipating the thrust of some postmodernist satires in which narrative and discourse themselves are an object of the satire, Stead poses a question about the value of all narrative. Stead indicts both *Miss Herbert*'s own writing, which simply reinforces cultural stereotypes about women, and the kind of texts she edits, because they also reinforce inequitable social relations, and further empower social and political elites. Implicit in Stead's satire is the idea that economic realities dictate all sorts of cultural endeavour.

Whereas Eleanor's story will no doubt be a text of pleasure, Stead's is a highly disruptive late modernist satire—a text of bliss.⁴² It unsettles the reader, makes us uncomfortable and challenges many of our assumptions about literary culture, women's writing, and about narrative and its relationship to society. Many of Stead's other satirical novels also express disillusionment with the place of literature, and particularly satire in culture, and focus attention on the absurdities of popular writing. *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *I'm Dying Laughing* both take up these ideas within the context of a decaying capitalist society.

Chapter 3

'A Wilderness of Lies': History, Truth and the Development of Christina Stead's Satire during World War II

A Little Tea, A Little Chat published in 1948, is in many ways Stead's quintessential satire. It meets the most obvious and conventional definitional criteria of satire. Indeed Alvin Kernan's description of satire fits perfectly with this frenzied, indignant and rasping work. Kernan identified in the typical satiric 'scene':

...massive amounts of foolishness and villainy, and a jumble of material things pressing in a disorderly fashion upon, and threatening to obliterate, the remnants of sanity and decency.¹

The massive amount of 'foolishness and villainy' portrayed in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* constitutes the satire, but this novel lacks the complexity of characterisation found in Stead's later satires. In fact the monstrous and unstinting villainy of the main character threatens at times to obliterate the thematic and allegorical integrity of the work.

In terms of Stead's development as a satirist, however, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* represents a new stage in Stead's use of the genre, a work in which folly is dissected, and hypocrisy is anatomised in painstaking detail, but with an alienating detachment. Whereas Stead's later satires are experimental and transform the genre, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* is a paradigmatic satire.

If *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* is Stead's crudest Juvenalian satire, her next novel, *The People with the Dog*, published in 1952, provides the strongest contrast to it in Stead's oeuvre. *The People with the Dog* is an enchanting, gentle, Horatian satire, relying on irony and sardonic commentary rather than denunciation and savage attack. As such it represents another important stage in Stead's development as satirist. Here Stead experiments with the elegiac mode, reflecting on the failed utopian aspirations that underlie American society. Stead celebrates the elegance of cosmopolitan New York at mid-century and at the same time laments its fading bohemianism after World War II.

After publishing *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* Stead attempted an entirely different project. Recounting the sequence of her publishing career in 1969 Stead stated:

The People with the Dog this was a novel I made a departure in. I made up my mind not to be a satirist but to be kindly towards the people, because I had discovered from writing the previous book [*A Little Tea, A Little Chat*] which has a certain amount of satire in it, that satire does not do anybody any good and, furthermore, that the people satirized are quite proud and vain about it, so I realized it had no purpose.²

In her nostalgic and 'kindly' mode she is, however, relentlessly satirical. In this excursion from her 'angry' satire, Stead portrays the decay of American idealism, its complacent and indulgent isolationism and its suffocating materialism. While the tone, pace,

narrative structure, prose texture and characterisation differ radically, both novels rely on allegory and advance Stead's analysis of American society, begun with *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1944) (but with roots in *The Man Who Loved Children*), and not completed until the posthumous publication of *I'm Dying Laughing* in 1986. These two middle novels provide a dialectical analysis of American society, the first condemning the brutal, dystopic Darwinian world of US capitalism during the war, the second examining the opposite impulse of American society—its liberal and egalitarian ideals in their crippled, anachronistic last stages.

The People with the Dogs marks the end of Stead's exploration of socialist ideals as a genuine possibility. In this novel of the Cold War she dismisses her longstanding vision of communal harmony, seeing it in the harsh light of American repression. Having alluded to the capitulation of American socialism to the populist pro-war position in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* and having explored its vestigial social forms in *The People with the Dogs* Stead never looked upon socialism with the same benign hope again. From this point on she fixed her satiric gaze on the naivete, stupidity and corruption of failed socialists.

If the primary emotion conveyed in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* is disgust and the tone one of outrage, *The People with the Dogs* conveys disappointment and amusement. But to talk of primary emotions is perhaps to obscure both the historical project visible in each work, and their associated documentary qualities. In *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* these qualities are explicit and sonorous, whereas in *The People with the Dogs* they are artfully muted. We are told in the very first sentence of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* that it is 1941, and at regular intervals we are reminded of the exact month and year, the novel taking us up to 1945. Both novels present satire as history in Stead's continuing discourse of the decline and fall of Western capitalism, and in this case the fall of American 'civilisation'.

A LITTLE TEA, A LITTLE CHAT

The purposive thrust of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* foreshadows that of *Cotters' England* the novel in which Stead's prose is explicitly polemical. *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* dwells on the underside of American capitalism and its gross developments during the war. Like *Cotters' England* and Stead's English short stories, it is grounded in social history and actual historical conditions. But in this novel, Stead is not so much interested in portraying social conditions as in speculating on the underlying ailments of ideology in wartime America. As in *House of All Nations* and Stead's later satires, her analysis depends on extravagant distortion and excess. While the excesses of Stead's satire in this novel distance it from historiography in its conventional form, the crudeness of the characters and the sustained excess of the novel convey the monstrosities of the period with frightening clarity.

Once again Stead modelled her main characters on those around her. The protagonist and anti-hero, Robbie Grant, is based on Bill Blake's old friend and employer, Alf Hurst. According to Hazel Rowley, Alf Hurst consistently underpaid Blake and used Christina to do his typing. However Blake and Stead were not in a position to complain, because they depended on him.³ Hurst frequently indulged himself with talk of Christina accompanying him on a trip to his native Romania so that Stead could ghost-write his autobiography. While this trip never eventuated Stead did write a book about Hurst, at first called 'The Blondine' (with reference to Grant's mistress), but later called *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*

The novel creates a social milieu in which excess and corruption are the norm. Right from the beginning of the novel we find ourselves amid a world of rogue businessmen, described with documentary precision, using the catalogue form often adopted by satirists:

Hoag had as many friends as he could count, all Wall Street men, stock-exchange and insurance brokers, bankers, men who ran bankrupt railroads, insured stockyards, were produce merchants and shipping brokers. (4)⁴

Introducing Peter Hoag 'the fixer' as the novel opens, the narrator immediately reveals an attitude of fascination and disgust with this world of late capitalism:

These men were well aware that the age of monstrous personal achievement had passed and that dynasties were now the order of that extraordinary one-time democracy, now territory of financial oligarchs...*(sic)* These men loved the United States intensely, ferociously, with terror and greed. (4)

Stead's style in this novel is bald, abrasive and polemical. We have only reached the second page of the story when we are told unequivocally that each of these men, these friends of Peter Hoag, 'loved money and lechery, above all' (4). We are left here in no doubt as to the narrative stance. Following the mode of *Letty Fox* and *Miss Herbert* no clear or overarching moral argument emerges in the novel. Once again Stead is not interested in passing judgement on whether individuals behave morally or immorally; for one thing, most of the characters are completely immoral and aware of it. Rather, Stead shows the normality and rationality of such behaviour, without expressing any interest in its opposite, or any hope for reform. Stead does express moral outrage, but no overarching moral position is reached. In her later satires such as *I'm Dying Laughing* she also expresses moral outrage, but reveals a sense of being implicated in the moral dilemmas of the characters. As a result we find a greater sympathy towards the renegade activities of the protagonists.

In *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* Stead relentlessly denounces the corrupt, self-seeking and dangerous behaviour of this New York

sub-culture. Therefore the novel can be seen in a superficial sense as a moral satire, condemning vice and hypocrisy. But this is only a surface level feature of the text. Her stance on vice and folly is much more analytical than moralistic. The point of the satire is not simply to expose vice and folly, though this is one compelling feature of the novel. Rather, Stead examines the ideology that permits such vice and allows it to flourish. Her analysis of the appalling ramifications of capitalism in encouraging rampant self interest and competition provides the more profound subject matter of the satire. Stead attempts to explain the social conditions in which war profiteering occurred, and then to explore the isolationist and proto-fascist rhetoric that fosters these conditions.

A kind of barbarism permeates the culture portrayed in the novel, calling to mind the adage Bill Blake uses in his work, *Understanding the American*, that American culture was 'the only culture that had gone from barbarism to decadence without the intervening stage of civilization'.⁵ Stead establishes mid-town Manhattan not merely as the background setting for the chicanery of Grant and his cronies but as a place of the 'sophisticated and depraved'. Like Bridgehead in *Cotters' England* or Hollywood in *I'm Dying Laughing* it is a paradigmatic place. Unlike straightlaced Boston, where Grant domiciles his wife (described by Grant as 'a narrow-minded Boston girl' (18)), Manhattan and specifically 'fashionable midtown' is where Grant lives. He installs his principal mistress, Barbara Kent, in midtown's Grand Hotel: 'a place with bars, restaurants, a night club, a roof garden, coiffeurs, dress shops. It was the resort of business and society people all day long'. (27)

It is the home of the 'easy money crowd' and like Dickens's Coketown or Chancery, it offers a metaphor of society in decay.⁶ The bars, hotels and restaurants of this area are frequently named in the novel, contributing to a sense of specificity, as Grant moves

from one to the next throughout the day and most of the night. Grant's son Gilbert pointedly outlines his father's territory:

Dad's tour of New York City—have you seen it? Take a compass and stick it right through the Barbizon Plaza. Draw a circle with a radius of half a mile and there you are, that's it. Dad's world. I was at the Barbi-Plaza last night, night before at Pommies Frites, tomorrow at Monte Carlo, tonight I don't know where, and what about the '21'? Do you know the Raleigh, beastly showy place full of war-rich like this brute who was here, and bits of chicken under bell glasses, and special ices?... Showy places, showy women—you know... (119)

While the war changed the lives of everyone in Europe, Stead was staggered by the decadence of American life at the time, and the ironic fact that extraordinary wealth was being created. The United States was the arsenal for the war, but removed from the fighting, people grew tired of sacrifices and became more demanding, and self-interested.⁷ Stead satirises the ignorance and complacency of the ordinary person, and the lip-service paid to supporting Britain, during the farcical episode when the blonde pretends to be collecting discarded clothes or 'Bundles for Britain' for the war effort. (314) The humour of this episode is chilling, as it reinforces the dissociation of the women from the real events of the day. Here we find more to the humour in this satire than simply an unmasking of vice.

A Little Tea, A Little Chat provides us with literature that is mimetic and rhetorical. As mentioned in the introductory chapter to this study, satire is often regarded as a department of rhetoric, with its referential qualities being overlooked. Stead conveys the circumstances, atmosphere and prevailing ideological mood of the war years in the US and she adopts a particularly cynical attitude towards it. However the fact that Stead resists giving the reader any kind of moral alternatives to those posed in the satire, and displays a keen excitement in the face of such depravity, means

that the purposive thrust of the novel cannot be easily reduced to literature 'with a thesis' or to the conventions of the ideological novel. Like Dickens, Stead combines a purposive rhetoric with mimesis, or imitation, as it is sometimes called.⁸ Perhaps this is the most interesting feature of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* which attempts to build a bold and radical argument about decline into 'the drama of the person'.

The very 'normality' of Grant's character can be contrasted with Kristeva's view of the prominence of mania and psychosis in post-war fiction, as a way of rendering the political disturbances and horrors of the period.⁹ Kristeva talks about a 'literature of our maladies', a literature in which psychic pain resulting from the calamity of World War II and life in the modern world surfaces consistently in fiction. Stead's fiction is at odds with such a view. Her post-war fiction emphasises the rational, the corrupt, and the very normality of people's behaviour, even in the face of war. Admittedly most of Stead's targets are from the New World, where the impact of the war on civilian life was considerably less than in Europe. Nevertheless Stead refuses any kind of romanticism about the psychic effects of suffering in France in *I'm Dying Laughing*, and in Great Britain in *Cotters' England*. Even the survivors of the Nazi death camps are able to give disturbingly rational accounts of their own cruelty in the face of persecution.

Stead portrays Grant as normal and attractive. Described as 'husky, tall, fair, with fine blue eyes, a square-set fleshy nose of extraordinary size, and a powerful chin' (10) he is far from grotesque. Grant is vain, fastidious and beset with a number of fetishes, but it is only Edda Flack, David's daughter (supposedly modelled on Stead herself) who sees him as grotesque. Edda, who resents Grant's shabby treatment of her father, draws a cartoon of Grant and shows him as 'avaricious, long-nosed, thin-haired, with a sniffing belly' (103). Unlike Dickens's grotesques, where gross physical appearance signifies moral dissipation, Stead's characters,

particularly Grant and Mrs Kent, the blondine, are presented as physically attractive, according to the conventions of the time. While grotesque characters need not be ugly, it seems that Stead is deliberately rejecting the traditional characterisation of the villain as diabolical, strange or exotic,¹⁰ in order to show her protagonists as ordinary, attractive and well liked. In a culture where youth and physical appearance are so highly valued, their good looks are effective disguises for vice.

Stead's reliance on dialogue, slang and the intriguing language of the 'fast money crowd' bears the imprint of Hollywood. Even more salient in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* is the similarity of the plot and atmosphere of the novel with two *film noir* classics ('Double Indemnity', 1944 and 'Scarlett Street', 1945) in which the male protagonist becomes entangled with a *femme fatale*, who uses sex in order to attain money. Barbara Kent, the blondine, is a *femme fatale* of this kind. However she beats Grant at his own game. In Stead's story, with its mood of glamour and corruption, the woman is triumphant, whereas in both films, the woman is killed by the man she has seduced. Whilst the woman in the *film noir* genre is liberated from being portrayed in a traditional role, that is, she is strong and sexually powerful, *film noir* is unable to explore fully a discourse of sexuality or the reality of sexual politics.¹¹

In *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and in *Letty Fox* before it, Stead plays with the question 'What does a woman want?' as Grant makes a mockery of such an inquiry with his much repeated infantile catch cry: 'All I want is a woman'. With her focus on the economic needs of women and her portrayal of women as rational, clever and corruptible, Stead implies no difference between men's and women's morality. In this way Stead playfully draws on the genre of *film noir* but extends it considerably.

Grant is shown to be totally corrupt. Stead reveals her lack of interest in portraying her characters as good or bad by depicting Grant's behaviour as normal in his circle, and by the fact that he is

propped up by other sympathetic characters, such as David Flack and Grant's secretary. Instead of establishing any line of moral judgement, Stead offers the strong and the weak in a busy tableau of Darwinian extremes. She insists that there is no lack of moral awareness among her characters. At the novel's opening we are told of Hoag and his set, that 'They not only were birds of prey, but loved to think of themselves as eagles in their flights and vultures in their hovering.' (5) Their attraction to corruption and exploitation is a constant theme in the novel. While subscribing to a variety of clichés about women, Grant is ineluctably drawn to what he perceives as more masculine and corrupt behaviour in them. After a night with Paula Russell who was 'engaged to a man in the hotel business':

...he still thought a great deal of her, was shocked at her corruption, but could not help seeing that she had not the slightest feeling or respect for him... It intrigued him. She was more a man than a woman, he said to himself. (17)

What appeals to him about the blondine, apart from her beauty, and her apparent disdain for him, is her business acumen where men are involved. He is also impressed by some of her actual business ideas:

She had some schemes for smuggling currency and furs to Mexico, also perfumes; naturally I didn't listen to her, but they were all right... (58)

Although Grant is aware of his own venality ('But I'm corrupted. I'm a profiteer. Will I sit back and let the others take the pickings? It's asking too much.' (67)), he also believes in the American ideals of hard work and rewards, but is incapable of thinking beyond jingoistic notions of American success. He is

deluded in every way by clichéd ideas of happiness, his 'ferocious' belief in the profit motive and a total lack of self awareness. Instead he believes, like many Americans, that it is impossible to make a lot of money except by crime.¹² This view gained currency during the war when so many people insisted upon their right to make profits in spite of the regulations to the contrary.

Stead is at pains to demonstrate that Grant's chosen path of depravity is 'rational', considering the values of the period. Robbie Grant embodies the corrupt ideology of capitalism that causes and simultaneously profits from war. Yet Grant exudes an energy and vitality that is at times attractive, like capitalism itself. His roguishness is shocking but entertaining, at least in the early stages of the novel. In a parody of the lecture Polonius gives Laertes before he travels abroad, Grant lectures his son on how to dissemble in order to survive in a sorry world:

Then another thing, if you see people want something, promise it to them: they'll never get it anyway, very likely, and so what harm do you do? People pray to God, did it since the Year One, and does God send parcels-post? There are cinders in Europe that once were one million innocents, and does that stop people from believing in God? They don't expect it; also, you don't burn up anyone in an incinerator. God's credit is good, too, eh? Better than yours or mine. (338)

Grant eventually perceives his own descent into the 'abyss' in the form of a strange dream about 'walking across muddy fields in wartime' and feeling 'the filth folding him in, in his armpits, round his waist, his limbs'. (375) This reinforces the sense of a person who recognises his own depravity, just as Eleanor Herbert goes to sleep imagining the taste of human excrement in her mouth. The fact that his struggle with the 'filth' is imagined as a physical battle with engulfing forces of mud suggests the irresistible forces of vice

around him and sustains the allegorical significance of American decline during the war.

In spite of his voracious appetite for immoral behaviour, Grant is not without a sense of guilt, and the rather Chekhovian ending of the novel implies that it eventually destroys him. Grant is revealed to us chiefly through monologue. As Susan Sheridan argues, we see him 'speak himself into fictional existence, obsessively and repetitively'.¹³ In *Grant*, we see a character who is fully exteriorised for the first time in Stead's fiction. In this novel, Stead experiments with and begins to perfect the method of speechifying that becomes the basis for characterisation in all her future works of satire. While there are earlier examples of the monologue, particularly in the characterisation of Sam Pollit, Stead's reliance on diatribe in this novel is paramount for the first time. In *Letty Fox: Her Luck* the narrative takes the form of a dramatic monologue; *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* is a novel of talking between characters in which Stead perfects what becomes her distinctive satirical vehicle.

Grant's talking takes the place of thinking so that he comes across as a cipher, a person who can recount any number of clichés and ideological views with equanimity and confidence. Grant's language is full of outrageous contradictions, non sequiturs, Freudian slips and strange inversions of well known quotations from Shakespeare.

Far from disrupting the 'satiric design' of the novel, our enjoyment of the text, particularly our fascination with rascality, is an important part of the way the satire functions. The ambivalence of the satirist engenders a state of attraction and repulsion in the reader that provides one of the key experiential elements of a response to satire. For example the reader is invited to marvel and recoil at Grant's extremely callous treatment of Myra Coppelius. But the fact that we may enjoy the episodes in which Grant dupes this vulnerable woman, who eventually commits suicide, intensifies

the effect of the satire rather than diminishing or disrupting it.

Moreover, Susan Sheridan is only partly right when she points out that all satire encourages emotional distance. In Stead's most powerful satires this distance is a complex matter, breached frequently. It is the blend of sympathy and contempt that Stead demonstrates, and invites in the reader, that makes her satiric victims so interesting. The weakness in Stead's portrayal of Grant is that too much emotional distance is produced. Yet Grant is still a compelling villain. He is portrayed as a decadent hedonist with a peculiarly American obsession with ablutions and a puritanical distaste for body talk, but Stead's satire, recalling Sterne and Rabelais, focuses on the sexual and gustatory rather than the excremental.¹⁴ His seduction invitation of 'a little tea, a little chat' is issued and accepted hundreds of times in the novel. There are numerous references to his vanity and his obsession with his physical appearance. Stead treats us to a full description of his bath:

He took several tablets but had only a few hours of dull sleep. He got up as usual and began his ablutions, following a system which filled in more than two hours of his morning. He took a bath, a douche, a scented bath, a hot and cold shower, a footbath, a pedicure and manicure, a suntan from his special lamp. His teeth gleamed, his nails were buffed, and he wiped out, as far as possible, every sign of age. He emerged in fresh linen and a different suit, with a hot towel held to his chin with one hand, and he looked over his stores. After ten minutes' steaming, he applied eau de cologne, powder, hair cream, eyebrow dye, and while he put on his cocoa, he inspected his coat for the day. It was eight o'clock. (134)

The description echoes Elvira's bath scene in *The Beauties and Furies*, drawing attention to the similarities between these two self-absorbed characters.

However, Grant's excesses as a war profiteer provide the allegorical core of the novel and incorporate Stead's critique of

capitalism. Stead's ambitious use of Grant as an allegorical figure representing American capitalism in the form of a capitalist fascist embodies her idea that the war is the end result of capitalist greed.

The satire of war profiteers presents perhaps Stead's most trenchant use of satire as history. At the outset Grant declares 'If war's coming, I want to make a profit, that's all. I'm too old to fight, all I can do is make a profit, eh?' (33)

Grant, like many others he represents, is exultant when the Japanese declare war on the US:

The city was released. The war-tension of months, the uncertainty, were at an end. It was like news from Mars: they had never thought anyone would dare to attack them, mighty nation that they were, but it had only the effect that the first hard punch has on a strong youth. Everyone was downtown. In that morning, Flack and Grant sold all Grant's Government bonds at superb prices, many others being ashamed to sell at that moment, and they bought steel shares which had fallen since people were nervous... In the next few days they all considered what primary produce would be needed in war, as well as cotton, he went with Flack in a car to look at old disused piers and sheds in the Hudson, he wrote letters to all his correspondents in Europe and elsewhere, and considered forming a shipping company in Valparaiso to send contraband of war to Japan. Flack was found sufficiently pusillanimous to shake his head at this idea, while laughing. Grant shouted, 'My dear boy, when the golden harvest has begun, take a scythe in your hand.' (51-2)

Rowley reports Alf Hurst's glee when Pearl Harbour was attacked. It is not the blatant absence of patriotism that aroused Stead's ire, though she was shocked at the duplicity and hypocrisy of so many people. Stead expresses this vehemently in the novel: 'Everyone went out handshaking and deploring with the ear cocked for the moneyminting half-word.' (52) Not only did she find the money grabbing exploits obscene when so many innocent

people were being slaughtered in Europe, and when compatriots were giving their lives, but she saw profiteering as proof that capitalism was fast disintegrating. Not only were the profiteers gaining when the government was urging discipline and self-denial,¹³⁰ but the profiteers were treacherous as well. Grant Associates is accused of sending rare alloys in cotton bales from Brazil to aid the Nazis. Robbie Grant is certain he will make money in the fur trade just as Alf Hurst had been confident of this market, as the European fur trade was ruined by the war. 'Europe would need furs, any kind of furs, rat furs, cat furs, after the war; better to look ahead then! "Give the trappers a few needles, or radios."' (65) Profiteering affected almost every industry, particularly essential supplies of petrol, meat, shoes and coffee.¹⁶ Grant traded in all sorts of black market products as well as currency, and began to acquire properties abroad. He bought an English manor house cheaply and:

...at once offered the property to the Government for war-service and counted on getting rent and compensation for it during the war and on selling it immediately afterwards during the expected inflation. (179)

The reader is left in no doubt about Stead's distaste for the rapacious activities of war profiteers through her emphasis on the climate of greed rather than the activities of individuals: 'Everyone scooped greedily in the great cream pot of war.' (228) Using documentary realist techniques to make the themes explicit, Stead seeks to portray the legitimacy of profiteering in a capitalist society and therefore its self-destructive and maladaptive (in Darwinian terms) tendencies. She shows black marketeering as a symptom of social disorganisation and the breakdown of social consensus. Where individual materialism triumphs over national welfare, and where it is largely accepted by the community, the very existence

of the society is threatened. While American history books are not overflowing with information about profiteering, it is recognised that the black market was extensive, and that the losses to consumers amounted to billions of dollars.¹⁷

Stead is of course interested in the significance of such widespread violations of the wartime economy, revealing the difficulties of regulating business in a country where profit for the individual is the basic principle of the economy. Many people like Grant actually regarded the government programs of controls as immoral restrictions on private enterprise.¹⁸ In a country where patriotism was as fierce as it was in the US, the conflict of values over government regulation and the resulting black market revealed the impotence of law makers even in a national emergency. That government turned a blind eye to so much black market activity,¹⁹ and that there was so little public discussion of it after the war, suggests a kind of complicity with the idea that the profit motive reigns. As the American economy experienced unparalleled growth during the war, growing at the rate of ten per cent per annum and faster than ever before or since,²⁰ its interests had been served and so the profiteering, which in theory threatened the very existence of the economy, went unchecked. But for Stead the profiteering in New York during the war simply confirmed her sense of the decay of capitalism.

If Robbie Grant represents the dangerous excesses of American capitalism, he also, at times, expresses ideas that capture American political rhetoric immediately after the war; for example, the self-righteous but unashamedly hegemonic language of the rising empire of the United States. Again we see Grant pontificating on the morality of a certain course of action, while his own behaviour reveals a startling absence of morality. In this kind of talk, Stead demonstrates the shifting ground of public and international morality that paved the way for wartime atrocities. Speaking to Edda Flack, Robbie enthuses:

Look, we'll write about the new world, a new world, that is. The U.S.A. has new values, doesn't know how to use them. The old world needs new values U.S.A. has - that will be our theme, not me, see. Of course, you got to have human values too. Look, in Europe they all compounded a felony. They put up with Hitler. The whirligig of values, see. In old times a king threw his serving man out the window, no one would talk to him, they wrote him down in books, called him Pedro the Cruel or something; now, not. Everyone talks to Hitler after Munich, you get pretty women saying he's handsome, and statesmen saying he's brilliant, and young boys saying he represents their ideal. (46-7)

Europe's complicity in the war²¹ becomes a strong theme of *Miss Herbert* and the theme of the US 'helping' other countries with their 'new values' is heavily satirised in *I'm Dying Laughing In A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. Stead explores the reactionary extremes of American isolationism alongside the opportunism of business at this time. Stead then returns to this theme in *The People with the Dogs*. She derides American provincialism and reveals the complete lack of interest in the plight of Europe that coincides with entry into the war. In the character of Hugo March, a bullying servant of the Mafia, con-man and racist, Stead shows an even more sinister side of American capitalism than that represented by Robbie Grant. March is unequivocal in his isolationist sentiments:

I don't see why they issue passports to Americans ... Anyone—that's my opinion—who turns his back on the Statue of Liberty—deserves to stay wherever the hell he thinks he's going... But I'm damned if I'd let one of those goddamn s.o.b.'s take his American money with him. I'd make him try to do business on the other side, in the peanuts those monkeys use for money...

The whole world's going to hell without our aid. Let it, is my remedy. We got a big enough country. All we've got to do is sit on it... Why did

the British get us in? If we'd let the Japs mind their own business in China and clean up the Reds, we wouldn't have had a Pearl Harbor. We don't give a goddamn about Hitler. I don't know one good American who cares if he dies or walks all over Europe. Do them a lot of good. But who cares what a pack of starved mongrels do? (69–70, 71)



A Little Tea, A Little Chatis is a radical novel, yet it has not been regarded as such by mainstream critics and reviewers, nor by academic critics who apply a strict criterion when they talk about the 'radical' novel. While the novel ends in 1945, Stead cleverly satirises the feverish pursuit of 'reds' after the war (through the ridiculous surveillance of the blondine) and also refers more obliquely to the atmosphere of confusion in the post war years, in which President Truman's administration was weakened by a perception of corruption and communism within its ranks.²² Not only is the novel prescient and amusing in its portrayal of the ludicrous and farcical surveillance of possible spies, devoting pages and pages to the expensive monitoring of the blondine by Robbie's unscrupulous agents, but it is prophetic in its vision of the US as a kind of totalitarian society devoted to profits.

Through the diatribes of characters, such as March, Stead portrays the fierce divisions in American society during the war, and the deepening political antagonism between various interest groups. There was little public discussion of black marketeering after the war. In spite of the protestations by labour leaders during the war against the practice of business putting profits before service to their country, after the war civilians were led to believe that strikes posed a more significant wartime threat than the black market. Although one firm was found to have sold the government inferior war materials in a 1944 federal court case, very few

profiteers were prosecuted,²³ and the authorities were perceived as weak.

Not only is Stead's novel radical in giving expression to such views of profiteering and the climate of exploitation in New York during the war, it also voices a radical critique of capitalism itself. We cannot ignore Stead's reference to Edward Bellamy's socialist classic, *Looking Backward* (1888), very early in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. It is not simply an idle reference but sharpens the satire of Grant considerably. Grant suggests to two of his women friends that they 'not read the best-selling trash but to get hold of Bellamy's *Looking Backward* it had been his bible when he had been a lad' (15). In purely allegorical terms this is important as Grant represents the decaying stages of American capitalism, capitalism devoid of the once liberal and egalitarian ideals of nineteenth century utopian thinkers such as Bellamy.

Grant, of course, is a travesty of his namesake Robert Grant Owen, the industrialist and social justice champion of the New Lanark cotton mills. But Grant also appears to be a twisted version of the hero of Bellamy's novel, and *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* seems to be a dystopic rewriting of that work. Significantly, Bellamy talked about 'the economy of happiness', which became the basic concept of his utopia; Grant perverts this notion and constantly seeks after happiness, judging the worth of everybody in terms of money.

A Little Tea, A Little Chat is a subversive novel that simply does not fit the definitions of the radical novel prescribed by scholars such as Walter Rideout and Daniel Aaron, whose work in the 1950s has been regarded as definitive until recently.²⁴ Because it focuses on the activities of war profiteers, Mafia men and their hangers-on, Stead's novel seems to have been excluded from consideration as part of the history of the Communist literary left. Stead's subject matter departs from the strike novel, the proletarian struggle novel, the novels that explore the faith and

character of the Communist, heralded in 1940 by Albert Maltz's *The Underground Stream* or even the independent radical's self-styled novel.²⁵ But as well as presenting fiction about people who are not immersed in left wing politics, Stead's novel actually refuses to accord Marxist discourse any special status. Not only was Stead appalled by the capitulation of communists to Browderism and patriotic support of the war, but she demonstrates via her character's occasional appropriation of Marxist rhetoric just how easily any political discourse can be enlisted by unsavoury people to suit their purposes.²⁶ This advances the allegorical thrust of the novel. However it disqualified the novel from inclusion as one of the forty 'radical' novels Rideout claims were published in the US between 1940 and 1954.²⁷

A clue to Rideout's criteria lies in his summary discussion of the radical novel during the whole period, that is, from 1930 until the early 1950s. He admits to the common weaknesses of many of the novels, but points to several that avoid these defects. Referring to Josephine Herbst's trilogy, and Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*²⁸ as well as James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* and others, Rideout states that in these works 'the framework of Marxist doctrine is embedded almost out of sight but serves to bind the material of fiction firm'.²⁹ It seems that for Rideout and for the left in general, the radical novel or socialist realist fiction subscribed to Marxist ideas and emphasised the interests of the underprivileged classes.

Stead, an avowed Marxist, did not respect much of the so-called radical fiction of the day and her own novels presented a critique of capitalism but also Marxist rhetoric and socialist pretenders. In fact Stead mocked many aspects of society and attacked a variety of warring ideological viewpoints. Stead was fully aware of the theory and conventions of socialist realist fiction, and in fact adopted the theory of the typical. Stead's achievement was to combine an interest in the life of the individual with an

interest in the life and future of society by showing the typical character.³⁰ Stead's characters are shown to be typical of their milieu in many ways, which gives her satire resonance and strength. In *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* Stead focused on the nature of contemporary 'typical' life, using a wide range of characters. However in all her books, she refused to confine her material to workers and their triumphs.

Rowley documents the fact that Stead became impatient with the 'pious slogans' and 'dreary political saysos' appearing in *New Masses*. She remarked to her friend Ettore Rella that the 'politically-minded poets and writers... are invariably those with least talent'.³¹ Stead aroused hostility when she criticised Louis Aragon's novel *The Century was Young* (1941), and declared an aversion to novels in which political commitment is 'discovered':

We hunger for the happy ending and the consoling 'Credo' of the dying, but we would laugh at the device in a religious novel and we cannot take that comfort to ourselves in a political novel... I fancy socialist writers are of sterner stuff than those who only let their characters steeplechase through trouble in order to come out first in the happy ending of moral uplift.³²

Stead vigorously defended Ruth McKenney's novel *Jake Home*, published in 1943, and described by Rideout as 'grandiose' and 'suspiciously like a wish-fulfilment projection, a constructed myth', 'unconscious caricature' with a 'cartoonlike' hero.³³ Stead took issue with Israel Amter's review of *Jake Home* in which he had decreed untimely McKenney's portrayal of a flawed communist, whom he described as 'atypical'. Not only did the idea of a 'typical' character irritate Stead, but she insisted that 'a novel is not a pamphlet' and its business is to be 'untimely or timeless'. As I have argued, Stead used the theory of the typical in her own way but she resisted the 'typical' character when the writing was rigid and formulaic.

Ironically Stead's novel, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* can be criticised for some of the same qualities as many of the 'radical' novels Rideout discusses. For example it is sometimes overly didactic and crude. However Stead does make Robbie Grant 'typical' or at least representative, and generally avoids the caricature that Rideout complains of in *Jake Home*. In its allegory the novel succeeds in achieving what Rideout describes as problematic in many of the 'Communist protagonist' novels: it presents the protagonist's career as a microcosm of the development of recent American history and the pressure of contemporary social and economic forces.³⁴ In later novels, particularly *Cotters' England* and *I'm Dying Laughing* Stead excels in creating characters that represent a class and an entire culture, as well as constructing rich allegory as a strong component of her satire.

THE PEOPLE WITH THE DOGS

Published in 1952, and written while Stead was living in Europe, *The People with the Dogs* is a kind of dialectic response to *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. Through Robbie Grant Stead denounced all that was wrong with American capitalism. In her next novel she viewed capitalism from another angle, exploring the remnants of American Communist philosophy via the Massine family, who embody some of the values of nineteenth century American socialists. The novel has been described as Stead's most amiable and genially ironic work, with a protagonist who is regarded by some critics as Stead's most attractive male character.³⁵ The novel focuses on a decaying family and particularly on the lazy and dispirited Edward, building up an allegorical portrait of American society after World War II. Paradoxically Stead's tone is both affectionate and critical towards the Massines. While the novel is nostalgic, it expresses profound disappointment with the aimless

materialism of the post-war culture and its arrogant isolationism.

Unlike both *Letty Fox: Her Luck* and *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* the critique in this novel is subdued in the affectionate descriptions of lower Manhattan and the sometimes comical, sometimes absurd symbolism of the dogs. Stead portrays an entire family fixated on pets, and registers a very strong element of ambivalent affection towards her satiric targets that she did not express in the preceding novels, or in those that came later. It also suggests that Stead was more concerned than ever about appealing to the market in a repressive climate, seeking to couch her criticisms of American society and provincialism in a celebratory portrait of bohemian New York.

While the novel is not Stead's most accomplished work, it does represent an important stage in the development of her satirical voice, method and compass. Significantly Stead returns for the last time to the kind of exuberant, romantic descriptions of the natural world so prominent in *For Love Alone*. Her focus is on beauty as well as stagnation, on love as well as suffocation in families, on pleasure, as well as decadence, on the regenerate as well as the degenerate in American life. A buoyant, whimsical humour permeates the novel, softening but not undermining the satirical thrust of the narrative. It reveals a growing sophistication in Stead's humour that contrasts with the strident and savage satire of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*.

The portrayal of the Massine family in *The People with the Dogs* also casts doubt on the interpretation of Stead's use of real people in her fiction as somehow pathological or at best predatory. Hazel Rowley makes much of Stead's intense relationships with friends, and her subsequent transformation of these people into demonic characters. Stead's portrayal of the Massines is true to life, in that it grew out of her enduring friendship with Aida and Max Kotlarsky and their nephew Asa Zatz, the model for Edward Massine. The details of their lives and the lives of the Massines are

almost identical. However none of the characters is demonic. Stead demonstrates remarkable affection for her characters and yet there is a gentle but unrelenting censure of them both as individuals and in their allegorical capacity. In other words this novel represents the developing complexity of Stead's attitude to her satiric targets, who were always her friends. It is reductive to insist on a kind of causal relationship between Stead's emotional state or the state of her relationships and the realisation of character or place in her fiction. Stead did not satirise people and places because she disliked them, as some critics imply. On the contrary, Stead loved the Kotlarskys and New York, yet she heavily satirises both the family and their milieu in *The People with the Dogs*.

The distortion of facts about people that alarmed Ruth Hall (discussed earlier in this work) is part of Stead's satirical method. Distortion and excess are a vital part of Stead's satire; in conveying the excesses of depravity in the case of Robbie Grant, or the excessive complacency of the Massines, Stead produces the allegorical substance of the satire. The concentration on excess and the extravagance of Stead's satire allows the rhetoric of the work to function through the allegory. However this does not necessarily diminish the importance of the referential or mimetic qualities of the work. In *The People with the Dogs* Stead is particularly concerned to portray the lower East side of New York and the idyllic Catskill Mountains as carefully as possible while at the same time constructing a broader picture of social stagnation through this detail.

The frenzied life of Robbie Grant contrasts with the lethargy and leisure of Edward Massine. While Robbie profits from the war, Edward participates in it but comes home unscathed. Both men are representatives of their culture and both shun the work ethic on which so much of American ideology depends. Unlike Robbie, who is intent on making as much money as possible without working hard and without regard for ethics, Edward

spends his time avoiding work and comically rationalising his need to do so. In reality he doesn't need to work because he owns two buildings. Edward's embattled relations with his long-time lover, Margot, whom he refuses to marry, are a much more comical but still unnerving version of Grant's 'war' with the blonde. In a departure from her earlier novels, in which Stead focuses on the perspective of a young woman, in these two novels Stead attempts to present sexual relationships from a male viewpoint.

Clearly Grant becomes an embodiment of American economic aggression; Edward on the other hand represents American stagnation, resulting from wealth, isolation and cultural decay. His passivity reflects the state of emasculated socialist idealists in American politics during and after the war. If *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* can be seen as a cynical rewriting of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, it is useful to acknowledge Stead's association of 'the Massine republic' with the Perfectionists of New York.

The Perfectionists of New York were known as the Oneida Association, because they set up their community at Oneida Creek in Madison County, New York, in 1843. The community at Oneida was one of the most interesting communist experiments in American history. It dedicated itself to the principles of individual perfection and communal good, stressing intellectual endeavour over material need. Clearly the goals of Cold War America utterly reversed these ideals. In the novel, Edward's favourite aunt, Oneida, dominates the family and fears Edward's independence.

While the connection between the novel and the fortunes of the Oneida Community has been noted in passing by several critics, little has been said about the significance of this explicit association. Stead satirises the utopian community at Whitehouse, the Massines' country retreat, alerting readers to Edward's ambivalence at the outset: 'I dread the thought of going to Whitehouse this summer. I haven't been near it since 1943.' (30) ³⁶

Every spring the Massines leave New York City to spend the summer months at Whitehouse. Of course the use of 'Whitehouse' as the family seat makes Stead's allegorical purpose explicit. We cannot avoid making the connection between this country retreat in an advanced state of decay and American democracy. Not only does Edward feel suffocated by life at Whitehouse but in three ancient capitals he had keenly resented his American home, and its oppressive hold over him: 'In France, in Cairo, in Rome, he had hated Whitehouse and thought of it as stifling his talents.' (118) But he believes the fault to be his own: 'I am wrong, a modern restless nervous man.' (118) Apart from the lyric descriptions of the mountain landscape every reference to the Massine property and houses at Whitehouse chronicles its decay. The language Stead adopts to express this decay works at the literal, metaphorical and allegorical level. It reveals the neglect of the garden and the farm, now strangled by a 'great wild hops vine', at the same time alluding to the violence with which a family suffocates its members:

The root of the nearest tree was in the grip of the vine...

It held, embraced, but did not crush the ground, the house, and all there brought by dogs and men: bones, sheathed copper wire needed for watering the cows, old leather shoes hidden by a predecessor of the Abbot, a sadiron, and all the things lost by this fertile careless family... the deep ineradicable cables plunging into the hill soil and sending up at great distances their wires and threads; (151)

The vine 'traps', 'throttles', 'tears', 'grips' and 'suffocates' the sheds, house and plants, the 'suffocated' pear trees overtly expressing the life squashed by this symbol of an 'arterial' family and national culture. Edward is perfectly aware that he is in the grip of an oppressive family, but like the US itself at this time, his

situation has so much appeal it is difficult to leave. His friend Walt warns him against sloth and against taking on the causes of others, answering Edward's plaintive cry: 'I ought to go fight for somebody', with 'Anyone who expects causes and wretched suffering peoples to save his soul ends up a traitor.' (93) Rowley has documented the fact that Asa's grandfather, a Russian Jew who had emigrated to the US, had bought some land near Hunter, in the Catskills, and had been inspired by the ideals of the Oneida community of the nineteenth century.³⁷ Stead's sardonic reference to 'the perfect still life' (94) at Whitehouse encapsulates her careful and ambivalent criticism of the family, with its communal warmth and plenitude, but static, anachronistic way of life.

Stead's satirical attack on Edward's milieu works through conversations and description rather than monologue. Stead's emphasis at intervals throughout the narrative on a kind of documentary precision and interest in social conditions forms a picture of New York that contrasts the bounty and tranquillity of Whitehouse. For example, the novel opens with a description of lower Manhattan where Edward lives. The tone is nostalgic but Stead's emphasis is clearly on documenting living conditions at the time and foreshadows her later focus on social and historical conditions in her English novels and short stories, also written in the immediate post-war period. Clearly Stead envisaged her novel as a form of history. Moreover her descriptions are reminiscent of Henry Roth's lower East Side in *Call it Sleep*, published in 1934.

The People with the Dog opens with a lengthy description of a tiny area of Manhattan:

In lower Manhattan, between 17th and 15th Streets, Second Avenue, running north and south, cuts through Stuyvesant Park; and at this point Second Avenue enters upon the old Lower East Side. The island here is broad between the two rivers and heavily trafficked, north-south, east-west. Here, Third Avenue up to 18th

Street is still the Old Bowery, with small rented bedrooms and apartments like ratholes, cheap overnight hotels, flophouses, ginmills, fish places, bowling alleys, instant shoe repairers, moneylenders, secondhand clothing stores, struggling cleaning and tailors' places, barber schools, cellars where some old man or woman sells flowers and ice in summer, coal in winter, dance academies up crumbling stairs, accordion and saxophone schools and such businesses as are carried on for very poor people by very poor people and so occupy a very small space in a very old building. It is the last of gaslight New York. (3)

After this description we learn about Miss Waldemeyer, an 'excessively fat' real estate agent who once was simply 'gay' and 'chubby' before the war when there 'had been apartments to let' (5–6). Stead gives us an account of the annual moving days in New York prior to the war when upwardly-mobile New Yorkers moved to new apartments. Her essayistic style is important here as she explains the change since that time:

The principal thing was to move; that showed one had money to move, and taste too; one was not satisfied with conditions. However, since the war and the housing crisis, the chief thing was to have an apartment at all, and the worst and darkest holes were now prizes... (7)

Opening the novel with this description of the poor housing conditions in New York after the war registers the narrative as partly a chronicle of a period, and signals Stead's interest in the effects of the war on people at various rungs on the social ladder. For the Massines, finding an apartment is not an issue. In fact for Edward, apartment life in New York is just as confining as his life at Whitehouse, where unconfined physically, he feels trapped in a pointless existence. Complaining about his life with Margot to his friend, Al Burrows, he claims:

We never go out. We just go from one apartment to the other and sometimes to the theater. Once, about ten years ago, when we first met, we went to Staten Island to see what it was like. (64)

Stead creates a portrait of a sensitive and artistic young man with a theatrical bent, but we are also shown someone who is indolent, discouraged and self-indulgent.

The portrayal of this 'Cherry Orchard family', as Stead called them in a letter to Bill Blake,³⁸ is similar to Chekhov's portrayal of the Russian gentry. That the title calls to mind Chekhov's 'The Lady with the Dog' makes Stead's comparison of the milieu of the wealthy in late nineteenth century Russia and that of the declining 'gentry' of mid-twentieth century America explicit. The decadence and ennui of Edward and the intrinsic loneliness of the family members, in spite of their communal household, expose the same kind of infantile ineffectiveness and eccentricity of the characters in *The Cherry Orchard*. A similar kind of ironic humour operates in *The People with the Dog* and Chekhov's plays, as the characters are shown to be pathetic and immoral. In portraying the random generosity but also the frequent exclusions practised by the Massines, and the comical and sometimes poignant love of their pets, Stead sustains a kind of benevolent enjoyment of her targets without openly denouncing them in the way that she does in her other satires, particularly in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*

The concentration of the characters on the health, welfare and companionship of dogs is a preoccupation of the book that provides much of the substance of the allegory. Chekhov described *The Cherry Orchard* not as drama but as 'comedy: in places almost a farce'³⁹ and there are farcical episodes in both *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dog*. When the entire Massine family attend the vet's surgery for an operation on Oneida's French bull terrier bitch, Madame X, the novel becomes farcical. Similarly when Edward's friend Phillip Christy, a jaded

anarchist, perpetually feeds his dog expensive brandy and dies trying to rescue her in a trolley car accident, the reader is treated to farce of an unsettling kind like that offered by Chekhov.

Clearly the fixation on the care of the dogs reveals a society and an ideology that has lost its way, where excessive wealth has removed purpose and where humanitarian ideals have become distorted. It is impossible to disregard the fact that films about animals and pets became immensely popular during and after World War II. For example both 'Lassie' and 'My Friend Flicka' were released in 1943. This may have also been a factor in Stead's choice of satirical target.

The story of a family devoted to dogs is plausible and at times even delightful but Stead is unequivocal in her distaste for the people of this novel. Her rhetorical stance is patent. Oneida's obsessive concern for her animals is shown as a kind of aberration:

Oneida with a pert expression, went on wiping pus from Madame X's corrupting anatomy... She kept on kissing the old dog: her savage and innocent heart believed that her kisses would restore Madame X to health. (160)

Stead also reveals this affection to be a kind of delinquent displacement of negative emotions towards her own family members, describing Oneida's vigorous grasping of Madame X's skull which she 'squeezes' and 'kneads'. 'Her anger for the Outcasts had turned into emotion for the dog, and almost made her dizzy.' (174) Just as the retreat at Whitehouse offers the family a buffer against the world, the dogs, too, surround and preoccupy Oneida, making her aggressively isolationist, like her country at the time. The family is selective about who visits Whitehouse and cruelly shuns the 'two old maiden sisters' who hate their dilapidated house, where they have been 'exiled... by a decree against which there was no appeal.' (157) The sisters are treated

like unwanted animals. The dogs are encouraged to attack passers-by and Oneida is furious when she learns that she cannot afford to buy a Russian 'cure for old age' for her 'old dog friends'.

They had always been in favour of socialized medicine but moved into an active family propaganda for it now. How angry Oneida was that the dogs of the rich could have this treatment, perhaps, and her poor dogs not. 'And then there are poor old men and women,' said Oneida. (256)

There is no doubting the rhetorical thrust of Stead's elaborate allegorical connection between the Massine dogs, the distorted values of socialism and the excesses of materialism in American society. There is also a slightly uneasy connection between the care of dogs and the newly submissive behaviour of countries who needed American help after the war. Stead and Bill Blake believed that the US was deliberately forcing a food crisis to 'starve all Europe including England into submission to the frenzied American imperialists',⁴⁰ a theme she takes up again in *I'm Dying Laughing*. The 'cult of dogs' replaces genuine care for people. It is akin to the unquestioning cultish patriotism felt by this family, and its corollary in America's newfound eminence in the world. In her analysis of the emotional dimension of Oneida's obsession, Stead links it to a kind of savagery in humans. Oneida is aware that 'Anyone is capable of anything; but especially when you know them.' (202)

The blind faith in humanity in the New World is reflected in the Massines' fervent patriotism and ignorance of the world. Even at the end of the novel when Edward marries Lydia and boldly suggests that they might spend time in New Mexico or in Cape Cod rather than at Whitehouse, he refers to these places ironically as the 'Never-Never', having spent so little time outside New York. He still cannot contemplate leaving the US. Similarly the

Massines see no need to travel outside the US and Oneida ridicules others for wanting to travel the world. Stead spent the war years in New York and must have been horrified at what was going on abroad, when she and the Kotlarskys were enjoying themselves in the blissful surrounds of the Catskills at midsummer. Towards the end of the novel this sentiment is made explicit when Victor criticises Oneida: 'Not one of you ever did anything for society. Here you were during all the trouble, in perfect peace.' (196)

The insularity and futility that Whitehouse comes to embody in the novel corresponds with that of the Oneida community, on which Asa Zatz's grandfather had based his rural retreat at Hunter, the model for Whitehouse. The Oneida Community proclaimed their utopian faith in a statement published in their own periodical:

We believe that God has commenced the development of his kingdom in this country; that he has inoculated the world with the spirit of heaven, and prepared a Theocratic nucleus in this the most enlightened and advanced portion of the earth.⁴¹

The Oneida community begun by John Humphrey Noyes in 1843 failed for the same reasons that many communes fail. Its exclusiveness, theocratic government and attempts at sexual freedom in relationships repelled the younger generation, whose indiscipline and rebellion threatened the viability of the community by the late 1860s. Noyes, like Stead, resisted the idea of monogamy as the basis for personal fulfilment and social harmony. While *The People with the Dogs* only hints at this, Stead no doubt was attracted to Noyes's radical view that exclusivity in relationships runs counter to the desires and potentialities of the human being. In the Oneida community the application of this idea became Darwinian in the extreme, as Noyes himself, and

then a committee, presided over reproduction in an experiment they believed would improve the physical and moral qualities of the offspring.⁴² While there is no hint of this kind of supervision of reproduction in the Massine community, there is a similar kind of Darwinian exclusion of the weaker old maiden aunts.

The values of the Oneida community are distorted at Whitehouse to the point of absurdity. Very little work is done by the Massines on their property and very little intellectual work is pursued. In fact one book lies open at the page Edward's grandfather stopped reading it; suitably it is *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* left open on page 66. There is no radio at Whitehouse whereas the Oneida community subscribed to numerous newspapers and periodicals and adults and children alike studied foreign languages, music, mathematics and other subjects. The exclusiveness of Whitehouse is constructed as a symbol of American isolationism, and travesties the values of the community on which it is based.

The Oneida members failed to notice the changes that led to their eventual breakup.⁴³ The Massines too, are unconcerned about their decline and even Edward's marriage to Lydia does not seem too threatening even if the couple should spend summers away from Whitehouse. *The People with the Dog* through its rewriting of the Oneida experiment, is a novel about the failed utopian experiment of America. In order to portray the anachronism that Whitehouse has become, Stead convincingly presents a sense of American history through an emphasis on housing conditions in New York after the war, but also by conveying a sense of compromised ideals on the left.

Stead's portrayal of the puppeteer, Waldemar Block is chilling. In the lengthy description of the immense dinner served during Edward's one visit, Stead presents a character of Rabelaisian excess, described by his wife as 'a terribly hungry man' (222). But the couple cannot afford for Block to satisfy this hunger every day.

After showing Edward a couple of his puppets, Block tells Edward about his escape from Germany into Switzerland:

He had been a candidate for the Reichstag, he had foreseen the Brown Terror. When the Reichstag had been burned he, like many others, had known what it meant, people had known in Germany if not in America: and he had then been on tour with his twenty-two puppets. (227)

Waldemar's appetite and excessive focus on food foreshadows a similar association between eating, loneliness and futility in the post-war society, that becomes an important theme of *The Little Hotel*, the novella Stead wrote after *The People with the Dogs*.⁴⁴ The theme is also vital to the literal and allegorical effect of *I'm Dying Laughing*. Waldemar and Dorothy Block are based on the Kunzes, friends of Stead's and Blake's, who made puppets in their workshop-apartment on 18th Street. Kunz told Stead he and his 'large family of puppets' had escaped from Nazi Germany after the burning of the Reichstag. It was Kunz who made Stead the puppets that became her hobby for twenty years.⁴⁵ In focusing on the excessive care of dogs and puppets Stead represents the infantile shallowness of culture and the kind of spiritual vacuum that has taken hold of third generation Americans and new Americans alike. Both Block and the Massines displace lost political energy with apparently aimless play. But there is also a delicate humour and amusement in Stead's portrayal of these puppet-loving folk.⁴⁶

In *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dogs* Christina Stead presents a thorough and complex analysis of American society during and after World War II. In experimenting with satire, she explores alternative narrative strategies, establishing an uneasy position of narrative detachment in both

works. As referential novels with explicit rhetorical strategies, the two works set out cogently to dissect folly, analyse ideology and reflect upon social change. In these two mid-career satires Stead's focus is narrow and the narrative energy of the two works is directed towards character and allegory. Unlike her later experimental satires, to be discussed in the next two chapters, these two novels can be seen as paradigmatic satires. While the two books do not represent Stead at her most powerful as a novelist, they are very important satires for several reasons.

In *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* Stead perfects the dramatic monologue and the use of dialogue as her main narrative vehicle, retreating from its use in the more Horatian satire *The People with the Dogs*. She experiments with pace, tone and prose texture as direct indices of the rhetorical thrust of the satire. At the same time she sharpens her satiric focus to critique ideas and their movement in history, particularly the wane of socialism in American society. In addition to their value in providing a staging ground for what we can now see are emergent qualities in her development as satirist, these two novels are significant examples of satire as history.

Chapter Four

‘What’s Wrong with My England?’ Christina Stead’s Satirical History in *Cotters’ England* and the English Short Stories

In *Cotters’ England* published in 1967, Christina Stead sharpened the focus of her satiric microscope in order to present an anatomy of the English working class. In this novel of social protest and grotesque fantasy, Stead not only reflects extreme disappointment with the failure of the post-war Labour Government in Britain, and the retreat of the intellectual left, but she explores the blinding effects of class on her characters. The demoralised British are analysed through their representatives, the Kelly family of Tyneside, in what is perhaps the most viciously comic picture of family pathology in any of Stead’s novels.

In depicting the paralysis of social change in Britain, *Cotters’ England* intersects powerfully with *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*, written just after *Cotters’ England*. In *Miss Herbert* Stead indicts British intelligentsia during and after World War II as emasculated. Helen Yglesias described *Miss Herbert* and *Cotters’ England* as supremely English novels ‘infused with the troubled,

cocky and half-defeated spirit of contemporary England'.¹ In fact *Cotters' England* and *Miss Herbert* and *I'm Dying Laughing* make up a trilogy study of the Cold War in the West.

Having written about a third of the manuscript for what became *Cotters' England* in January 1953, Stead described the project in a letter to Florence James: 'It's a pretty little Strindberg type of comedy, filled with tears of blood.'² When Stead took up work on the novel again in the winter of 1964–5, after failing to secure a publisher for it in 1953, she acknowledged that the 'truth' in *Cotters' England* was 'a poetic interpretation of life, not unreal, quite true, but as poets see truth'.³ In making this statement Stead touches on an old argument about the relationship between history and literature, going back at least as far as Aristotle. For Aristotle poetry is 'unified, intelligible, based on proper subordination of the part to the ends of the whole, whereas history knows only the paratactic organization of contiguity or succession'.⁴ Whilst history and literature have frequently been defined in antithetical terms, their similarities have also been recognised; indeed up until the end of the eighteenth century, history was a branch of literature, no real distinction being made between genres of fact and fiction.⁵

As I have pointed out in examining each of Stead's satires since *The Beauties and Eries*, Stead's project was to present a satirical history of her times. Stead's satires more and more vigorously demonstrate the proximity of history and fiction within the genre. *Cotters' England* presents a potent example of Hayden White's idea that 'the difference between an historical and fictional account of the world is formal, not substantive'.⁶ Gossman rightly interprets this to mean that the kind of understanding evoked by the historian is no different from that offered by the fiction writer.⁷ Thus *Cotters' England* can be seen as part of a tradition inherited from Juvenal, whose verse satires present an account of Rome in its decline. Stead writes in the

tradition of eighteenth century satires such as *Gulliver's Travels*, which is a kind of history, and Swift is acknowledged as the paradigmatic satirist.⁸

Stead attempts to draw her satire closer to contemporary history in a time-honoured satirical tradition. She achieves this through character study and a polyphonic approach to narrative; Stead also dissects England with its flinty core. In this chapter I will elucidate each of these dimensions of the text. Drawing on Bakhtin's work on Menippean satire, Dustin Griffin explains the function of satire as charting 'the adventures of an idea or a truth in the world'.⁹ *Cotters' England* may be seen as a novel of this kind, in which Stead tries out ideas, and surveys views of the world with regard to specific problems in England after the war. At different points in the novel Stead seems to endorse entirely divergent views of the world, alternating between Marxist and Freudian interpretations of the individual and society, but never offering one view as transcendent and final.

Historians who cling to what they perceive as the 'scientific' dimension of historical research, and the distinction between the research and the writing of history, have rejected White's claims about history writing. But contemporary scholars in the humanities are generally comfortable with the notion that historiography is never politically innocent. In *Cotters' England* Stead adopts the rhetorical strategies and devices of satire to present a portrait of post-war England. Her anatomy of a declining civilisation develops through an allegorical exploration of the disintegration of a working class family. Stead's characters articulate various arguments in a dialectic about class and social reform. Stead presents a satirical history that announces itself through the specificities of time and place, and thus the text invites ontological questions about the project of history and fiction writing that are powerfully pursued in her final master satire *I'm Dying Laughing*.¹⁰

Stead does not 'subordinate' her imagination to 'experience' as White deems necessary for history writing.¹¹ Stead's satire depends upon excess and distortion to execute its historical analysis. Like Flannery O'Connor, Stead implicitly believed in 'grotesque satire as an art of distortion whose end was revelation'.¹² The revelations of a novel like *Cotters' England* provide us with an historically satisfying interpretation of a particular state of affairs. As was evident in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* Stead both mobilises and privileges imagination, fantasy and the grotesque in adapting her satire as a form of historical enquiry.

Cotters' England like all satire, is purposive. In keeping with most of Stead's novels its political canvas is wide, and the polemical undercurrent of the novel gives the satire substance and referential strength. However, the work cannot easily be reduced to ideological statement or decree. On the contrary it satirises every ideological viewpoint espoused by the characters.

There is a discernible dialectic in the novel in spite of the heavy irony to which it is subjected throughout. To understand the proximity of this novel to non-fiction writing it is useful to examine Stead's English short stories, also written early in the 1950s. The stories show a documentary style and precision that contrasts with the extravagance of *Cotters' England* but both the novel and the stories attempt to capture what is quintessentially English at this juncture in English history. Juxtaposing the novel with Stead's English short stories reveals the range and scope of Stead's satire. In the last part of this chapter I will briefly discuss three of Stead's English short stories, focusing on their historical dimension and their use of documentary realism.

If, as Hayden White states, 'rhetoric is the politics of discourse',¹³ Stead revels in rhetoric. *Cotters' England* is a novel about the warring discourses of Marx and Freud, the corruption of such discourses and the oppressive power of discourse at a political and personal level. In this sense Stead is interested in rhetoric, as

she unveils the way discourse is constructed to maximise power and performance in the presentation of ideas.¹⁴ She expresses this interest through the speechifying of various characters. The way in which Stead infuses political and personal life through speech, diatribe and abuse allows her own discourse about social degeneration and the failure of radical political action to prevail. Yet even this is undercut and questioned by the novel, through humour and irony.

In her anatomy of English society, Stead engages in a study of one family at an historical moment. The self-consciousness of Stead's project in writing *Cotters' Englands* is significant. As she said in her address, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', 'truth has no fixed form'; rather the multiple charactered novel is an attempt to fix the multiplicity, the plurality of the world of her day. Moreover Stead admitted that any attempt to reflect contemporary viewpoints and contemporary life is not an unconscious act; it is very definitely, 'a work of strife'. In *Cotters' England* Stead subjects English defeatism and the post-war climate of social renovation to lacerating satire. Simultaneously she declares war on modernist fables of the epistemological journey, the narcissistic voyage of self-discovery and actualisation so inseparable from Cold War politics.

But the focus of Stead's attack is also on the failure of socialism and socialists to effect any meaningful change in Britain. Terry Sturm commented that the novel 'might have had the subtitle "why England hasn't had a revolution"'.¹⁵ With its recurring images of poverty and deprivation and its insistent dwelling on the details of food, houses, heating, household budgets, clothes and illnesses, the text renders a hopeless and stultifying picture of people whose ideals are lost in the squalor of urban life in London and Newcastle; the socialist values espoused by the characters prove to be ultimately hollow and self-serving. Unable to see the satire in the novel, *Time* magazine labelled the book 'overt socialist propaganda'.¹⁶

Michael Wilding, like other critics, found *Cotters' England* a 'puzzling novel—why the socialist theme unless something is being said about socialism? But what is being said?'¹⁷ Wilding seems unable to see that Stead denounces socialist pretence in the novel, and indicts the welfare state for not providing welfare for anybody. Rationing and food shortages were still the norm in 1950 (in fact the food in Munich was reported to be better and cheaper), but worse than that, the difference between the left and the right was negligible.

Stead's analysis of a working class family involved a thorough study of north eastern England. Her notes, held in the National Library, reveal her encyclopaedic mind, and her intense desire to understand the history of this region in order to write *Cotters' England*. Stead took copious notes on the climate, settlement, and geography of Northumbria, noting that in the seventh century it was a centre of missionary activity and a place of scholarship and art, in spite of the fact that one of the novel's characters expresses the shared feeling that 'nothing great ever came out of there'. (230)¹⁸

In *Cotters' England* Stead uses every means at her disposal to do her satirical work. While the novel is rich in authorial scorn, each of the characters contributes to the indictment of the others. For example, Nellie's constant interfering in her brother's relationships poisons and undermines each one. Speaking of Tom to Caroline she declares:

Any word he says to you is false, for it isn't him and it has no outcome. If he were to say love, it doesn't mean love; things aren't what they seem: things are the contrary: if he were to say marry me, it would be nothing but the joke of a silly, yellow-faced, garlanded clown dancing in a hall of mirrors, but in all these hundred shadows, love, there is not one man. You can't marry him, for there is nothing to marry... (256–7)

Through the voices of the characters speaking about each other we receive many versions of the truth in the novel. The distorted tales and outright lies told by Nellie and Tom jostle for primacy in the novel, each story introducing new elements and fragments of their past that enact the warring discourses and narratives of history.

Stead also employs satirical description, recurring imagery, sophisticated allegory, allusion to other texts, ironic layering as well as her characteristic serial monologue to create the satirical history. But the degenerative power of the novel is achieved through an undercurrent of subversion, not only of social structures but of narrative itself. 'The truth is not in books; the truth is in humanity' (51) shouts Nellie. Yet it is Nellie's breathtaking inhumanity towards her intimates that makes this declaration ludicrous. Also we are told by Eliza Cook that Nellie 'was rowdy with opinions she got out of books'. (228)



In 1946 Christina Stead and Bill Blake left the US for Europe, concerned for their safety in the face of increasing pressure on communists. Chris Williams notes that Stead met a journalist for the *Daily Worker* called Anne Dooley, née Kelly, in 1948 and that in 1949, writing to her sister Kate, Stead admitted that her interest in this woman was motivated by a strong desire to meet and understand the English. Anne Dooley became the model for the central character of *Cotters' England* Nellie Cotter.

Stead's comments about this friendship and her growing enthusiasm for a novel about working-class England are useful in considering her attitudes at this time, after living away from Australia for twenty-one years, and away from Europe for nine years. Describing the English to her sister Kate, Stead wrote:

They are, you know, you do not know perhaps, another nation from ourselves. The language is the same, that is we have an English idiom undercurrent, whereas the Americans do not understand the 'idiomatic undercurrent': but their ways, past, future as they think it, and their helplessness, mild hopelessness, their dependence is quite alien and perhaps all this comes from their many, many years of underfeeding. All freely admit they are underfed—'our stomachs are shrunken', 'we don't eat enough'—they leave it there, they don't run out in the streets with banner[s] 'bread bread' you know. Nevertheless my idea for a book is a cheery one and for this book I must meet others.¹⁹

While Stead saw a country ripe for revolution, her novel depicts a society unable to change. Indeed *Cotters' England* stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from her first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* with its utopian possibilities and hopes for social reform. By the time Stead began *Cotters' England* her energies were firmly engaged in investigating why no such reform was possible in England during the post-war period, and probably never. Thus the novel does not deviate from Stead's steadily developing discourse of corruption and decline, established in *Letty Fox: Her Luck*

Yet the virulence of *Cotters' England* reflects in part Stead's irritation with her own life in England and her own writing during this period. Hazel Rowley reports that Stead agonised over the rejection of *The People with the Dogs* declaring she was sick of 'writing such weak tea, such dillywallying trifles' and 'fed up with waiting for books to sell'.²⁰ As Rowley comments, somehow her meeting with Anne Dooley and the rest of the Kelly family triggered her emotions, enabling her to begin on what is her most chilling portrait of a family and a nation. Rowley notes that Stead was intrigued with the Kelly family, and her descriptions reveal that she did not change much about them when she portrayed the characters of *Cotters' England* There was:

...the alcoholic 'Pop Kelly' with his 'face of fire', the timid and prematurely aged 'Ma Kelly' who had just had a stroke, and the plump, dark daughter Zena, in her mid-thirties. There was also Uncle Tom, 'a wee bowed man' of 78, and Peter the black, hairy dog, 'foolish and noisome', who belonged to Zena.²¹

Significantly the Kelly family was not typical of the English working class. Commenting on them in a letter to Edith Anderson in 1950, Stead described the family as:

far from repressed, not at all reticent, very unreasonable, very fantastic, emotionally turbulent and amazingly immoral in an old-fashioned sixteenth century style.²²

However for Stead it seems that the heightened emotional life of the Kelly family, its turbulence and immorality, represented and embodied some peculiarly English neuroses and eccentricities. She seems to have found in this family the perfect microcosm of a decaying society, with their enmeshed, destructive and Philistine family culture. Through distortion and exaggeration Stead creates the reality of family life in a way that recalls and extends the brilliant revelation of the cruelty of intimacy in *The Man Who Loved Children*

Stead's somewhat prurient fascination with the Kellys and her outrage at the inequities in English society propelled her into writing *Cotters' England*. The sickly, impoverished, unhappy Cotter family act out a highly comic allegory for Britain at the time. Clearly the indignation aroused in Stead, by what she saw as monstrous emotional blackmail in the family, compelled her to write. But Stead insisted on a 'scientific' approach and so went to stay with the Kellys for several weeks, only to find living in their midst unbearable.

Stead saw *Cotters' England* as a retort to other versions of the country at this time. She was appalled at the squalor of cities and

the almost feudal relations between rich and poor. It is as if her idealised notions of the 'mother country' are utterly ruined and she seems to take on the voice of postcolonial critic, coming to terms with the fading imperial power. In a letter to Gwen Walker Smith she sounds bewildered:

It's the mystery of all the world how the centre of a great old civilization can closely resemble the liveliness and gaiety of a pig-village... Bill and I can't help feeling They [*sic*] make the people miserable purposely to keep them down. There are clubs for the rich and grand homes, balls, parties; and as for the rest, let them rot. It's such an old world in England, so nineteenth century, so old baronial, so out of date.²³

Simultaneously a curiosity about another kind of England, an England of antiquity, permeates the novel and an 'anterior' narrative surfaces. Tom's fascination with 'old England' is reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's character in 'England, My England' who relishes his home at Crockham:

The spear of modern invention had not passed through it, and it lay there secret, primitive, savage as when the Saxons first came. And Egbert and she were caught there, caught out of the world.²⁴

Tom is a weak, immoral and confused character without the strength and vitality of Egbert, but Tom, like Egbert, is portrayed as 'the living negative of power'.²⁵

No one in *Cotters' Englands* strong and vital in any positive sense, and Stead seems intent on satirically dispensing with the eerily present 'Englands of the mind', refusing to equate old England with a golden age, as Lawrence does. Tom seems to long for a golden age of old England, but he is totally disconnected from history and from the social realities of the present England.

While Stead resists any nostalgia for a bygone age, she originally envisaged the novel as utopian. An earlier draft of the

work relies on the theme of false expectation of betterment. Entitled 'A Traveller from New Holland' in her notes, Stead also lists other possible titles such as 'Sweeneys' England' or 'The White Island', and describes the project as follows:

The story whatever it turns out to be is in the complete setting of the greatest dream of the age for England 'socialism in our time' which the inhabitants of the White Island fondly believe has already arrived: while the crowd to which the Moores belong, having believed in it as children, and seen it come not to them but to other countries... are working for it in various ways without their hearts in their mouths but with a more or less prose [of] certainty. [*sic*]²⁶

Stead was determined to present an England constituted in subjectivity, the England of a working class family, and it is through her realisation of the socially determined psychic grasp of a place that she forges an historical interpretation of the country. The use of character as the main vehicle for critique demonstrates a subjective construction of history and place. At the same time *Cotters' England's* Stead's England.

Stead's novel seems to offer a direct challenge to George Orwell's essay of 1941, 'England Your England', disputing much of Orwell's grand denunciation of the left, but displaying some surprising points of contact. Orwell condemns the Intellectual left, and tends to generalise about all left wingers, who he claimed are distinguished by the 'emotional shallowness of people who live in a world of ideas and have little contact with physical reality'.²⁷

The socialist characters of *Cotters' England* are distinct from the Intellectual left. Yet Stead, like Orwell, laments the defeatism of the left in general. Perhaps the most explicit point of contact, however, is in the shared sense of decline in England, though Orwell's essay ends on a more hopeful note. Both authors see the vast inequalities in the society and both point to the insularity and xenophobic patriotism so blinding in the working class. Orwell

produces a compelling and amusing argument about the anachronisms of the English class system, explaining how the ruling class had outlived its usefulness by the 1920s. In conveying a picture of the country in disarray, Stead and Orwell hit upon the same metaphor. In Orwell's words: 'A family with the wrong members in control—that, perhaps, is as near as one can come to describing England in a phrase.'²⁸ For Stead however, the entire family is dysfunctional; no members are fit to control the family.

Ann Blake prefaces her article on Stead's English short stories with a long list of Stead's complaints about England. Her essay opens with 'England was a place that Stead never liked'²⁹ and closes with a reminder to the reader of Stead's unhappy expatriate status, implying that Stead is unfairly critical and that the stories need to be read with Stead's prejudice in mind. Though never speaking of the works as satire, Blake seems intent on naming the satirist's animus, but on the other hand concedes that the stories are 'dark with the gloom of England' after the war. Whether or not Stead 'liked' England makes interesting reading, but such information should not be used in this explanatory way. In any case Stead's attitude to England was highly ambivalent. Rowley notes that when Stead and Blake returned to England from Belgium in May 1947:

They found London battered and impoverished. Many of the quarters they had known and loved before the war—like the Jewish East End—were now desolate blitzed areas, with weeds growing on the bombsites. The railway porters looked so thin and weary that Stead felt ashamed to hand them her bags. Rents were high because of the housing shortage. After the splendence of New York, London was a real shock.³⁰

Nevertheless Rowley reports that Stead regretted leaving England to go to Belgium in 1950.³¹

As I have mentioned earlier, Stead very much liked New York but satirised its society unmercifully in four of her novels. Blake

suggests that the ‘indulgence one accords one’s own country’³² is of course what is lacking, but Stead was as critical of the drab suburbs and benighted denizens of Sydney as she was about London. As I suggested earlier, her liking for a place or for a person did not make a difference to her satire.

It is intriguing to note that while Stead was staying with the Kellys in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Blake was staying with Ruth McKenney and Richard Bransten in London. Hazel Rowley tells us that Stead and Blake now referred to Ruth McKenney as ‘Emily’, the name of the character based on Ruth in Stead’s still to be written, monumental satire *I’m Dying Laughing* Blake would report on ‘Emily’ to Stead, informing her that McKenney sat around the house all day eating ‘ferocious quantities’ and ‘too fat to be comfortable in ordinary clothes’. Stead found this titbit irresistible and in *Cotters’ England* we hear of such a woman, a wealthy client of the dressmaker Camilla Yates:

...an obese rich customer in the West End for whom she was making an outfit. The woman was ashamed to be seen out; and usually wore dressing gowns and gave parties to literary London in her bedroom. (122)

By day Blake worked in the British Library and at night helped the Branstens correct proofs for their guide book *Here’s England*

Stead’s increasing disenchantment with her former ‘best American friend, female’, Ruth McKenney, culminates in *I’m Dying Laughing*, but in *Cotters’ England* there is a sense of Stead attempting to outdo the Branstens at their own game. From her luxurious house in Chelsea, Ruth McKenney and Richard Bransten wrote their guide-book on south east England, Rowley reports, ‘undeterred (Stead observed) by their almost complete ignorance of the country’.³³ Appalled by the Branstens’ vapid and clichéd travel writing, and their betrayal of socialist ideals, Stead must have

had them firmly in mind as she worked at presenting England 'accurately'.

In taking up the working class as the subject of her novel, perhaps Stead also had in mind questions about the 'real England' specified by D.H. Lawrence as places like Nottingham, Sheffield and the villages near Eastwood. Lawrence described these places as 'the hard pith of England', and used them for the settings of the *Chatterley* novels. Graham Martin documents that on Lawrence's visit to the region in September 1926 he saw evidence of the General Strike maintained by mineworkers and in a letter stated that 'they've pushed a spear through the side of *my* England'. While Stead may not have known the contents of Lawrence's letter to Rolf Gardiner (though it is often quoted) she was familiar with his work.³⁴ Martin asks us to view the three *Chatterley* novels as a composite text and argues that history, evident in the first novel, is eventually displaced by myth in the last.³⁵

Like Lawrence, Stead both engages with and withdraws from history in her novels. But there is no hint of myth colouring history in her satires. In *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, *Cotters' England* and *I'm Dying Laughing*, Stead's engagement with history is particularly important and salient, whereas in a novel like *The Man Who Loved Children* she engages with a more generalised historical and ideological climate. As was discussed in the introduction, history is filtered into the ideological setting of the early autobiographical novels but is primary in the later novels in which Stead's satirical impulse is strongest. In other words as Stead's career progressed her novels became increasingly concerned with the specifics of time and place, with historical particulars and discernible shifts in ideology.

While *Cotters' England* would not be regarded by some as a working class novel, because it was not written by someone born into the working class, it does present itself as a form of oppositional literature. Stead fulfils her youthful desire to write about obscure

lives, unlike classical and Augustan satirists who focus largely on leaders and aristocrats. It is a novel about the working class and was recognised upon publication as 'very accurate about the lower middle class and new Bohemian levels'.³⁶ It arouses sympathy for a whole class of people, represented by Ma Cotter, Uncle Sime and Peggy, who occupy a peripheral place in society, and whose lives are lived in nightmarish deprivation, and extreme alienation.

Graham Holderness argues that Zola's novel *Germinal*, which he describes as a bourgeois-socialist text and the first 'mining novel proper', perceives the mining industry as both solid reality and a kind of fiction and dream, and stubbornly resistant to change.³⁷ Looking also at Lawrence's representation of miners as 'inhuman creatures' Holderness offers the idea that non-naturalistic discourses are indispensable in expressing the 'full complexity' of working class life in terms of its oppression and hoped-for liberation.

Christina Stead adopts non-naturalistic forms and grotesque imagery to create a plausible picture of working class life, but this does not serve only to evince a sense of nightmarish oppression. Her use of the grotesque is perhaps linked not so much to a polemic about class struggle but works to characterise social and psycho-social life in its entirety. Stead was not interested in proving the exploitation of workers; she took that as a given and as a starting point but not as a destination. In *Cotters' England* Stead undertakes to explain how and why a class sabotages itself and resists change. Fuelled by anger and despair, Stead's non-naturalistic discourse embraces excess and breaks free from realism, thereby establishing a wholly different but nonetheless powerful relationship with the political world with which it engages.

Significantly Stead predicts a much more contemporary view of what is working class, presenting anyone who sells their labour as a worker, rather than drawing a distinction between manual and

professional workers, or relying on definitions based on birth. However she problematises social mobility in showing Nellie and Tom moving away from their 'blue-collar' roots only to become the most viciously exploitative of characters. When Tom is working in Blackstone he brags to Nellie about bringing food, English baronial food, to London for them.

I'll bring my own fodder, ducks, geese or pheasants. All I have to do is chalk up on the board, *The engineer wants a brace of pheasants* or ducks maybe, and they turn up. Where they are got is not for me to ask. Nearly every one of my workers is off the feudal estate.'

He laughed. (246)

Whether or not Stead believed, like Thomas Mann and Flannery O'Connor, that 'the grotesque is the true anti-bourgeois style',³⁸ *Cotters' England* adopts the grotesque and in doing so Stead forcibly signals her satiric intentions. With destabilising irony Stead labels her work a satire very early in the novel, when Nellie exclaims to Caroline:

I'd like to take ye with me, show you a bit of England with the lid off, no Roseland, the furnace beneath the green moor that'll blow up into a blistering volcano one of these days. Aye, it's a bit different from your green and pleasant fields. But it's a very normal tragedy. (46)

While being alerted to the theme of social decline we are immediately aware of a 'blend of amusement and contempt' in these confronting words.³⁹ Thus Stead announces not only satire, but also the tragic dimension of the genre. Nellie's description of England with the lid off heralds debates about the real England, its past and future, which rage throughout the novel. It is through these bitter exchanges between characters as well as through vivid description that a picture of decline emerges. Tom and Nellie Cotter

who have come to London to escape the poverty of their northern industrial home, Bridgehead, expect to find in London everything that was lacking in their childhood. Listening to Eliza's disappointed revelations about the stubbornness of working people in London, Tom describes his northern people as just the same:

...good at straight talking like the Scots; but what do they do, Eliza? The men do the pools and the women gossip. We're just one nation. (72)

Later in the novel Eliza describes Bridgehead to Camilla Yates, offering her a version of Tom and Nellie's personal history:

They were sick of the dull narrow horizons and the meanness of family life, the pools, work talk, gossip and one good time a year, Race Week on Newcastle Town Moor with the sideshows the only news of outside life: mermaids, dog-headed boys. (230)

Even the city is described as harsh and emaciated:

You should see Newcastle. It's worth seeing. You see the iron of its ribs and backbone when you first look. The reefs of little houses, the iron-ribbed river. (230)

Very quickly in the novel Stead establishes the overwhelming bleakness of England, chiefly through her concentrated descriptions of shabby, grey buildings, airless rooms, insufficient food and illness. Indeed the action of the novel loosely follows three deaths, and images of death pervade the entire narrative.

When Tom returns to Bridgehead he says to himself:

'Back to Bridgehead gray,' the colour of his youth. It was a dark morning, the docks, bridges, ships were lighted. Different shifts were going to work and coming away; and he passed a stand where he got a cup of sour gray tea, 'stewed water,' ... The sky was black with

smoke fog which had not come down. 'If we had a decent government, it would do something about this weather,' said Uncle Simon. He was heating his old tea from the night before on the stove... (90-91)

Uncle Simon's comments are always pathetic and amusing, and it is in this lighter satirical vein that the novel weaves a kind of humour through its more savage study of post-war society. The absurd, black but somehow 'cheery' humour both reinforces the social critique in the novel and offers relief. It resembles the humour in Patrick White's *A Cheery Soulor* even some of Barry Humphries' prescient jibes at the Australian 'character', encapsulating through idiom and description a way of seeing the world, in this case England.

The grotesquerie of Stead's humour in *Cotters' England's* unrivalled in her entire oeuvre. The relentless and brutal black comedy in this novel helps to construct the vital allegory in which we are invited to read the Cotter family, that 'house of terror and storm' (46), as England in its death throes, ironically after the war, 'its finest hour'. Early in the narrative this allegory is laid bare with an absurd comment made by the naive and vulnerable Caroline: 'Why, Nellie, you're pure English, old English. Why, if they elected the Queen and she wasn't born to it, they'd elect you.' (47)

The extent of decay in *Cotters' England's* registered through constant references to coughing and lack of nourishment. Stead's familiar use of hunger as a metaphor for more extreme forms of suffering, deprivation and decline is paramount here, sustaining a surface humour that betrays a far more terrible state of affairs. When Tom returns to Bridgehead early one morning we are told that:

Peggy and her mother came downstairs about half past eleven when the house was warm. The street lights were still on; and everyone was coughing. (94)

The novel is packed with revolting descriptions of Nellie's hacking cough and chronic bronchitis but she exclaims to her doctor when advised to get outdoor work: 'It's only me bronchitis, doctor,' ... 'if you can't stand a bit of bronchitis, you can't be British' (225).

Stead ridicules every ounce of British parochialism and inhospitality, forging the argument that the empire is definitely on its knees. Nellie's obsessive tea drinking and poor diet and the Cotters' disgusting meal times comically become the focus of one of Nellie's arguments with her husband George, who leaving her goes to live on the Continent. On one of his visits home she pleads with him not to leave her, literally going down on her knees:

...and taking his hands, with her queer ugly, fascinating face twisted into laughs and sobs, she looked up, kissing his hands. 'Forgive me, George, I'm a damn histrionic bugger, I'm a bloody groveling fool, can ye leave your poor old wife?' (224)

Nellie's histrionics provide the dramatic stuff of the entire novel, building up an hilarious allegory that culminates in her plaintive cry when George is leaving: 'Me sun has set.' (217)

Although nobody is spared in this satire, George Cook does represent a man who has hopes for England and its workers, but ironically sees his future away from his country, working with the ILO in Geneva. In creating George Cook, Stead drew on Patrick Dooley, Anne's husband, who went to work for the Comintern in Bucharest in 1949.⁴⁰ But Nellie mocks George for 'Deserting England for the sake of a meal'. Having introduced tomato and lettuce to his workers in England, George studies cook books and yearns for the more interesting cuisines of Italy and France. With ingenuous charm he demands 'Why doesn't my country offer me a square meal?', (215) a question for which there is no complete answer in this novel.

Images of ill defined skin diseases, terminal cancer, bronchitis, alcoholism, schizophrenia and worst of all, Alzheimer's disease, fill this novel. Ma Cotter's appalling memory loss prevents her from knowing who is who, who is alive and who is dead, and seems to unleash in her a particularly nasty streak. Peggy, whose illness dates from her youth and seems to have been precipitated or at least exacerbated by incest, lives a life of penury and alienation, completely cut off from ordinary life and from wider historical events. Ma Cotter also lives a meagre existence cut off from reality: 'With old Mrs Cotter after the funeral, time had been, time was and time might be again, but it was all one time.' (57)

The Cotters' poverty and degenerate condition are integral to the allegorical thrust of the novel. Curiously, however, life at 23 Hadrians Grove, Bridgehead bears a resemblance at times to the cruel but comic life of the mountebanks in Jonson's *The Alchemist*. In featuring the avarice, cruelty, superstition, dishonesty and manipulative zeal of the characters in addition to their furtive comings and goings from the Bridgehead house, Stead seems at times to draw upon the tradition of the revenge comedy. The hideous insults rained on Uncle Sime and the abusive atmosphere of the household, where past wrongs are frequently remembered, recalls the chaotic nastiness of a Jonsonian ménage. And yet there is a savage underside to the comedy of the novel; Peggy's cruelty towards her elderly uncle at the end of the story, when she casts him out of the house with nowhere to go, signals a note of tragedy in the novel that transforms the satire.

In one excruciating incident quite early in the novel Stead's themes of hunger, deprivation and family savagery burst forward. While the humour of the occasion is not unlike the stuffed carp dinner party in *House of All Nations* and the nauseating dinners at Spa House in *The Man Who Loved Children*, this dinner leaves the reader in no doubt about the violence of family life as a metaphor for the brutalising effects of English society.

In a parody of the family meal which has been compared with a Pinter set-piece, this incident enacts Nellie's 'very normal tragedy' but crystallises Stead's hellish account of a sick society. The scene is set when Tom brings home a freshly killed chicken to the Cotters, after his 'wife's' funeral and the whole family set about creating one of the most hideous meals in literature.

Grudgingly she [Peggy] hunted for a cookery book which had belonged to Aunt Lily who had died in their attic five years before and who had lain there for four years before that... The water, on Uncle Simon's low gas, had never come to the boil... The fine young hen which had been put on in cold water, with no salt, for Peggy thought it bad for the blood, was heavy, leathery; it did not seem cooked. The cabbage when dished up was hard, almost crisp... Meantime, she [Peggy] lectured them on the evils of flesh-eating; but she had eaten a lot of cabbage, onion, cheese and was in a good mood. (100–2)

The excesses of this scene with its raw chicken and raw hatred establish the tone and style of *Cotters' England*, and while the humour of excess resembles dinner parties from Stead's other novels, it is the perversions of deprivation that dominate here. In *House of all Nations* and in *I'm Dying Laughing*, food and the constant references to obscene over consumption represent excess and decadence, linking these books to the lavish feasts that Juvenal associated with rank corruption. But in *Cotters' England* and *The Man Who Loved Children* the ineptness, drudgery and cruelty associated with mealtimes reflects extreme poverty of emotion and spirit. There are no 'square meals' in *Cotters' England* or in Stead's other novels. Plain meals, associated in Juvenal's satires with the virtues of the 'long-lost Roman Republic'⁴¹ are never enjoyed. In fact Nellie, Peggy and Henny live on a diet of raw onions and very often 'dine' alone.⁴²

The absence of harmonious 'square' meals in *Cotters' England* and in many of Stead's other novels can be regarded as one way in

which she dramatises personal and social disintegration. Given that there is so much illness and that death provides the locus for plot, we can argue that 'good eating' is associated with fertility and life, and that its striking absence suggests decay.⁴³ Moreover food or its absence in Stead's novels, particularly *Cotters' England* is often linked with violence. Violence at both a personal and institutional or class level surfaces in the novel and reminds us of Stead's puzzled view of feudal life in the 1950s, reinforcing her sense of England as a cruel and barbaric place with distinctly Roman origins.

Throughout the novel, images of an older England crop up, reinforcing the sense of a declining civilisation. Considering a move to London, Tom thinks he could:

Avoid the dull, ignorant life of the country town, which was proud of its decline? 'We've been going downhill in Blackstone since the year one thousand.' And all around were the buried roads and ramparts, the abbey walls weathered to bogeys in the wild winds of the piney lands; a miserable place in winter. (246)

The unforgiving grimness of London in decline is oppressive in the novel, which barely refers to a natural world, only occasionally mentioning a sky glimpsed. Stead's portrait of London echoes Cyril Connolly's description of the city and its people in 1947:

Here, the ego is at half-pressure; most of us are not men or women but members of a vast, seedy, overworked, over-legislated, neuter class, with our drab clothes, our ration books and murder stories, our envious, strict, old world apathies and resentments—a care worn people. And the symbol of this mood is London, now the largest, saddest and dirtiest of great cities, with its miles of unpainted half-inhabited houses, its chopless chop-houses, its beerless pubs, its once vivid quarters losing all personality, its squares bereft of

elegance, its dandies in exile, its antiquities in America, its shops full of junk, bunk, and tomorrow, its crowds mooning round the stained green wicker of the cafeterias in their shabby raincoats, under a sky permanently dull and lowering like a metal dish-cover.⁴⁴

Significantly it is George who leaves the depressing old East End house very early one morning and sees beyond buildings:

There was an immense beach of sky to the east on which were thousands of little sand-colored clouds and the light blue air was swimming off it: and yet it was only half past three. (219)

George's first wife, Eliza, points out to Nellie upon her return from Italy where Nellie simply 'could not accommodate herself', that 'London's a Rome, too, since the blitz. I see no difference'. (203)

Stead's anti-progressivist view of history and her argument about decline pervades the drama of the novel. England is portrayed as a hard and barbaric country, exhausted and defeated by the war. Its cold, harsh winters that predominate in this novel reflect the brutality of Cold War politics but also come to represent a country without hope. Speaking to Tom, that 'awkward, outlandish, shadowy' figure, Camilla Yates asserts that England is 'spectral' and disturbing to someone like herself, from a warmer place. Damning England still further Camilla declares: 'You're not a Christian people at all. Like the Italians, you're a very old people. *Christ stopped at Ebo!* Christ didn't come here at all.' (147)

The resonance of the epithet 'spectral' is extraordinary. Firstly Tom also is presented as an unnerving and sometimes ghostly figure, a man without bodily presence or needs. In its literal meaning of an apparition it reinforces the idea of emptiness, a terrifying phantasm. Spectres were believed by Epicureans to emanate from corporeal things and Camilla is one of the few 'epicureans' of the novel; she can love 'insensately' and is therefore seen to be in opposition to

the stoics of England. The image also denotes Stead's idea of England as a ghostly, deathly, negative thing.

Stead offers in *Cotters' England* sporadic but brief descriptions of wild places in the country, usually dwelling both on the harshest and wildest landscapes but also directing attention to Roman and pre-Christian landmarks. It is in these fleeting passages, some of which recall the landscapes of Thomas Hardy novels, that we find a glimpse of another strand of Stead's dialectic—and the faintest nostalgia for a rural England. Speaking to Tom, Camilla says:

'Your sister says you know England well.'

'Yes, I know it. I could show you places people don't know.'

'I once saw the mountains near the Cheviot and those dangerous moors; what lovely colours!'

'I know them well.'

'Do you know the Border, Allen Dale, Allen Head, the Cumberland side?'

He smiled a little, 'All. Cheviot, Roseberry Topping, Ovington Edge and Ockfield Fell and all in the north, on the moors, through the gaps, against the wind, and with the sea-fret hanging, the sinking east coast and the brecklands; even Crewe and London, black Manchester—I could show you places. I went to some of the places because I heard about them in rhymes and songs, like Cwm Elan; and I was curious.' (133)

In its celebratory cataloguing of English place names, this conversation strikes a completely different tone to most of the novel. Even this fragment of conversation breaks the emphasis on the drab, impoverished grey cities that fill the novel. It marks a

contrast between Nellie's declaration that she could show Caroline 'England with the lid off', 'the furnace beneath the green moor'. But Tom's affection for wild places is not straightforward. He claims to love these old places, 'old, old England' and yet in his very next statement his claims are undermined when he tells Camilla that his interest is really in getting to know the people 'who wait and walk about, like messengers, paperboys, gatekeepers, sextons, policemen'. (133)

The emphasis on Roman ruins and Druidic stones seems again to contribute to Stead's argument about English history and the inevitable death of a civilisation. One intriguing episode involves a description Tom offers Camilla about a place called Grime's Graves, in southwest Norfolk. Here Tom has visited the four thousand year-old flint mines and spoken with the flint knapper:

He introduced me to the caretaker. He showed me how they used to hang axeheads on trees till the handle grew into the axehead. It's a quiet grassy heathland in the middle of a lot of low forest. It's bleak and desolate in winter, but it's lovely in summer... (137)

Tom's fascination with the flint mines he associates with 'old, England' suggests an ancient civilisation of barbaric strength. The strangeness of archaic ruins and a wilderness of rugged and unforgiving beauty become a haunting presence in this novel; this is the only beauty in a text fixated on the ugly and the grotesque. Thinking of Blackstone one day, 'the worst place in England, leaving out Wales; black, wild, open land, low young forests, winds rushing across, the bitter east wind making them all "bluenoses"' (277), Tom recalls it as 'perhaps the finest place in England' in the summer months.

The eye roved over grasslands, rushlands, heaths, preserves. They rushed through his mind now, and the great cloud fields. And not far away, the North Sea breaking into and crumbling the cliffs. Black

flashing storms, the lowings and bellowings of the old sanded forest, the whistling and hooning of nameless birds, the lonesome moons, the weird fifteen-foot stone dwellers of the Old Priory, soft grassy slopes on which lovers lay, the humblest of workers by day, ecstasies by night. (278)

The majesty of Stead's description here recalls the power of her poetic evocations of Sydney Harbour in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *For Love Alone*. The forest has an animal presence, the birds unnamed, but not unheard, and the moon personified and lonely makes this an eerily significant passage in the novel. The darkness and romance of this place elicits ecstasy and love in its human wanderers, but none is able to read the landscape; the mounds are as mysterious as nature itself. Indeed, each of the elements, the sea, the air, as well as the moon, is personified as restless and disturbed, producing a haunting and desolate mood.

There were remains of a Roman Road, a barrow; rivers and marshes full of fish. You had to be careful motoring on account of the pheasants, quail, rabbits, sitting out in full view quite undisturbed or running through tufts. (278)

In Tom this sight draws out an essential humanity and he declares:

I can be happy there, too, I am just an ordinary man. You can't be vain and arrogant there. It's like slipping into healing waters, pine-waters, cold and fleshy, rich-smelling, from which you come out feeling strong. The secret of joy is to be nobody. (278)

The sensual and yet inscrutable power of these heath lands is striking and seems to offer the reader an important aesthetic and dialectical point of comparison with the oppressive cityscapes. Stead insists on the enduring and unknowable immensity of the

natural world, in order to place the sordid social world in perspective. Yet the description of the place and its effect on Tom is slightly disturbing. The dangerous and unfathomable power of these natural landscapes gives Tom a strange and reassuring anonymity. This is exactly the opposite reaction to that experienced by Letty Fox during her sojourn in the country with Lucy Headlong. Tom's vapid and amoral nature finds a kind of answering emptiness in these ancient, deserted landscapes whereas Letty's vibrant and worldly spirit is repelled by the silence and loneliness of such places. Here, Stead reinforces her interpretation of the desolation of England.

In focusing on Roman ruins and pre-Christian landmarks she relegates English civilisation to its logical place in the sequence of history, suggesting its imminent demise. The constant linking of England with Rome registers an explicit connection between them in terms of decadence and decline, but also in terms of a harshness in the culture, an overwhelming materialism and an emphasis on utilitarian values.

In her anatomy of England Stead involves the reader in a systematic survey as a means of discovery. For example, we hear about anti-nuclear campaigns and heavy resistance to them from working people in both the novel and the short stories, as well as possible explanations for such resistance.

Eliza complains to Tom about her thankless doorknocking but the voice, importantly, is that of the narrator with actual dialogue intruding:

...she worked after hours, arguing against the atomic bomb... working for the Labour Party. She was hot-tempered. Very often at night, she'd lie awake in a sweat, at what men and women had said to her. 'I don't mind the words, Tom, I mind them being so foolish. For fear of the landlord, they think it's bad manners to talk about the bomb; and when I say your children will be destroyed, burnt up, they shut the door in my face, because I must be a bad woman.' (72)

On the other hand we are offered a conversation between Tom and Mrs McMahon who is Nellie's housekeeper:

'There are letters from Mr. Cook. For Mrs. Cook and one for me. He was mentioning something about the Cold War. What is the Cold War?'

'It's a bad feeling against Russia.'

'Oh! I asked my husband and he said the papers were always talking about it but he never knew what it meant.' (124)

In *Cotters' England* and *I'm Dying Laughing* and most of Stead's satires published after the war there are no fixed norms, no consistent targets and no unity of perspective for the satire, suggesting that 'truth' is unavailable and unknowable. However there are recurrent satiric targets and Stead writes with ethical intensity, no matter how immoral her characters are and how amoral the text is in its totality.

The fierce arguments and constant shifting of narrative emphasis in *Cotters' England* contribute to what Griffin has called a satire of provocation or a text in which the satirist puts forward a critique of false understanding.⁴⁵ Susan Sheridan argues that neither *Cotters' England* nor *I'm Dying Laughing* offers a 'defined object of criticism'⁴⁶ and refers to the 'shifting ironic perspectives' of both works. Because of what she calls the lack of a 'stable or unified position of knowledge for the reader' Sheridan will not call the novels satires. Somehow the instability of the narratives disqualifies them from the genre in Sheridan's terms. However satire very often refuses a stable position for the reader, and this is part of what can give it strength and complexity. If Stead did give a stable, certain, consistent position she would be contradicting her own view of the value of satire—that it invites the reader 'to

make up his own mind through his experience of life in the book' and forestalls any labelling of the work as 'thesis'.⁴⁷

Nellie and George play out one of the critical arguments in the novel, debating the meaning and value of patriotism and the 'right' course of action for a committed socialist in England. The sexual politics of a marriage is fully infused with the politics of the day:

'...you're trying to drag everything down to the personal plane like you,' shouted George. George was angry. 'And you're helping them. You're helping your lords and masters by talking a lot of frill about patriotism. Whose country is it? Whose pound sterling is it? Whose indebtedness is it? Whose empire is it? Whose revenues are they? Am I going to lose my eyes and hair and get to be like your Uncle Sime, old scrap nobody wants, and everyone spits on, to save their England? Or to save Cotters' England?'

'What do you mean by Cotters' England?' she cried out. 'What's wrong with my England?'

'The England of the depressed that starved you all to wraiths, gave Eliza TB, sent your sister into the Home, got your old mother into bed with malnutrition, and is trying it on with me, too, getting at my health... now I'm going to live for my country. You stay here and die in it. Don't you want to change it... You don't know what you're fighting for. To change Cotters' England. Wasn't that what drove you on? Or just ragged rebellion?'

'You're a bloody Cook's Tours, that's all you are,' said Nellie; 'you've got your spoon into the fleshpots...'⁽²¹⁶⁾

Stead neither endorses nor undermines either argument, which were summed up by the *Guardian* reviewer as the 'mad, romantic, masochistic business of being English'. Both arguments are validated in different parts of the text. George Cook articulates the

archetypal Rabelaisian satirist's sentiments in his love of worldly pleasures, asking Pope's question about how much a person should accommodate an imperfect world in an effort to draw pleasure from it and perhaps to have an influence on it. What good does suffering in self-righteous exile do anybody?⁴⁸ In other parts of the text, however, Stead rejects this hedonistic notion.

Through the character of Nellie Cotter, Stead reinvigorates a potent satiric weapon: that of the paradox. Nellie provides the central paradox of the novel, and through Nellie the text unsettles and destabilises any easy, reductive reading of it. Stead builds up a picture of Nellie as a kind of witch, a cruel and manipulative 'sobsister', an exhibitionist and a sexually aggressive hoyden. Simultaneously Nellie is portrayed as an ugly bird:

...a strange thing, her shabby black hair gathered into a sprout on the top of her small head, her beak and backbone bent forward, her thin long legs stepping prudently, gingerly, like a marsh bird's...
(13)

Early in the novel we are aware of her mannish behaviour and her strange role reversal and incestuous concern with her weak and shallow brother Tom.

But it is not just the narrative voice that offers us the hideous descriptions of Nellie. She is frequently portrayed through the eyes of others, as a 'big, scrawny, screechy fowl' (59) by her mother, 'bony and ugly and wild as a streetboy, ripping out the dirty oaths' by Eliza, (229) and significantly as 'the spindling hatchet witch' (189) by herself as she looks into the mirror in the frequently discussed grotesque episode when she and Tom visit a Palace of Mirrors.

In confronting the reader with the satiric paradox of the human as bestial, freakish and grotesque, the text seems to

subvert moral thinking, as Nellie is also strong and vibrant in a way that none of the other characters are. Thus Nellie, the sexually depraved witch, the deformed and disgusting parody of woman, the moral cripple, becomes a kind of heroine. In this way orthodox thinking about women, about morality, is frequently undermined by the text. Paradox, Griffin informs us, challenges received or orthodox opinion in the satire of ancient times, during the Renaissance and from the seventeenth century through to Johnson, and Stead seems to have adopted paradox to the same purpose.⁴⁹ Nellie's speech and appalling behaviour are both celebrated and denounced by the text. Stead seems to revel in Nellie's obscene, degrading and ruthless acts. She is the principal source of humour in the novel. In trying to get George to stay with her she cries:

I'm going to pull the woman act. You're not deserting me without a whimper, I'm not going to be the heroine. I'm going to fight for you. (218)

Her bizarre taste and brutal sexual energy are constantly paraded in the novel. But she is paralysed by her own egotism; she is, as George says, 'shipwrecked in Bohemia'. (219) Right at the beginning of the novel, on a visit home, we are told that Nellie unbuttons her blouse in front of Uncle Simon, 'she came and stood in front of him, her breasts lying loose, tempting the ragged old man... She burst out laughing loudly.' (29)

It is through Nellie's exhibitionistic sexuality and her lesbian adventures that Stead seems to articulate her fascinated horror of lesbianism. Critics have puzzled over Stead's portrayal of Nellie's hideous lesbian party, and her indictment of Bohemian circles. Oddly here, Stead, who champions sexual freedom for women in every novel, demonises Nellie's predatory sexuality and her lesbian circle. Stead developed the lesbian/bohemian theme of

the novel long after writing the original manuscript, in 1964–5, at a time when her ideas about such things seem to have been particularly complicated.

Typically Rowley interprets Stead's disgust for what Stead called 'the mental, moral and physical squalor enjoyed in Bohemia' as part of a 'deep, repressive pathology' and links Nellie to Stead's friend Edith Anderson.⁵⁰ Sheridan points to Stead's usual distaste for the hypocrisy of Bohemian life, in which women like Nellie shelter behind the facade of married 'respectability', condemn other women's sexual dalliances, but carry on in the most depraved way with their female lovers.⁵¹

One way of understanding Stead's denunciation of the anarchistic sexual adventures of 'Bohemians' is to see it as part of a recurring theme in satire. Juvenal, of course, raged at the decadence of homosexuality in Rome, seeing it as causal to the decline of Rome. David Foster, in our own era, also believes that the feminisation of our society in general (and the widespread acceptance of homosexuality in particular) is a form of decadence, and will weaken it to the extent that other more masculine societies in our own region will overpower us.⁵² Stead also associates Bohemian and lesbian sexual anarchy with decadence and a concomitant lack of interest in social change. Not only does she deplore the lack of personal discipline in such circles on ethical grounds, but she portrays this decadence as socially degenerative and associates it with a betrayal of socialist politics.

While D.H. Lawrence expressed the Freudian idea that the suppression of 'primitive' instinct and the emphasis on 'cerebral consciousness' are a major cause of discontent in the modern world, ironically Stead seems to suggest another Freudian idea: that sexual instinct is irrepressible and chaotic, and that psychosexual needs govern a person's behaviour. While Stead detested puritanism, she laments a society that tolerates sexual excess and decadence, because that is a society in which sexual needs triumph

over social responsibility and social justice concerns. Just as Juvenal and Foster rail against rampant homosexuality and sexual depravity in their own societies, fearing for their survival, Stead associates sexual anarchy with social decline in the West. Stead's view can therefore be seen as a satiric position rather than a personal prejudice.

Cotters' Englands perhaps Christina Stead's most bitter satire and most excessive sexual drama. Not only does it reveal Stead's disillusionment with the decay of English society and its failing attempts at social democracy, the novel revels in the grotesque and violent sexual depravity of women under the guise of sexual liberation. Like David Foster who allegorises the feminisation of society by describing men castrating themselves, Stead explores the masculinised rapacity of women whose misdirected sexual energies destroy one another.

If we look at earlier drafts of the novel we find that Stead tells us about Nellie, betraying her own point of view, whereas in the published novel, the reader is required to come to his or her own conclusions about the character, based on what Stead shows us of Nellie. The early manuscript reveals both how much this character affected Stead and the extent to which she reworked the material. An early draft reads:

She was a rubberface, fascinatingly ugly: and she had the power of an actress, she dripped gloom, sweated venom, folded herself into a recessive tenderness, flashed genius.⁵³

This kind of prose is much more like that found in Stead's earlier satires, *The Beauties and Fries* and *House of All Nations*. But Nellie is most memorable for her abusive monologues, her relentless haranguing talk with which she tortures everyone around her. Stead satirises Freudian notions of a talking cure as Nellie's barrages assault her listeners and the reader, their frequency and

vehemence unrivalled in Stead's oeuvre. In her constant commands to others to 'introspect', Stead, through Nellie, parodies this now outmoded psychological exercise. Introspection, or the act of looking inward to examine one's mental experiences⁵⁴ is distorted and abused by Nellie, as she assails people with the need to 'introspect', urging them to make their 'covert' thinking processes public. She is totally intrusive and ridiculous in doing this, revealing Stead's distaste for the absurdities inherent in such structuralist approaches to the mind, and the crude appropriation of psychological jargon in order to dominate another human being. Stead also vents her irritation with the use of psychological jargon and its grip on popular discourse in the 1960s.

An examination of the grotesque comedy of Nellie and her richly abusive language invites us to judge the importance of Stead's verbal play in the text. While there is a definite and perverse celebration of the horrible power and violence of language between family members, lovers and friends, it is not the kind of self consciously 'playful emulative abuse' Griffin notes in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in which we are aware that the abuse is part of a game.⁵⁵ This arises from the tradition of 'flyting', from which Stead departs. The play of rhetoric is intellectually rigorous in *Cotters' England* that it embodies what comes to be a never ending, unresolvable argument about history and society. Stead allows ideas to jostle, compete, crush, renew and parody one another, with a violence resembling the relations between characters throughout *Cotters' England*. But her technique is perhaps more self conscious and more ideologically loaded than Griffin's interpretation of Thomas More's 'open and free-wheeling contest' of ideas.⁵⁶

The rigour of Nellie's arguments is striking at times, despite her exaggerated expression and despite the fact that her own behaviour makes a mockery of some of her precepts. She

repeatedly puts forward a Freudian view of behaviour and strongly articulates a critique of socialist posturing.

The element of performance and entertainment in the language of *Cotters' England* powerfully carries the satire in a narrative sense and adds an ironic commentary on logic to the novel. Nellie's speech alternates between abusive vitriol and trenchant polemic. At times Stead returns to free indirect discourse rather than using direct speech. This variation provides some comic distance on Nellie and alters the flow of the narrative; ingeniously it also fully renders Nellie's capacity for invective, hatred and jealousy. Here, Stead's free indirect discourse features crippling expletives and alliterative punch:

Suddenly, there was a great noise about a blinking blighter, a blasted blooming bugger, a bleeding bourgeois bitch, who turned out to be (for Nellie was talking to someone) a woman interested in trades unionism and women's causes who had gone abroad to a congress meeting and met George in Rome. George had written to Nellie that they had eaten together in a place called Il Notaio. Why were blistering blasted bourgeois buggers admitted to such congresses at all, either by card or press permit or gate-crashing, when their only object was to manhunt? Why were the beggarly blistered bourgeois bitches ever allowed near the labor movement when no one was safe from them, not even the worker born? (125)

The profligacy of speech in the work represents the profusion of truths and discourses in the world and the degree of moral chaos. But it is impossible to find in the novel, even at the end, any outright denunciation of Nellie Cotter. There is no ultimate judgement wrought on this strange heroine. But there is an allusive irony in the ending, that again distances us from Nellie Cotter. In any case the satire resists closure on any of the ideas debated throughout the text. Griffin makes the point that the

satirist is loath to close off an argument, and Stead shows that the satirist often does not make conclusive and final judgements.⁵⁷

The irony of the ending of *Cotters' England* complicates a reading of it. It reinforces the satirical surface and the allegorical thrust of the novel. George Cook dies in a skiing accident and is described by the foreign press as 'a great fighter for the British working class, who turned many to socialism by his ready forceful expositions'. (352) The sardonic tone of this reinforces the humour of the novel, sustained right until the very end. Tom and Nellie are photographed at the 'foreign funeral', but the photograph, we learn, cannot be used by the press as it shows:

Nellie gay with success as a hero's widow and Tom smiling, hand in hand. This is a problem the press always meets, people smiling for the cameras in disasters... (352)

Tom and Nellie are thus united again, and the problematic and corrupt hero figure, George, is dead. But an even more difficult layer of irony enters in the final paragraph where we are told that Nellie joins a circle interested in 'consolation, in the human heart' and that 'Nellie slowly at first, became interested in the problems of the unknowable'. (352)

Significantly it is William, the suspected spy, who directs Nellie, the renegade, away from any real interest in politics. While the narrative scorns this turning away from social projects, it does not condemn Nellie, because of the venal and hopeless picture it has painted of England, suggesting a kind of impotence and need for consolation, in its defeated admission that there will be no socialist revolution in the West.⁵⁸ But it is difficult to avoid another dimension to Stead's ending. Nellie's final turn towards 'problems that the professors and scientists could not solve' can also be read as a metaphor for the retreat amongst Nellie's generation to

'imaginative romanticism'. Nellie's submission therefore represents the collapse of the intellectual left, lamented by Alan Ross in his book *The Forties*

Literature took a temporary turn to the Right. The days of social realism, of proletarian art and documentary reporting were gone forever... The Marxists shut up shop. There appeared to be no minority causes left for the writer; only a retreat to private conflicts, to an imaginative romanticism that turned its back on the outworn political clichés of an earlier generation.⁵⁹

While Stead herself is not in this category, clearly Nellie is one of the Marxists who shut up shop, and *Cotters' England* provides an angry obituary on radical political life and its failure in Britain after the war.



Stead's English short stories provide a context for this failure of radical political life in the post-war years, focusing on the conditions of life and more mundane every day concerns of Londoners than *Cotters' England*. In terms of Stead's project the stories offer balance in that they ground the reader in social history and actual historical conditions. The stories '1954: Days of the Roomers', 'Accents' and 'A Routine' also form a bridge from *Cotters' England* to *Miss Herbert*. '1954: Days of the Roomers' is a version of some of the material in 'Accents', and both of these stories represent content discarded from *Miss Herbert*.⁶⁰ Clearly the stories were originally written in the 1950s although '1954' was a piece written especially for the twenty-first birthday of *Overland* in 1975.⁶¹

Reading these stories, now grouped together in *Ocean of Stoy*, (published posthumously in 1985) potently reinforces the idea that Stead envisaged the stories as part of her satirical history.⁶²

The stories form a complementary but also composite text with the two English novels, *Cotters' England* and *Miss Herbert*, and contradict Griffin's view that satire does not present itself as 'objective' and 'documentary'.⁶³ Even the more romantic, nostalgic and moving autobiographical story 'Street Idyll', written after Bill Blake's death in 1968, depicts England as an unfriendly place divided by tension between the classes, but also between regions, and the old and the young. The satiric venom in this story is, however, softened and displaced by other concerns.

'1954: Days of the Roomers', described by Frank Kellaway as 'reportage',⁶⁴ explicitly sets up the non-fiction/fiction nexus which characterises the stories. It spells out the depressing living conditions of the 'Watson couple, literary hacks'; we are told about how they lived in:

...the large front room on the first floor, with two windows on the fire escape and with a locked door to an adjoining closet, once a dressing room, now rented as a bedroom to a Swiss student from Basle. (404)

In this very short autobiographical story the narrator changes towards the end and the piece becomes a memoir, 'We were there too.' (406)

That year we translated several books; my husband went to Grosvenor Square to work with an American TV company. How do I remember it? (407)

The way Stead remembers it is to list the main international political events of 1954, finishing with the succinct sentence:

That year the United States began to get rid of the unconscionable egocentric, Senator McCarthy, who had rashly started to investigate the US Army as well. (407)

Whereas this story does bear the marks of a time remembered later, Stead's focus for three and a half of the four and a half pages is on the grim, cold and spartan living conditions in London's rooming houses. The other two stories dramatise the situation but their focus is narrowly on housing and its changing role in the social structure of England. All of the stories present a picture of London that is verifiable. They are therefore offering history. While *Cotters' England* relies on a portrayal of historical conditions, the novel is much more speculative and generally broader in scope than the stories, tracking the psychic as well as the social landscape, and offering a dialectic about the future of England. The stories are not interested in dialectic, philosophy or in presenting the general decline of a society. They focus on material conditions and class conflict, and thus fulfil the criteria for socialist realism in a way that Stead's novels do not.

In the chilling story 'A Routine', Caroline, a voluptuous version of Nellie Cotter, who works as a prostitute, neatly sums up the themes of the story at intervals. She constantly reminds her querulous middle class husband that everyone is suffering during the housing shortage, and their quarrels provide some of Stead's finest and funniest dialogue.

Well, Noel, we had the war and then the cost of living and then the pressure of population and they can rent any old building at all. We are not better than others. (428)

In keeping with *Cotters' England* and *The Little Hotel*, the sinister climate of Cold War surveillance manifests itself in the constant, fearful watching of tenants, neighbours and visitors. In this satire of middle class values, Stead's characters are slightly more stylised than in her novels, but they are never caricatures. Caroline is a shrew, undermining her husband at every opportunity; she says 'As a man, Noel, you're an understatement.'

(425) Noel is a cuckold. The comic vigour of the story carries a clever plot, revolving around the routine the couple have of leaving one rooming house after another without paying their rent. Appalled at being the tenants of 'foreigners', Noel is reminded by Caroline 'that property is king. If they own English houses, they can pick and choose English people.'(448)

'Accents' takes up the theme of property as a lever for social advancement, ridiculing the obsessive pursuit of Englishness by a man, whose wife describes him as 'a Spaniard or a German' and 'more Catholic than the Pope' in the desire to gain respectability in England. While the satire is very obvious and very close to the details of *Miss Herbert*, it also draws a compassionate portrait of a woman who feels her children are being educated to despise her. Mrs Turtell (a woman of Slavic background whose married name is really Turtle, but whose husband insists on the more refined sounding Turtell) at times assumes the voice of the satirist. Her children, Boadicea and Aelfred, are being groomed for Oxford, and are being educated with the proceeds of their parents' two boarding houses. The humour in the story arises from Rose Turtell's opinions about the accent her husband is intent on 'pulling off the tree', and her comments derisively catalogue the entire range of accents in England as heard in radio drama. She derides her husband's precious protection of her son:

He spent the whole time here in quarantine because his father won't allow his school friend to come and he's not allowed to play with the neighbours. He has got to speak and think Beowulf School. He's a prisoner of an accent; we are living for accent. (468)

In spite of her irritation with the narrowness of her husband's ideas, and her fears that her children will be ashamed of her, she is a Tory and is teased by her neighbour Gwen Jones for her unbending conservatism. Refusing to sign Gwen's peace petition,

she claims 'Everyone for peace is a stooge for Russia', but she realises her life has become a parody of self-interest. After Gwen asserts 'Yes, your whole family was burned to death by the Nazis and Russia wants to stop that forever; but you prefer the burners', she damns herself:

I'm selfish. All this activity, everything I do is selfish. It's for two children, not even for my husband and my self. To make two children into little snobs without any sense, living in a past age. I don't care if mankind is burned to death by the H-bomb, because Aelfred and Boadicea have to talk as if they were chewing fancy soap. (462)

Overall the stories are less exuberant, less fantastic and less grotesque than *Cotters' England* and their satire is much more straightforward. They prove that Stead was also a master of the short story, that contrary to what is often thought, she could turn her hand to a spare style. But even in the stories Stead relies on dialogue, though there are few of the explosive diatribes of her novels. With their indictment of snobbery, prejudice and avarice, they present a gloomy and historically accurate picture of England after the war.

In both *Cotters' England* and Stead's English short stories, Stead offers historical interpretation through satire. The materialist social analysis of the short stories reinforces some of the themes of *Cotters' England* but the novel launches a far more abstract, allegorical and dialectically complicated history of England in decline. In both the stories and *Cotters' England* humour is central. But the humour of the novel is blacker and more grotesque than in the stories. *Cotters' England* is a psychologically intense novel, a provocative satire, and a highly self-conscious work of strife, marking a point of no return in Stead's very own relentless and continuing satirical pursuit of the history of her times.

Chapter Five

Christina Stead's Encyclopaedic Vision: *I'm Dying Laughing* and Twentieth Century History

I'm Dying Laughing is Christina Stead's most powerful novel. It is also one of the great satires of the twentieth century. *I'm Dying Laughing* is Stead's most experimental work, presenting a vivid blend of realist and early postmodernist elements and a distinctive satiric vision. Here we are confronted with a portrait of Western society on the brink of collapse, of corruption so entrenched in Western culture that it is laughable, and with people whose pleasures become the symbol of American decadence in the twentieth century. In this work Stead transforms the genre of satire, blending tragic, comic, grotesque and realist elements in what may be called an encyclopaedic narrative.¹

In this final chapter I will consider the textual history of *I'm Dying Laughing* before exploring the nature of Stead's political intent in satirising American society between 1935 and 1950. I will then discuss the allegorical figure of Emily Wilkes Howard and Stead's attitude to the woman on whom Emily is based. I will

examine the relationship between Emily's own satirical writing and that offered in Stead's story of American excess. Finally I will discuss Stead's analysis of American hysteria over communism and the moral dilemmas it caused for the literary figures of her own milieu.

I'm Dying Laughing presents the story of Emily and Stephen Howard, two hard-line communists living in Hollywood in 1945, who are ousted from the local party because of their refusal to soften their line and adjust their Marxist views to suit US Government Policy, in line with the dictates of their party colleagues. Unable to make a living in Hollywood, they move back to the East coast and then to Paris, to escape the witch hunts of the period. In war-ravaged Paris they attempt to retain their leftist principles while living a life of luxury, in the end betraying their communist friends to the authorities at the American embassy.

The novel was written during the late 1940s and early 1950s, finally submitted for publication in 1966, but not published until 1986, three years after Stead's death. 'UNO 1945', which became Chapter 4, appeared in a special Stead issue of *Southerly* in 1962 as 'Chapter 1 of an unpublished novel: I'm Dying Laughing'.² In this novel, Stead continues, revises and completes her study of contemporary American society in general and the dissolution of the American left in particular. Focusing on the anti-communist hysteria of the US after World War II, *I'm Dying Laughing* is Stead's most overtly political novel and her most self consciously satirical work.

There is no doubt that Stead set out to write an important political novel about what she called 'the Judas Time'.³ In contrast to her description of *Cotters' England* Stead commented that the novel is 'not poetic, but political' in a letter to Norman Rosten of October 1966.⁴ Her emphatically stated interest was in making the story as 'real' as possible, but she feared that:

...as usual people won't believe it's like that—American writer's life—but is it? Profoundly so. It's Hollywood, success writing... with a terrific central character, female.⁵

Stead's determination to root this book in the actual political conditions of the time is manifest in the final version, with its constant references to actual political figures and events and innumerable dates, in her many comments about the text, in her diaries and notes, and in her reluctance to disguise much of the truth about the real life subjects of the novel, Ruth McKenney and Richard Bransten. When Stanley Burnshaw first read Stead's manuscript in 1966 he was struck by how 'uncannily real' the voices of her characters were. In fact the proximity of the text to the reality of McKenney and Bransten's lives raised alarm about possible libel suits at Stead's publishing house in 1967.⁶ Even more difficult for Stead was the advice of her agent, and both her American and English publishers, to revise the text in order to provide more material on the political atmosphere of the late 1940s, and background details about Emily, in order to clarify her later disagreements with the Communist Party.

Given the massive amount of background reading, note taking and historical research Stead undertook to write *I'm Dying Laughing*, it is a little surprising that the requests for more political and historical detail so derailed the publication of this novel. On the other hand Stead's anxiety about the accuracy and integrity of the book ('I felt I had to write "the truth", 'I am very serious about getting this book right'⁷), not to mention the intensity of her feelings about her targets, must have been difficult to reconcile with her knowledge that a novel about communists in the wake of the McCarthy witch hunts would not win her too many friends. At the same time she would have been concerned, just like her protagonist, about making a living from her writing given that this

book was unlikely to sell. That the novel heavily satirises the phenomenon of American amnesia with respect to American history must have contributed to Stead's sense of defeat in the face of such immoderate requests for more 'history' in the novel. By 1973 Stead had given up:

My 'forthcoming novel' is now in the dustbin or as good as. I ploughed it under—instead of dying laughing it was dying of boredom and overwork and what Bill used to call ree-search. It is not my métier and it got me down, so low I could not even read a book—any book.⁸

Somewhat paradoxically, given Stead's problems in acceding to the wishes of her publishers, *I'm Dying Laughing's* Stead's most explicit satirical history. It is her richest and most expansive portrait of Cold War manners, the unravelling of the American left and the theatre of the absurd that was the House Un-American Activities Committee. Even before Stead was asked to make any changes the manuscript was her most politically potent and historically sweeping.⁹

Stead's background materials for *I'm Dying Laughing* fill several thick folders, and include copious notes on speeches made at the Paris Writers Congress held in April 1935, notes on the Alger Hiss trial from various sources, dozens of newspaper clippings on the HUAC¹⁰ hearings, notes on the Sacco and Vanzetti case of 1927, detailed timelines of the events leading up to and during both World Wars, extensive jottings on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, notes on J.M. Keynes and a diary-style document from 1949, outlining what happened in the Committee hearings of communists every day of the year.¹¹

Furthermore Stead's reading was not confined to newspapers of the mainstream or of the radical press. On the contrary she read Herbert L. Packer's book, *From Ex-Communist Witness* (1962),

and *The God That Failed* (1950), a book of accounts by former communists about the sources of their disillusionment.¹² The book included an account by Richard Wright, an old friend of Stead and Blake,¹³ as well as those by Andre Gide, Louis Fischer, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone and Stephen Spender. Her reading therefore was eclectic and unrestrained by her own sense of allegiance to the CPUSA. Her dedication to the task of 'research' is remarkable given that she was constantly moving from country to country and relied solely on public libraries for information. In 1951 Stead and Blake moved from Montreux to Lausanne because of the superior public library there.

Stead's study of American legislative history, Constitutional rights, the Espionage Acts of 1917–8 and their origins in the Naturalization Law of 1798, as well as her comprehensive notes on the Truman and Eisenhower years, are documented in the folders that correspond to the drafts of *I'm Dying Laughing* held in the National Library of Australia.¹⁴ Indeed some of the earliest draft materials contain slabs of 'historical text' interspersed with fictional narrative, revealing a gradual shift from historical notes and commentary to fictional prose drafts. Some of this early didactic material was cut from the manuscript and was replaced with more dramatic dialogue. But a glance at any of this extensive background work impresses upon the reader a sense of Stead's distinctive scholarly method and her determination with regard to 'getting the book right'.

As early as 1946 Stead was concerned to ground the novel in the politics of the Depression and New Deal. Some notes in an early draft list the contents of a prologue in which Emily and Stephen live in Washington and:

how they got inflated—their disgust with Washington, How they longed to go to Hollywood to make money... Their concern with the Party with which they were all the time at loggerheads (false routes

taken by party—united front? USA capitalism in Europe) ie. Introduce their setting and inflation... The atmosphere of the ND—and backlook at the atmosphere of early ND.¹⁵

On the opening page of the novel we are immediately plunged into a debate about Depression art, followed by a discussion of how Roosevelt's own class 'hate him'. In the first chapter many of the people Emily meets on the ship express opinions about Roosevelt, some revering him as a 'saviour' and others simply viewing him as 'a friend of big business' (16).¹⁶ While Stead is concerned to link historical events to their antecedents and to explore patterns of history, her focus is very much on exactly what happened in the US from 1935 until 1950, and how the left failed to make a real impact on American society.

In this project she reexamines the pre-war and post-war decades in the attempt to understand a different set of people from the targets of both *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dogs*. In *I'm Dying Laughing* Stead's focus is on the communist movement in the US, and the rising middle class. Stead makes the point that in the US these groups must be mutually exclusive. But this was not always the case, as the early chapters on Emily and Stephen reveal. When Emily and Stephen attend the Paris Writers Congress in 1935 (just as Stead had with the English delegation), we are treated to a catalogue of real, literary personages. Stead's tone is gently ironic:

The embassies received them. In their dress of poor relations, they were announced by servants in black clothes and gloves, all the artisans of typewriter and pen, the unknown, the known, all named: 'Monsieur André Gide, Madam Anna Seghers, Monsieur Thomas Mann, Monsieur Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Martin Nexoe, Ilya Ehrenburg, Aldous Huxley, Julien Benda—Monsieur Stephen Howard, Mademoiselle Wilkes... (32)

Arguments rage about whether or not Roosevelt is a friend of the forgotten man or whether relief is merely 'a few sandbags against the flood'. (35) At the same time Stead compares the US situation with that of Europe, revisiting some of the themes touched on via the American fascists of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. Stephen cautions Emily against making a trip to Berlin, as:

The Nazis are crushing opposition: the multimillions, though humming and ha-ing are preparing to move in behind Hitler; and everyone is *gleichgeschaltet*⁷ co-ordinated, incorporated. It's the fashion. Mussolini, Hitler, and even the USA is in the shadow of the corporate state: they're chewing their nails and thinking it over, waiting to see what happens over here, letting the Nazi terror spread its foul wing, while big business recovers. Don't you know it's like that? Do you have to go and record the dying shrieks of a republic? (37)

Emily's retort to this, 'You want to live in Washington and record things'(37), reinforces Stead's mounting association of America with decay and decline; her choice of Hollywood and Washington for Emily and Stephen's homes (though in the published novel they never actually move to Washington, DC) registers Stead's sense of place as symbolic and paradigmatic. But their different sentiments eventually lead to the 'great wound' in their relationship, 'a disagreement about American exceptionalism'. (52) It is via this central dispute between the two protagonists that the history of the left is interpreted and its collapse is understood. Clearly Stead is not simply referring to history but to the particular history of this period in which American attitudes to Europe, and to their own future, became so reactionary. Emily is both the voice for, and the target of, authorial critique.

Indeed, the character of Emily provides the focus of Stead's political allegory. Emily is the Gargantua of Stead's oeuvre; she personifies excess. She is also Stead's most sympathetic satiric

target. Emily is the main vehicle for the satire of this novel: she is an ambitious and idealistic comic writer, the daughter of hard working industrious people. Emily's self-congratulatory self-deprecation drives much of the humour, but she is also shown to be vicious in her ridicule of others, absurdly melodramatic in her behaviour, and monstrously greedy.

Stead explicitly associates Emily with America, just as she explicitly associated the Massine retreat, Whitehouse, with the US in *The People with the Dogs*. Significantly Emily is aware of her status:

She woke an hour later, in the middle of a dreamed conversation about a classic figure of a young girl in America, a sort of figurehead for our ship, for all her tragedies are explicit in the dying corrupt civilization of our times. (152)

She compares herself to the Statue of Liberty:

She's French, their idea of the wheatfed goddess. Her nose is Greek, four feet six inches long; but her waist, oh, her waist, is thirty-five feet round. Mrs MidWest America herself... And her mouth, like mine, is three feet wide! (6)

Emily is both celebrated and denounced by her creator at every turn of the novel. Stead based Emily on her friend Ruth McKenney, an author of popular stories and proletarian fiction. Stead's diaries from the initial period of writing *I'm Dying Laughing* illuminate the way in which McKenney fired Stead's imagination. McKenney seemed to embody the political ideology Stead wished to explore. In these Swiss diaries Stead refers to Ruth McKenney as 'The Renegade', which was the original title of the novel. In January 1951 she noted:

Yesterday, The Renegade's first letter since Belgium. Their debts, desperation, death of this world, 'when a new world arises, it won't be marked, Made in the USA.' Evening, soft small rain, warm.'¹⁸

A comment Stead made to her friend Ettore Rella illuminates her attitude to Emily and her apostasy: 'The American Renegade... it's a very strong, a *great* character is the renegade.'¹⁹ Somehow the contemporary phenomenon of the 'Renegade, Mr. and Mrs.' was to her 'pure American, only raised to infernal heights, sorrows, excitements...'²⁰ Emily, therefore, came to embody for Stead what was 'pure American', and was a perfect satiric target and heroine for *I'm Dying Laughing*

Stead's diaries from Switzerland, written in 1950 and 1951, reveal a growing obsession with McKenney and her wealthy husband, Richard Bransten, and an interest in their princely lives. Interwoven with Stead's musings on Swiss life, Swiss guilt and silence about the war, and melancholy reflections upon her own isolation, the moody atmosphere of Lake Geneva, are comments about McKenney and Bransten, who are referred to as EE and S. Stead's increasing disenchantment with these friends is palpable in the diaries. Her sense of purpose and excitement about her developing manuscript, and her despondency about the times, is reinforced by her notes on the Swiss muzzling of political conversation: 'It is political activity here for foreigners to discuss politics in their rooms.'²¹ Concerned about progress of the work Stead noted:

No news yet on English money. In the night I worry: I have exposition laid out for my book The Renegade but where is the plot? Death of the conscience? Am proceeding nervously and for the count of pages well, but plot advancing scarcely. This is only rough draft, and so much work!²²

Stead's reaction to Ruth McKenney in life ('I never thought of her as anything but Gargantua')²³ is written into *I'm Dying Laughing* with astounding authenticity. It is therefore difficult to understand Rowley's incredulity at what she calls Stead's 'whimsicality' when Stead so fondly eulogised McKenney in 1972, after her death. Rowley's comments tend to demonise Stead, implying a kind of neurosis in Stead's appropriation of her friends as models for what become 'monstrous' characters. Yet the quality of authorial emotion revealed in *I'm Dying Laughing* towards Emily is one of awe, admiration and disappointment, exactly the emotions she felt toward Ruth McKenney. As a satirist Stead exaggerates and distorts some elements. For example in 1967 she expressed the view that she had been much harder on Emily than was accurate of McKenney:

I'm rereading material from the past—and it's borne in on me how much more brilliant Emily was than I make her... She was very incisive, hardminded, and with—until the end—a high sense of integrity and what people should be doing as opposed to what they do. Part of her decline came from that terrific struggle...²⁴

However, many of Stead's essential feelings about Ruth McKenney are captured in *I'm Dying Laughing* just as they are about the Kotlarsky family in *The People with the Dog* and the Kelly family in *Cotters' England*. Rowley seems insufficiently attuned to Stead's confusion and ambivalence towards Emily in the novel, and she limits her discussion of the character to the biographical correspondences and their psychological implications. Clearly, however, Stead marvelled at Ruth and Emily because of what she saw as 'pure American' in them.

Stead's satirical characters from *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *House of all Nations* right through to *I'm Dying Laughing* embody their times. That the characters are based very closely on real

people gives the satire even greater potency and referential strength. Stead's ambivalence towards her satiric targets is the ambivalence of someone who has lived through the period, experienced the same struggles, and feels implicated in them, as well as being aware of the struggle as somehow representative of a set of people at a set time in history. It therefore transcends Stead's complicated personal reaction to the 'model'.

Not only is Emily the target of Stead's most complex satire but she is also a vehement satirist herself. Another diary entry reveals Stead's determination to portray with accuracy the nature of Emily's work: 'Three days spring fever, though yesterday copied American ads all day for psychology of and satire by EE.'²⁵ Emily's bombastic and penetrating analysis of American humour expresses at the outset of the novel this character's incisive understanding of her own culture, with its gross materialistic excesses, and her determination to reach beyond satire.

It sizzles. It burns holes in the paper. Well, that's the bitter truth...American humour is another way of seeing the truth; and what a vision! It isn't giggles or smut, it isn't anecdotes about babysitters and chars and Uncle Brown's habits; it is a homespun, godlike truth stalking in from the plains and the tall timber, coonskin and deerhide, with a gun to disturb our little home comforts. (20)

Emily's account of satire and humour in this speech announces the satiric project of *I'm Dying Laughing* which Stead had hoped would 'go on from fire to more fiery to fierier still' and have 'a very terrible dramatic end'.²⁶ It also suggests Stead's dissatisfaction with current definitions of satire, evident in Emily's dismissive reference to it:

You listen to any Hollywood dialogue in a modern film and you'll hear such a mash of good sense, brashness, earthy wit, impudence—that's American wisdom, that's our humour. It's not les bon

mots...it's not like satire which is just needling someone you're afraid to touch... (20)

Throughout the novel Stead draws attention to her satiric project and to Emily as a reluctant satirist. Emily resists her calling and clings to a moribund view of satire, lamenting her fate in Paris:

I'm not built to be a cynic or a satirist. I despise them, heart and soul. But having to keep a family going and with expenses the devil's long pocket could not meet, I'm doomed, I fear, to assassinating myself, to never doing what I want to do or putting it off till doomsday. (296)

Emily constantly mocks herself and at one point, whilst trying to write in Paris, she condemns her own material as 'Worthless'; identifying with her own characters she brands herself and Stephen 'Not-in-our-time revolutionists, on-and-off revolutionists, keep the deep freeze safe revolutionists.' (306)

To the extent that Stead plays with the mode of existence of the text, Emily's texts and all the texts in the world, we can see glimmers of a postmodernist aesthetic. At times *I'm Dying Laughing* meets Linda Hutcheon's description of the postmodern phenomenon as self-conscious, self-contradictory and self-undermining in statement.²⁷ Without doubt the mode of the novel is subversive and ironic, presenting us with humour that both celebrates and condemns the humorist and all her faults.

Stead describes the couple when they arrive at the Holinshead party in Hollywood as:

...in their best mood, Emily bubbling gaiety, Stephen with his smooth, slightly invalid walk and unexpressed smile, giving his wife a feeling of discreet alertness, satisfied satire. (76)

Together they provide a Laurel and Hardy type comic act, physically just like their real-life models Ruth McKenney, who was

short and overweight, and Richard Bransten, described as 'spectacularly thin and suffering from poor self esteem'.²⁸ Even their private conversations are full of satirical quips about one another, and Emily is unashamedly roused by satire. After their 'straightening out' at the Holinshead party, the couple are discussing Emily's cousin Laura, whose mother tried 'to hook' Stephen for her:

[Stephen] 'When all I wanted was you. You had just scored a bull's eye in the entertainment field and I figured I could live off you for the rest of my days.'

Emily laughed heartily, 'Oh, Stephen, let's get malicious: I need to laugh. I've been so dismal.' (111)

Much of Chapter One offers reinforcement of the equation of Emily with American values but also introduces the idea of the disintegration of American idealism—its outmoded egalitarian values, uncertain future and decay—all articulated by Emily in vivid and spirited language. She becomes a voice of America, explaining to a man aboard the ship that she has won a prize for an essay exploring the American dilemma:

...you want to be free and break new ground, speak your mind, fear no man, have the neighbours acknowledge that you're a good man; and at the same time you want to be a success, make money, join the country club, get the votes and kick the other man in the teeth and off the ladder... To believe, *Send the homeless... I lift my lamp beside the golden door!* and to know in your bones that the door *is* gold. We're Americans, we can't fail, some sort of covered wagon will get us through; yet we see lean and tattered misery, the banks failed, businesses taken over, dust-storms which used to be farms bowling along the roads covering the corpses of crows and men; and we despair, despair... (16)

Thus Stead sets up a problem in the first part of the novel, magnificently captured in the epigraph, 'I'm thirsty!'²⁹ Aware of

her country as the land of 'Fats and Thins, lined up against one another' (17) Emily is still idealistic enough to declare Americans so communal that socialism 'must be our destiny' (18). As Part One continues we are exposed to Emily and Stephen's excessive 'hunger' for good living, for money, friends, knowledge, respect and success, and their gigantic ambitions for themselves and their country.

It is not until the fourth chapter 'UNO 1945', which was originally the opening chapter of the novel,³⁰ that Stead's satire begins to bite, and to tackle the elegant 'radicalism' of Hollywood at the end of the war. With the sale of Emily's second script the Howards purchase a home at a 'good address' and begin to receive invitations from 'fashionable leftist society, people who without giving up their beliefs had made good in a highly competitive and sometimes hidden game'. (48)

The language of money speaks loudest in Hollywood and people there are known by what they earn, arranging themselves around the hills according to their weekly incomes. Very quickly the 'American dilemma' manifests itself in the Howards' lives as they spend long hours writing articles for the *Labor Daily* and the *Washington Liberator*, while Emily's agents become increasingly impatient for her next manuscripts. The tension of this situation ignites some bitter arguments between the pair, foreshadowing everything that is to come. One day Emily explodes and the full force of her vulgar and piercing wit is unleashed at dinner:

'My writing's crap,' she shouted, 'I don't want to do it. I'm not proud they pay me gold for crap. That *Mr and Mrs* stuff is just custard pie I throw in the face of the mamma public, stupid, cruel and food crazy. I find myself putting in recipes—ugh!—because I know they guzzle it. They prefer a deepfreeze to a human being; it's cold, tailored and shiny. I don't believe in a word I write. Do you know what that means, Stephen? It's a terrible thing to say. You believe in what you write!' (51)

The brutality of Emily's self-mocking attack on her audience forges the link between the banality of American food mania, crude materialism and mass culture. It also focuses on a connection between mothering and writing that Emily observes. The writer, without money or respect, is saddled with the enormous responsibilities of a mother, 'supposed to understand people and fix up their destinies', (55) and as the novel persuades us, there is both truth and irrationality in the analogy.

A little while later Emily and Stephen argue bitterly again, this time about American isolationism and arrogance, Emily accusing Stephen of 'servility to a system' (53) that made his family rich, and for pushing the line that US intervention in the war was to offer Europe the benefits of 'benevolent business democracy'. (53) She accuses the local leftists of caving in and 'asslicking' (53) in their blatant adjustment of Marxism to US Government policy. It is here that we begin to see the perilous split between Emily and Stephen that sets the pattern of alternate toadying and rebellion.

With the repeated references to humour, to tragedy, and to so called 'great satire', Stead attempts to sort out the difference between genres, as Emily confronts the dilemma of not being able to sell her serious political essays and novels, and her immense talent for 'corn'. It is Stephen who reminds her that 'All humorists are gloomy, cruel bastards. But at least they're not dull. They have both worlds. They see the sinister truth and they can laugh.' (212) Seeing herself as a doll 'with two faces glued together', (212) Emily worries about what she perceives to be the hard heartedness of the satire of Mark Twain. Emily wishes to be more than a cynical satirist but she wants her satire to 'sizzle, burn holes in the paper', to be a 'godlike truth' just as Stead wanted her novel to be 'fiery, more fiery' and 'to tell the truth'. Emily fears she will become like Jack London, who stated that he 'hadn't written an honest word in twenty years', and finally Emily compares herself to Damon

Runyon, who is described as a 'Hired Rebel', 'a great rebel at heart, but lacking moral courage... My life too, eh? Pretty'. (213)

Emily and Stephen are betrayed by their leftist friends very early during their time in Hollywood. One of the most hilarious and scathing satirical passages in Stead's corpus demonstrates the ludicrous charlatanism of the Hollywood communists. Emily and Stephen arrive at a dinner party only to be addressed in the gravest of tones by their host, Jim Holinshead, on the matter of their regrettable political views, in particular their references to pro-Roosevelt policies as 'reformist illusions'. The dialogue is loaded with the pompous manners and pretentious jargon of the courtroom and the preposterous reliance on pseudo-psychological explanations for Emily's supposed aberrations. Emily continuously interrupts her accuser and judge, undercutting him and mocking the entire situation, all the while drinking noisily as if the party had not stopped. The chapter entitled 'The Straightening Out' opens in a tone of sardonic amusement:

The women sat about among the men, saying very little, huddling in groups and talking quietly about their children, well-dressed, modern, polite and most somewhat drunk; and the men, also drunk, took many postures, horsing on the backs and arms of chairs, striding up and down, leaning on the windowsills, on the high mantel of the bogus fireplace... Clara Byrd and Emily were boldly drunk. (92)

Stead portrays the 'trial' (in which Emily's mode of mothering as well as her political views are condemned) as fatuous, cruel and menacing. While Stead's immediate targets are the insipid communists of Hollywood, the allusion to the Washington hearings going on in the postwar years is unmistakable. The humour is deft and pointed; the satire targets the excessive

conformism of the society, its obsession with psychology and its blind repetition of history. The other guests, Stead informs us, 'were fascinated by this trial without jury, entirely in the spirit of mid-century and of their society; but they were helping themselves to drinks, also'. (98)

While horrified at the protracted assassination of her character, Emily manages witty retorts, and caustic rejoinders to each and every charge. Describing Emily's 'psychic lesions' with ridiculous excess Godfrey says:

'There were coarse, hasty blandishments, and arguments whose strong, greedy intention immediately crudely appeared: a verbosity approaching surely morbid conditions, a repetition, excitements false and real, frenzy, and almost delirious monologues as if the words came out without any censorship.'

'It's like Shakespeare,' said Emily. (102–103)

The Howards leave Hollywood after the trial, hoping to find acceptance on the East Coast and later leave the US, hoping to fight for their causes in Paris, believing ingenuously that life will be much 'gayer, tougher, stranger, more complex in Europe'. (139)

Ironically for Emily, life does become stranger and more complex in Paris; her naive and simplistic views of the world are challenged so forcibly that she is overwhelmed to the point where she loses sight of her ideals, and plays the role of the clownish humorist more and more energetically. She feels compelled to write about the war and its aftermath but wonders how to adopt a fittingly serious and yet persuasive tone.

In the chapter entitled 'Subjects for Emily', Stead questions the validity of writing with a savagery that is unparalleled in the rest of the novel, posing the argument that writers are selfish collaborators, 'fixing' and 'corrupting' language to make it sell. At

the same time, however, the text works against this idea by telling the ghastly truth about the politics of survival. Emily meets a couple of ‘resistants’ who offer her stories of their decision to collaborate, to denounce fellow Jews in order to survive. The banality of evil, and the unexceptionality of betrayal, appal and vex her. Confronting the poverty of Paris after the war, Emily is gripped by the fear and terror of the occupation. She is melodramatic but incisively truthful:

These unwanted houses make me feel all the terror and the horror of the years. I begin really to hate the Germans and I'm afraid of them, too. All those outhouses and fences and all these attics have seen such fear, hideous terror of death, hunger; the dusty boards of a stage of such misery! I've never felt such terror. Europe is all fear. We have a budding terror, we have a youthful inquisition, we have the lynch spirit, hale and healthy, and we've had to run, but we haven't got this feeling of the blood running cold in old, vacant rooms, these haunted holes in history, through each of which a man or woman fell, shot, starved, self-murdered in despair. And each man is history, you can't talk about history; we are history, each thudding heart. Oh, my! I can hardly stand it! What they have been through! (210)

Emily's visceral response registers something of the actuality of people's experience of 'history' felt bodily in hunger, fear and terror. Again Stead contextualises the American experience through Emily's articulate response to Paris. The American 'youthful inquisition' is placed in perspective against the reign of Nazi terror, as Stead builds a satiric distance from her protagonists. But this distance is not without considerable sympathy and equivocation. As with most of Stead's other satires the satiric targets are not portrayed simply as villains. Considering himself and Emily to be 'dead politically', as demanded by their mounting debts, divided loyalties and spectacularly decadent lifestyle, Stephen counts himself merely as an 'onlooker', not quite being able to admit his renegade status.

In our country, all has failed. Who will resist? And who am I to say this? What am I? Hiding my head in a foreign country where I have just agreed to mix with villains only...

He foresaw their slow separation from the Party, the beliefs of the Roosevelt era. (275)

He too describes his self-disgust in terms of terror and fear, admitting to Emily his thoughts of suicide. While the dramatic and melodramatic struggle of the Howards provides the stuff of the narrative as well as the allegorical core of the novel, Stead's satire is ebullient in its portrayal of the demise of 'Madame Gargantua', but it also demonstrates a commitment to historical and psychological authenticity. Stead excels in this novel in finding a balance between telling history and giving it life through the emotions of its representatives. For example, we are treated to regular encapsulating paragraphs which comment on historical phenomena and propel the drama onward.

The Howards thought that it was wrong to choose between the old reactionary parties, Republican and Democratic, the same party under two names; they should attempt to found a third party representing labour; that it was wrong to support the quixotic erratic millionaire Henry Wallace, who would change his mind when he pleased, like other rich romantics; that Rooseveltism had not been the hope of American labour, but a romantic form of capitalist consolidation, that Roosevelt had saved American capitalism from its sharpest threat and had only been opposed by the Republicans and Wall Street, opposed merely on gang principles by what they called the Black Hand or true fascist tendencies brought up by war and oppression. (163)

At that time they expected revolution in Paris. The spirit of the resistance was still strong, so, of course, was the spirit of collaboration, active or passive. It was still uncertain which would

win... The Belgians were as ever, torn by their national conflicts, but England where the class feeling had taken a big blow, they said, from the years of suffering in common, might be headed for a new life; and France—she was almost certainly ready for the final struggle. In America they had simply given up the struggle. Emily muttered to herself, ‘Not in our time revolutionists, like us.’ (306)

Stead vehemently satirises the anonymous stupidity of American materialism and the culture of excess. At one point we hear a great deal about the blacklists and then we are treated to Emily’s list of questions about how Americans can cope with the shortages and rationing in post-war Europe. The chapter is titled ‘Two Lists’ and boldly mocks the easy transfer of anxiety about being called before the investigating committee to complete preoccupation with European food and commodity shortages. Emily’s list of questions for her friends Ruth and Axel, who sail before the Howards, is a striking satiric catalogue and an outrageously American litany. The irony of Emily’s comments about the children is staggering, given their extreme material comfort, and their unnecessary suffering at the hands of their guardians:

Do such real shortages exist? Is there any way of getting round them, such as black market ways? We’re ashamed to put this down, but our children are not used to hardships. Should we bring, or have sent regularly, such items as the following: canned milk; canned orange juice; canned fats; sugar; chocolate; powdered eggs; cocoa; jam; canned meats, as ham, hamburgers; ice-cream; frankfurters? Any suggestions? Are all necessary? Is it true that Americans have special privileges and can import freely without duty, either through their consulates, embassies, or the American army canteens, or otherwise? (188)

Much of the satire in *I’m Dying Laughing* focuses on the excesses of Emily’s appetite. Emily’s greed seems to rise in direct

proportion with her knowledge of the shortages all around her in Paris. The focus on food in this novel is unparalleled and the descriptions of the numerous banquets and lavish dinner parties hosted by Emily and Stephen form a very significant plank in the satire. The emphasis on Emily's excess is almost exclusively on the gustatory in this novel. Stead's descriptions of meals are detailed and lengthy and are interwoven with the guests' conversation. Not only do these rich prose set-pieces entertain and provoke by providing a focus for the satire but they also complicate the satire. Every consumable is itemised, the choices explained and the origins of the ingredients commented upon. One such description takes up almost two whole pages:

Then they had poached salmon with mussels sauce, little new potatoes, English style with parsley, and with this a little white wine, white rolls and butter; all black-market of course, as they explained, for at that time nothing but the coarsest yellow or black bread was to be had. Most people were eating it and some feeling ill from it. Everyone but Stephen ate two helpings of everything. The thought of the difficulties made them hungrier. (198)

The savagery of Stead's denunciation in the many dinner party episodes is both strengthened and mitigated by the humorous comments of the protagonists. After an extensive description of a meal Emily and Stephen share with Harrap, an American embassy official, we learn that:

They gave up their bread tickets and received in exchange, not the ordinary black or yellow bread (the famous *friandise*) but small white rolls. These, the butter for sauce, their fresh table butter, the cream and a good many other things were of course black market items; but compensated for by extra charges, which they gladly paid.

Emily, after eating, said, 'I feel rather low at eating so much and in the black market, when in fact people outside are starving partly or totally.' (202)

Stead's satire is explicit and unequivocal in damning American excess. Stephen, urging Emily to greater austerity in their housekeeping budget expostulates: 'We're living like the American army, with garbage cans overflowing with roast turkey, steak and pork chops.' (227) He accuses Emily of being greedy. Emily retorts 'So was Rabelais'. (228)

In her invocation of Rabelais himself and Rabelaisian forms Stead invites us to read the text as satire. The use of Rabelais also suggests an age of humanism and individualism which Stead portrays as distorted, decadent and self-destructive. Stead identifies with Rabelais's method of characterisation and humour in that the characters of Gargantua, Friar John and Pantagruel are constructed through their own speech for they, like Emily, are incessant talkers, and accomplished mimics and parodists. Rabelais himself was, like Emily, fascinated with all variety of learning and yet he had the earthy good humour of a peasant.³¹ Similarly Rabelais does not concern himself with individuals but with the portrayal of an age. In referring to Rabelais Stead appeals to a particular kind of text and invites us to read the characters as representative rather than to look at them psychologically as we might with Teresa Hawkins or Michael Baguenault.

Rabelais also rejected dogma and the rigidities of Calvinistic forms of religion. In a sense *I'm Dying Laughing* rails at the dogmatism of secular, material culture, of capitalist individualism that brutalises its people. But the novel transcends Rabelais's vision, pointing to the futility of humanistic values in the face of the atrocities of the twentieth century. Whereas Rabelais sought to unveil the rawest details of human life in a way that is humorous and confronting, Stead demonstrates the way in which human

society has become contemptible in its machinations in a far more obscene way. Indeed it is Emily who mentions Rabelais as 'the only man who understood me. He's dull and reported to be vulgar; but you can't high-hat the classics, you can just say they're dull. But they're real'. (302)

Emily's musing on Rabelais comes after hearing the horrific tales of collaboration and betrayal by the survivors of Buchenwald. But Stead draws attention to Rabelais to pose a question about the historical relativism of what we consider to be a 'classic', and what should be the function of satire. She ably demonstrates through the collaborators' tales the obscenity of human betrayal and the vile crimes committed in the name of survival. Implied in this is the idea that satire should reveal such obscenity, that Emily should be writing about it but cannot. Stead's satire implies that satire is not a transhistoric genre, suggesting that in the face of the Holocaust Rabelais *is* dull. Furthermore the revolutionary notions of humanism expressed by Rabelais have brought the West to unprecedented inhumanity. *I'm Dying Laughing* attempts to tell the truth about the savagery involved in surviving the death camps and the almost banal treachery of occupied Paris. Emily is capable of satire that damns herself and her age as we are constantly shown through her speech, but in her own work she fails to rise above the worst elements of Rabelaisian satire. Moreover Emily realises that there is no market for real satire in a repressive political climate.

The title of the novel *I'm Dying Laughing* encapsulates Stead's impulse to distance her satire from that of Rabelais. The novel is comic but it is Emily's Rabelaisian nature that causes her downfall. Writ large, the decadence of the society is killing it. Unlike Rabelais and other early theorists of laughter such as Aristotle, Hippocrates and Lucian, Stead does not ultimately propose laughter as a healing and regenerative pleasure. Emily's laughter offers only temporary relief from her predicament. Bakhtin explores laughter in the context of derision of church ritual and

hierarchy, and the monolithic Christian cult, identifying the feast of fools as ‘deeply immersed in the theme of bodily regeneration and renewal’.³² Stead, on the other hand, presents Emily’s ‘feasts’ as increasingly grotesque and links them to bodily degradation and decay. An early draft of the manuscript sheds light on Stead’s title and its rhetorical purpose:

Emily goes to some humble friends in a French province and in her atrocious French, she says ‘I’m dying, I don’t look like it’ she laughs, ‘yes I’m dying... je ris la mort’... I’m dying laughing, it’s crazy I should die—out the flags, emily wilkes is going back to the cancer ward of the USA—ho, what will I do with my life, what will become of me—c’est la fin, die ende, goodbye, schluss, c’est la fin.’

She flies off, and her last letter from the USA expresses her (courageous) horror and the terror of USA now...³³

Although the melodrama does not reach its awful climax until the final chapter, Stead refuses to condemn the pair outright for naming names. However, she does present Emily as gross and disgusting towards the end of the novel. Stead insists upon identifying Stephen and Emily’s naming of their friends in a much more favourable light than the deeds of Nazi collaborators. She satirises not so much Stephen and Emily’s betrayal of their friends, once they are forced, at the American embassy in Paris, to choose between their American passports and naming their friends, as Stephen’s self flagellating grandiosity after the deed is done.

Individual and collective hysteria become the focus of Stead’s satire of American society in the latter half of *I’m Dying Laughing*. In portraying this climate of hysteria amongst Americans during the ‘red scare’, Stead shows Stephen’s reaction to his own treachery to be completely inappropriate. Throughout the novel Stead attempts to sort out the morality of various kinds of betrayal, from marital infidelity to turning in one’s friends and

neighbours to the Nazis. Unable to face his old friends Axel and Ruth Oates after naming them, Stephen likens himself to the Nazi guards who played ball with the children to keep them occupied before ushering them into the gas chambers. The intensity of his reaction is mocked as ridiculous and the reader sympathises with Emily, who approves of Stephen's recent gift to the Oates of \$1000 to help them with expenses. 'To hell with expenses. I don't see why I couldn't see them and say hello. I haven't had friends here for a month. We could have given them a good dinner, something they don't often get.' (442)

The posturing and self aggrandising of the 'parlour pinks' comes in for the most Juvenalian satire in this novel. Even Vittorio, who some critics have cited as evidence of a kind of renewing energy in the work, is seen as no more than a 'poster comrade'. (403) Stephen's suicide and Emily's disintegration are fully explained by the narrative in that the sense of treachery and loss for both of these former ideologues is clear. But the extent to which they react to their own sense of failure and corruption is denounced by the text as sheer histrionics. Stead goes to a great deal of trouble to demonstrate the absurdity of their reactions. She shows that the absurdity is not confined to the characters themselves but is a symptom of the times. The Howards are constantly dispensing American hospitality and largesse in their home in Paris, and even though they are first expelled from the party, and named as 'Trotskyists, renegades', (442) the worst the Howards might have suffered had they refused to name names was blacklisting and a loss of income. Economic hardship or short jail sentences were the worst punishments inflicted on those who refused to testify. Of course the economic effects of being blacklisted or betrayed by friends should not be diminished;³⁴ *I'm Dying Laughing* portrays the sense of guilt and loss powerfully, but Stead focuses on the broader cultural meaning of the hearings within the context of the post-war world.

A sense of the hearings as grand theatre for the entire nation (as Emily knows only too well, right from the beginning) is manifest in the text. Her knowledge only serves to exacerbate her dilemma over whether to fight the good fight or avoid becoming a martyr. Emily changes course mid-stream and decides to placate Stephen's mother in order to retain financial support and her American passport, but loses both her integrity and her sanity.

The grand theatrical spectacle that HUAC and the other committee hearings provided is inexorably linked with the fact that many of the 'star' witnesses were stars emanating from Hollywood, Stead's 'paradigmatic place' in the satire of *I'm Dying Laughing*. Lillian Hellman was one famous witness who defied HUAC by refusing to answer questions about anyone but herself. Her recollections of the period reinforce Stead's trenchant depiction of the theatrical excesses of the hearings:

We sent a letter saying that I would come and testify about myself as long as I wasn't asked questions about other people. But the Committee wasn't interested in that... It was very common in those days, not only to talk about other people, but to make the talk as interesting as possible. Friendly witnesses, so called, would often make their past more colorful than ever was the case. Otherwise you might turn out to be dull.³⁵

In *I'm Dying Laughing* Emily's biggest fear is 'dullness'. Hellman described the years as 'comedy, black comedy'. Like Emily she says 'one is torn between laughter and tears' when remembering some of the testimonies. But Stead's comedy reinforces what Hellman calls the sense of the craziness of those years. The use of theatre people to testify at the hearings titillated the American audience, as virtually unknown politicians 'could get their names in the papers every day by using more famous people than they were' as well as playing on a collective fear of Russia.³⁶

The use of Hollywood to inflame fear amongst the people was a very calculated process. That it worked and movie actors 'supplied the drama full of lies' emerges by implication in Stead's satire. According to Hellman: 'The committee wished to hear drama and these people supplied the drama. And the drama was full of lies. So they made liars out of rather simple-minded people.'³⁷ Stead's depiction of the Howards' 'straightening out' is a perfect unmasking of the masquerade of HUAC as well as the cowardice of American communists at the time.

It is not only the drama based on fear and lies that Stead satirises. It is the fact that a culture can both tolerate and luxuriate in the lies of 'frightened, simple minded'³⁸ people that Stead mocks in *I'm Dying Laughing*. This culture of excess fosters a culture of amorality in which lies are acceptable, particularly if they make good copy. Lillian Hellman contends that 'what started in the McCarthy years ended up in Watergate'. She also identifies some of the causes of American involvement in Vietnam, such as the fact that the State Department purged all their China experts, and refers to a whole climate of amorality leading eventually to Watergate.³⁹

Mr Nixon came into prominence in a period of total amorality where you said anything that furthered your career... I don't think that changes in men. He learned that it paid off quite well... if you kept your head... and you don't see villainy as villainy, and I genuinely believe that Nixon doesn't see villainy as villainy, that there are people without any morals, who see only their part in this world and therefore almost can't be blamed... Whatever you do is OK because it benefits you; it doesn't matter much what it is. The pious words come out because you know the pious words are good salesmanship... you can't say, 'I've just decided to lie' at four o'clock in the afternoon, told a total untruth. So you say that total untruth is absolutely necessary for the country, and I think you genuinely believe it is.⁴⁰

Stead satirises this climate of amorality and grandiose lying in *I'm Dying Laughing*. As a result she has no difficulty in establishing Hollywood as the paradigmatic place of this satire. Hollywood is the pinnacle of 'fashionable leftist society', (48) full of elegant and celebrated radicals but as stratified as every other level of American society. Stead describes the desert landscape with irony:

Ranging from the flat seacoast of Santa Monica are a number of sandhills, covered with sparse scrub and the almost pure sand held together otherwise with logs, ivy, desert flora and a few trees. The hollows between the hills are called glens, narrow shallow gullies which decline rapidly towards the place called Beverly Hills...

Persimmon Glen, next, was for fastidious writers who had a position in Hollywood society... Pomegranate Glen was next to it and here were people who were graduating from excitable and unsure radical groups to long-breathed Hollywood society of the stabler sort, people who had had jobs in the studios for many years. Some actors were here, even one director; and here Moffat Byrd, the five-thousand-dollar-a-week man, leader by common consent of Hollywood progressive society, had one of his houses. (49)⁴¹

Stead however is quick to point out in the novel that 'Hollywood 1944–5 was far from as radical as it had been, because of the fear of investigation running through the studios.' (59) The 'mad Hollywood carnival' (71) becomes associated with the jaded party, now dedicated to Browderite notions of patriotism and faith in American capitalism. Hollywood is also the symbol of America more broadly, with its glamour and excess, its gossip, rumour and myth-making. The Hollywood communists are portrayed as quintessentially American.

Lillian Hellman's recollections of the period reinforce Stead's portrayal of Hollywood as a 'paradigmatic place' full of naive and not so naive people who relished and enjoyed the attention the

hearings brought. Neither of these authors diminish the seriousness of these hearings in terms of their broader historical significance, but the actual impact on people was minimal in comparison to the atrocities perpetrated in Europe. What Stead and Hellman acknowledge is that frequently the betrayals among friends amounted to nothing. Emily's friends, the Oates, continue with their radical activities. We do not hear of any serious consequences of the fact that they have been named. Hellman describes a common practice at the time, of witnesses telephoning their friends before testifying to let them know they planned to name them, and sometimes getting permission to do this. 'They understood the motive of their friends' betrayal—money, injury to a career.'⁴²

Christina Stead and Lillian Hellman were not the only writers to lament the absurd spectacle of the HUAC and other hearings of the late 1940s and 1950s. Arthur Miller also comments on the period in his autobiography *Timebends* and describes his reactions to hearing about Elia Kazan's testimony before HUAC on his car radio. Miller was returning from Salem, Massachusetts, where he had been studying the records of the Historical Society for his play *The Crucible* (1953).

I remember thinking that the issue was now being made to sound altogether political when it was really becoming something else, something I could not name... The bulletin was repeated again on the half-hour. I wished they would stop. I felt something like embarrassment, not only for him, but somehow for all of us who had shared the—comradeship, I suppose the word is, born of our particular kind of alienation. The political element was only a part of it. We had all cheered the same heroes, the same mythic resisters... from way back in the Spanish war to the German antifascists and the Italians, brave men and women who were the best of our identity, those who had been the sacrifices of our time.

What we had now seemed a withering parody of what was being advertised as high drama. When the Committee knew all the names beforehand, there was hardly a conspiracy being unveiled but rather a symbolic display that would neither string anybody up on a gallows nor cause him to be cut down. No material thing had been moved one way or another by a single inch, only the air we all breathed had grown somewhat thinner and the destruction of meaning seemed total when the sundering of friendships was so often with people whom the witness had not ceased to love.⁴³

Kazan named names (though he did not name Miller) in the hearings and his actions angered Miller, who rather publicly broke off relations with him. Later, however, he did agree to have Kazan direct his work.

Miller's plays *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) bear a number of important similarities with *I'm Dying Laughing*. *The Crucible* is a play about hysteria; the allegory it creates provides comment on the anti-communist witch hunts also depicted in Stead's novel. Miller's allegory is multifaceted. He talks in his autobiography about his personal identification with Jewish fears of pollution from outside the clan, and feeling intensely that Salem was his own inheritance. Nevertheless the substance of his play is not unlike the allegory presented through Emily Howard in *I'm Dying Laughing*, where Emily functions as representative of American culture in its entirety, as well as of the radical subset. However Miller's use of allegory is perhaps more traditional as he adopts the technique of building up a fictive world that represents another world, that is, Puritan New England stands for post-war America while the world of Emily Howard is that of post-war America.

Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is also a representative figure. Miller describes him as 'a salesman always full of words'.⁴⁴ Stead's characters are also 'full of words'; she too relies very

heavily on dialogue and diatribe in *I'm Dying Laughing*. In some places it is more like a play than a novel. This is also true of *Cotters' England*. Miller's achievement is remarkably close to Stead's in portraying what Miller describes as 'what I had always sensed as the unbroken tissue that was man and society, a single unit rather than two'.⁴⁵ Significantly Stead's fiction conveyed this kind of integration as far back as *Letty Foxin* 1946, and arguably earlier in *The Man Who Loved Children* and *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*.

In *Death of a Salesman* Miller questions the future of capitalism as Stead had been doing with vituperative flair since *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*. Miller recounts his feelings about this in his autobiography:

...there was the smell in the air of a new American Empire in the making, if only because, as I had witnessed, Europe was dying or dead, and I wanted to set before the new captains and the so smugly confident kings the corpse of a believer. On the play's opening night a woman who shall not be named was outraged, calling it 'a time bomb under American capitalism'; I hoped it was, or at least under the bullshit of capitalism, this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator, waving paid-up mortgage at the moon, victorious at last.⁴⁶



In the last two pages of *I'm Dying Laughing* the allegorical satire reaches a climax when Emily is discovered by the man who had originally betrayed her, Jim Holinshead. She is wandering, homeless, among the ruins of the Forum Romanum, laughing to herself, and declaring that she is waiting for Vittorio. She carries only her valise holding the manuscript of her work on Marie Antoinette, entitled 'The Monster'. The satire is vehement and unequivocal. This woman of robust exuberance, monstrous

egotism and gigantic ideals is now alone and mad in the ruins of Rome. The allegorical significance is unmistakable; America has fallen, sold out, betrayed itself deplorably, and staggers aimlessly among the ruins of its former glory. This deeply pessimistic ending, with its blackly comic dialogue, is profoundly negative, even nihilistic. Here there is no Rabelaisian vision, only the disintegration of a woman, a genius, a civilisation.

I'm Dying Laughing thus completes Stead's study of the decline of Western culture, begun so romantically in *Seven Bor Men of Sydney*. Stead explores the ideas of a socialist future in America with excoriating satire, condemning the communist witch hunts as an assault on personal liberty and a travesty of American democracy but more significantly as grand theatre for an ignorant mass culture. Emily Howard, as we have seen, personifies the greed and arrogance of post-war America, setting off as she does on a feeding frenzy in a decimated country, ignoring the suffering and hardship of her hosts. In a repetition of French history, in which she knowingly plays Marie Antoinette, Emily begins to write her great work. In its reflections on the dehumanising effects of the capitalist work culture, the excesses of national ideology, the decadence wealth engenders, and the history of the American left, *I'm Dying Laughing* presents an encyclopaedic vision of Western culture while telling the 'godlike truth' about a real woman, an actual political movement and a defining moment in history.

Conclusion

Christina Stead was an accomplished and determined satirist. She adopted the techniques and rhetorical strategies that we associate with the genre of satire, but her distinctive approach to it departed from those techniques and transformed the genre. This study arose out of what I perceived as a blind spot in the criticism of Stead, in which her satire is not recognised. In addition, I was aware that critical interest in satire has been relatively low in recent times, and that definitions of satire are often so rigid that they ignore the satirical impulse when it is conveyed in a tonal quality or spirit rather than in a specific set of conventions.

The genesis of Stead's distinctive satirical style is apparent in *The Beauties and Eries* and *House of All Nations*, her earliest experiments with Horatian satire. *Letty Fox: Her Luck's* perhaps Stead's lightest comic novel. *Miss Herbert (The Suburban We)* reveals the dramatic tonal shift that occurred between these otherwise similar novels, and Stead's command of both luxuriant and spare styles. In the two novels published soon after World War II Stead moved towards paradigmatic satire. These novels involved her in a close study of the United States during and

immediately after the war: *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dogs*. Stead's most complex, most passionate and most experimental satires, *Cotters' England* and *I'm Dying Laughing* reveal Stead's considerable power as a satirist.

Over the course of her publishing career Stead produced a series of satires that make up a satirical history of her own period, from the 1930s until well into the Cold War. Stead's diaries and notes, held in the National Library of Australia, offer evidence of her intense and scholarly study of the events of her times, her views on the events and some of her intentions with regard to her fiction. In particular, some of the material cited in this study illustrates Stead's early and continuing interest in satire and reveals her thoughts on the particular relevance of the genre to her own times.

Stead's notes, letters and diaries help us to understand her framework for writing fiction and reinforce for us her sense of the importance of historical referentiality in fiction. In other words, the notes she wrote contextualise her art but they also confirm the seriousness with which Stead approached the writing of satire. One of the aims of this book is to point to the intellectual dimension of Stead's fiction, and to explore the political currency and energy of her writing. In establishing the accuracy and authenticity of her targets, her paradigmatic places and the events of her stories, readers can be more certain of Stead's political critique. However at the same time this method allows us to appreciate her resistance to reformist solutions or the program of any particular political faction. As a result, this study has focused on the dialectical strength and vigour of Stead's novels and their distinctive combination of rhetorical drive, satirical flexibility, mimesis and performative power. Through this blend of techniques we see how Stead transformed satire, particularly in *Cotters' England* and *I'm Dying Laughing* which in turn allows us to confront the boundary-breaking qualities of satire itself.

This study draws together some of the threads of earlier criticism. Looking at the novels as satire allows us to understand the interrelationship between the formal and contextual qualities of the fiction very clearly. The political orientation of Stead's satire is linked in this study to Stead's own experiences of the Depression, the decadence of the 1930s, World War II, the business sector and the left in the US, London's Grub Street, the disappointments of the post-war Labour Government in Britain and the trials of the McCarthy years.

In considering Stead as a satirist I seek to counter a view of her, put forward by some biographical studies, as a woman with many hates, who used her friends as models for characters, exaggerating and distorting their personalities mercilessly. This kind of criticism is commonly levelled at the satirist, regardless of the artist's more complex political and social motivations. I have demonstrated the complexity of Stead's relationships with her 'models' and the importance of artistic distortion in the satirist's art. More importantly, I have emphasised Stead's engagement with people as representatives of their times and their nations, through her ambitious use of allegory and her extraordinary ability to portray the reasons for her characters' failings. As I have argued, one of the most powerful features of Stead's satire is its analytical dimension; far from simply describing or unmasking vice and folly, Stead seeks to understand it both politically and psychologically.

The analytical/historical strength of Stead's satire, her prodigious character studies and her emphasis on the many voices of her monomaniacs produces satire that lacks consistent moral judgement and displays remarkable ambivalence towards its targets. In its amorality it can be considered pessimistic and subversive, like the postmodernist satires of Thomas Pynchon and Salman Rushdie.

Stead's satire can also be usefully understood within the context of other satirical fiction of her own period: for example

with the English satirists George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley and Nancy Mitford as well as with the Americans Nathanael West and Mary McCarthy. As I have shown Stead belonged to a milieu in which she has not previously been placed: that of the Hollywood writers and dramatists Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller.

Much work remains to be done on the relationship of satire to political culture and history, in particular as a context for the satirical fiction of our period. In addition the conundrum of why women (as Stead remains an exception) do not usually write political satire remains unanswered, though I have speculated about the reasons for this phenomenon.

Christina Stead made a substantial contribution to the radical novel in the twentieth century. Many of her works prefigure an aesthetic now more common in the satirical novels of Salman Rushdie and Don de Lillo. In understanding Stead's work as radical satire we can perhaps dismiss the conventional view of satire as conservative and reformist and see it as degenerative, anarchic and in some ways indispensable as a form in which society is subject to vigorous critique.

Appendix One

Christina Stead's Satirical Novels: Composition and Publication Dates

	Composition	Publication
<i>The Beauties and Furies</i>	1935	1936
<i>House of All Nations</i>	1936-7	1938
<i>Letty Fox: Her Luck</i>	1941	1946
<i>Miss Herbert</i>		
<i>(The Suburban Wife)</i>	1955-58	1976
<i>A Little Tea, A Little Chat</i>	1946-7	1948
<i>The People with the Dogs</i>	1945, 1948	1952
<i>Cotters' England</i>	1950, 1953, 1965	1967
<i>I'm Dying Laughing</i>	1949-1951, 1966, 1969	1986

Appendix Two

Types—Known from All Time*

Miser

Pettifogger

dandy

Fils a papa

coquette

don juan

lover who passionately awaits consummation, no intrigue

libertine male ie. seducer young rake

complaisant husband

shrew

proselytiser of evil—infector of youth and innocence

quack

cynic

harlots of various sorts

bawd & pimp

stool-pigeon, informer, spy.

madman

salesman

* Christina Stead then lists 231 types—not all listed here. The complete list is found in the National Library of Australia, Papers of Stead, MS 4967, Box 15, folder 113.

dreamers
lackadaisical romantic idle shopman
park and cafe politicians
deformers of hard words
Mrs Bartels
family tyrant—male
churchgoing maiden lady (honest and hypocritical)
misanthrope
tattling neighbour
hilarious inexperienced young schoolgirl
wanton young schoolgirl
licentious society woman
obscene prude (both sexes) esp. clergymen
the journalist
the woman writer (generally unfriendly)
poet
poetess (last three almost always unfriendly)
the rake of rake's progress
Pleasure mad youth
traitors
the incestuous (see perverts etc. those who hate husband and children covertly.)
suicides
travellers; footloose, avatars, the few people who can make a total change
the raconteur (Abe Goldstein etc.)
one-idea types who are neither thrivers nor users but appear as both or either in the service of their idea
mijaures mijaurées

political types
a. bureaucrats, ward-heelers, and hacks
b. parliamentary and executive council types.

c. energumenes who are partly military or rabble-rousing with causes

d. revolutionary fervent

e. sneaks and informers

f. people in it for a profit

g. villains in it for the dirt

h. freelancing pens and tongues in it for employment

The suburban housewife

people with wills (and their heirs presumptive and hopeful)

eating types (gouleurs)

the lover of children

the hater of children

animal haters (common with ambitious moneymaking and moneysaving people)

puppet-haters. monkey-haters. and other 'shadow and simulacrum fearers and haters.'

the aesthete (the true aesthete, like Stanley)

the great talker. (refer verbomaniacs, not same though). True talker that is of Mr Memory, 'photographic memory' 'walking dictionary' etc.

the polyglot, polymath; also of trifler in learning, marginal scholars note-takers, eternal students and so on. The verifier. Sciolists, smatterers: also, encyclopaedist

the messers Always in a jam

a. goodnatured, goodhearted.

b. vicious blunderers

the Girls' Girl; Women's woman as Sybil Neidecker, to whom every woman is closer than any man, women against the world type. (Edith is a little like that.)

the Man's Man (Harry in part, horsey type, club type, poker type in USA)

Kibbutzer type, eternal commentater, nothing done

Endnotes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Susan Sheridan, 'The Woman Who Loved Men: Christina Stead as Satirist in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dogs*', *Wild Literature Written in English* 32, 1 (1992), pp. 2–12.
- 2 Stead's notes provide ample (and amusing) evidence of her love of puppets and contain various scenes, plays, descriptions and accounts of her favourite puppets, and their role in her household. National Library of Australia, Papers of Stead, MS 4967, Box 6, folders 44 and 45.
- 3 Christina Stead, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', Paper written for the third Annual Congress of the League of American Writers', 4 June 1939. Drafts held in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- 4 Frank Palmeri, *Satire in Narrative* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 17.
- 5 Letter 28 May 1941, quoted in Hazel Rowley's *Christina Stead: A Biography* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993), p. 280.
- 6 I assume these belong with Stead's notes for her course 'Workshop in the Novel', though these particular notes are found in MS 4967 Box 14, folder 108.
- 7 Note from Stead's Diary of 9 January 1951, 'The Travellers Bed and Breakfast', written in Montreaux, Switzerland, MS 4967, Box 15, folder 111, National Library of Australia.

- 8 Sheridan writes that Stead's characters are 'more like forces or embodied passions than persons or symbols—forces which, however, are only knowable by means of the specific discourses (historical and ideological) which construct them in culture'. Susan Sheridan, *Christina Stead*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), p. 110.
- 9 Rowley's biography was published in 1993, Kegan Gardiner's study of Stead, Rhys and Lessing was published in 1989, and Joan Lidoff's book about Christina Stead was published in 1982. Judith Kegan Gardiner, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing and the Politics of Empathy* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989); Joan Lidoff, *Christina Stead* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982); more recently Kate Lilley extended this approach to Stead's fiction in 'The New Curiosity Shop: Marketing Genre and Femininity in Stead's *Miss Herbert (The Suburban We)*', *Southerly* 53, 4, (1993), pp. 5–12.
- 10 Letters from Cyrilly Abels to Stead, held by the author.
- 11 In his affronted criticisms of the biography Michael Wilding refers to Rowley's fallacious 'tracing of originals' for her characters: *Australian Book Review*, 152, July 1993, 8–9, p. 8.
- 12 Rowley, p. 213.
- 13 The thrust of Rowley's interpretation of Stead implies this, and Ruth Hall complained about the fact that characters are recognisable, commenting that this demonstrates both a kind of immorality and a lack of real creativity on Stead's part. Ruth Hall makes these comments when answering questions put by Stead's first biographer, Chris Williams, on 3 May 1987. A tape recording of Ruth Hall answering questions put in writing to Hall is held in the Oral History Unit, National Library of Australia.
- 14 *Theorising Satire* ed. by Brian Connery and Kirk Combe (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), p. 2.
- 15 David Foster, 'Satire', *Phoenix Review* 2, (1987/88), 63–79, p. 64.
- 16 Ann Blake, 'Christina Stead's English Short Stories', *Southerly* 53, 4, (1993), 146–160, p. 146.
- 17 Ann Blake, *Christina Stead's Politics of Place* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1999), p. 112.
- 18 Howard Jacobson, *Seriously Funny* (London: Viking, 1997), p. 127.
- 19 *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* ed. by Margaret Drabble, 5th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 867.
- 20 *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 500.

- 21 Northrop Frye, 'The Mythos of Winter: Irony and Satire', in *Satire*, ed. by Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), pp. 223–248, p. 243.
- 22 W.H. Auden, 'Satire' in Paulson, pp. 202–204, p. 202.
- 23 Frye, p. 245.
- 24 *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p.738: 'Satira signified a type of poem, invented by Lucilius, written in hexameters on certain themes, dominated by the Lucilian-Horatian tone.'
- 25 Niall Rudd makes this point and mentions that a satiric spirit is also found in the Homeric parodies, Aesop's fables and the lampoons of Archilocus, and in the work of other Roman writers who are not regarded as satirists. *The Satires of Horace and Persius*, ed. by Niall Rudd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 1.
- 26 Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 155, 156.
- 27 Frye, in Paulson, 1971, p. 233.
- 28 Highet, p. 3.
- 29 Michael Hodgart, *Satire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), p. 214.
- 30 Edward Rosenheim, *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 25.
- 31 Rosenheim mentions this also on p. 25.
- 32 Rudd, p. 33.
- 33 Highet, p. 235.
- 34 Literary historians regard Juvenal as the originator of the genre of satire as a 'continuous European tradition'. *Roman Readings*, ed. by Michael Grant (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), p. 364.
- 35 However Horace, Persius and Juvenal name Lucilius as the originator of the tradition. Rudd, p. 3.
- 36 *Juvenal: The Sixteen Satires*, ed. by Peter Green (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 143.
- 37 John Henderson, *Writing Down Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 179
- 38 Henderson, p. 181.
- 39 Steven Weisenburger in *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel 1930–1980* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), p. 1.

- 40 Northrop Frye, 'The Nature of Satire', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 14, (1944) 76–89, p. 78.
- 41 Steven Weisenburger, pp. 2, 3.
- 42 Henderson, p. ix.
- 43 Stephen Greenblatt, *Three Modern Satirists: Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 116.
- 44 Lillian Hellman was a strong admirer of Stead's work. Rowley reports that Hellman bought the option for a screenplay of *The Little Hotel* Rowley, p. 519.

CHAPTER 1

- 1 Rowley, p. 164.
- 2 Chris Williams, *Christina Stead: A Life of Letters* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1989), p. 112.
- 3 Sylvia Manning talks about places such as Coketown and the London waterfront as the 'paradigmatic places' of Dickens's satire. She interprets these places as metaphors for the society Dickens indicts. Sylvia Manning, *Dickens as Satirist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 86.
- 4 All page references are to Christina Stead, *The Beauties and Eries* (London: Virago, 1982).
- 5 All page references are to Christina Stead, *House of All Nations* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974).
- 6 Rowley, p. 144.
- 7 Rowley, p. 141.
- 8 Rowley, p. 200.
- 9 Bruce Holmes makes a similar point about the characters of *House of All Nations* and the various 'touchstones of moral worth' in minor characters, but I don't believe the concept is as relevant to that novel, as the focus is so much more heavily on various degrees of prostitution and an entire culture of corruption. Bruce Holmes, 'Character and Ideology in Christina Stead's *House of All Nations*', *Southerly* 45, 3, (1985), 266–279, p. 272.
- 10 Alvin Kernan, 'A Theory of Satire', in Paulson, pp. 249–277, p. 253.
- 11 Alvin Kernan, quoted in Manning, p. 7.

- 12 In his biography of Trotsky Joel Carmichael notes that Trotsky lived in a house in the forest of Fontainebleau, near Barbizon, in 1934, for about six months, while he was in exile in France. His whereabouts were secret and so the accuracy of this aside reveals Stead's dedication to specificity of detail, and her keen interest in the doings of such figures. Joel Carmichael, *Trotsky, An Appreciation of His Life* (London: Hodder & Staughton, 1975), p. 410.
- 13 René Albrecht-Carrié, *France, Europe and the Two World Wars* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1961), p. 252.
- 14 Ralph Fox, in his book *France Faces the Future*, refers to a Fascist plot of 6 February 1934 that did not have the support of the majority of the French. *France Faces the Future* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1936), p. 6. Albrecht-Carrié disputes the idea that there was a Fascist plot to overthrow the Government, p. 251.
- 15 Rowley, p. 444.
- 16 These are the three furies of Greek literature, 'spirits of punishment avenging without pity wrongs done to their kindred...' They are Tisiphone, Megaera and Allecto. (Stead spells it 'Alecto') M.C. Howatson, *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 240–1.
- 17 Stanley Burnshaw wondered what it meant that Marpurgo, 'the self-styled Trotskyite', and Oliver Fenton, 'avowed friend of the working class', are fraudulent. Rowley quotes the Burnshaw review on p. 206 of her biography. Burnshaw wrote the review under a pseudonym. J.G. Conant, *New Masses* 4 August 1936, pp. 25–6.
- 18 Stead's partner, later her husband, did not officially change his name from Blech to Blake until 1938, but Rowley reports that he had been using Blake before that. Rowley, p. 252.
- 19 Rowley, p. 141.
- 20 Ruth Hall answering questions from Chris Williams, 3 May 1987. Interview held in the Oral History Unit, National Library of Australia.
- 21 Rowley, p. 141.
- 22 Rowley, p. 212.
- 23 Rowley, p. 213.
- 24 Holmes, p. 268.
- 25 David McCooy, *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 164.

- 26 H. G. Wells, *A Short History of the World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 318.
- 27 Rowley, p. 109.
- 28 Rowley, p. 109.
- 29 NLA, MS 4967, Box 1, folder 4.
- 30 Chiappe was the Chief of Police until 1934 when he was dismissed by Prime Minister Daladier. Chiappe raised the ire of the left for his leniency towards right wing protesters. Albrecht-Carrie, p. 250.

CHAPTER 2

- 1 National Library of Australia, Papers of Christina Stead, MS 4967, Box 5, folder 35.
- 2 Weisenburger, as mentioned in the Introduction, talks in *Fables of Subversion* about generative satire which attacks vice and folly with the aim of restoring moral norms (p. 14), and degenerative satire as challenging all social structures, including narratives themselves (p. 5).
- 3 Christina Stead, 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel', Paper written for the third Annual Congress of the League of American Writers', 4 June 1939, Drafts held in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- 4 Stead's own expression in 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel'.
- 5 NLA, Papers of Stead, MS 4967 Box 15 folder 113.
- 6 Radio interview with Stead. Some fragments of the transcript are held in NLA, Papers of Stead, MS 4967 Box 15, folder 113.
- 7 NLA, Papers of Stead, 'Workshop in the Novel'—Notes, MS 4967 Box 11 folder 84. The course was part of an extramural program for New York University, from September 1943 until January 1944 (she repeated the course in 1944 and 1946).
- 8 Diana Brydon calls the novel 'a modern Moll Flanders'. Diana Brydon, *Christina Stead* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), p. 92.
- 9 Christina Stead, 'It is all a scramble for boodle' (edited version of unpublished notes written during Stead's first visit to the US in 1935), *Australian Book Review* June, 1992, 22–24; also NLA, Papers of Stead, Box 11, folder 79.
- 10 Rowley quotes a letter from Stead to Florence James, 19 November 1935, p. 191.

- 11 Rowley quotes this letter dated 17 October 1935, p. 191.
- 12 NLA, Papers of Stead, MS 4967 Box 2, folder 7.
- 13 All pages refer to Christina Stead, *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974).
- 14 Stead in an interview with the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* 25 October 1946, quoted in Rowley, p. 332.
- 15 Stead expressed these thoughts in a letter to Walter Stone on 24 March 1958, *A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters 1928–1973* ed. R.G. Geering, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992), p. 172.
- 16 NLA, Papers of Stead, MS 4967 Box 2, folder 7.
- 17 The Literature Censorship Board report of May 1947, quoted in Williams, p.175.
- 18 Minute Paper signed by C. A. Quin, Acting Senior Clerk, Department of Trade and Customs, 2 June 1947, copy held in NLA, Chris Williams Papers, MS 8065, Box 5, folder 40.
- 19 *New York Sun*, quoted by Williams, p. 168.
- 20 Rowley, p. 241.
- 21 Rowley, p. 241.
- 22 *A Web of Friendship* p. 172.
- 23 Chris Williams quotes Giles in *New Masses* 10 December 1946, p.23–4 on p. 169. In an astute closing comment to her chapter, Williams retorts to the Giles quote ‘It may not have occurred to her that perhaps Christina Stead had trouble finding one.’ p. 169.
- 24 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, translated by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988), p. 19.
- 25 Baudrillard, p. 23.
- 26 Baudrillard, p. 7.
- 27 Baudrillard, p. 17.
- 28 Christina Stead, *For Love Alone* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1982), p. 159.
- 29 Dorothy Kelso in the *Boston Herald-Advertiser* 4 July 1976, NLA, Papers of Stead, Stead’s review clipping file, MS 4967, Box 11, folder 83.
- 30 Critics have not explored the idea of Eleanor as representative of the English middle class, though they have made passing reference to it. Ann Blake specifically identifies Eleanor with the English middle class in her article on the novel, ‘Christina Stead’s *Miss Herbert* (*The Suburban*

- Wife) and the English Middle Class,' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 26, 1, (1991), 49–64. Helen Yglesias said that 'the life story of a British beauty is a metaphor for England in its present hour'. Helen Yglesias, *New York Times Review of Books* 13 June 1976, p. 4. Rowley says 'in some ways Eleanor also represents struggling, right-wing, postwar Britain', p. 408. Susan Sheridan also refers to the 'allegorical mode' of the novel in her book, p. 89.
- 31 NLA, Papers of Stead, MS 4967, Box 3, folder 18.
- 32 All page references are to Christina Stead, *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)* (New York: Random House, 1976).
- 33 Ann Blake, p. 61.
- 34 entitled *My Grandmother's Footsteps: The Life of Florence James* directed by Margie Bryant and narrated by Pippa Bailey, Special Broadcasting Service Masterpiece Series, 1994.
- 35 Rowley, pp. 406–7.
- 36 Rowley, p. 407.
- 37 Ann Blake discusses what she calls Eleanor's retreat into 'self-delusion', p. 56.
- 38 Bernard Bergonzi, in his introduction to George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, first published 1891), states that Orwell's novel is a pastiche of *New Grub Street* the also notes that Defoe described writing as a 'very considerable Branch of the English Commerce', p. 21.
- 39 Rowley, p. 400.
- 40 *Brief Candle* is also the title of a collection of satirical short stories by Aldous Huxley, published in 1930.
- 41 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v. lines 26–28.
- 42 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* trans. by R. Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995).

CHAPTER 3

- 1 Alvin Kernan, quoted in Manning, p. 7.
- 2 NLA, Oral History Unit, transcript of interview by Hazel de Berg, Sydney, 12 September 1969.
- 3 Rowley, pp. 216–7.
- 4 All page references are to Christina Stead, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (London: Virago, 1981).

- 5 William Blake, *Understanding the Americans*(London: Frederick Muller, 1954), p. 51.
- 6 Manning makes the point that Coketown and Chancery provide metaphors for the society Dickens indicts, p. 103.
- 7 Richard Polenberg, *War and Society*(Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972), p. 136.
- 8 Manning makes a similar point in reference to Dickens, p. 9.
- 9 Julia Kristeva, 'The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* trans. by Katharine A. Jensen, 102 (1987), 138–152.
- 10 Arthur Clayborough offers a discussion of how Dickens, Coleridge and Swift employ the grotesque in *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 232–3.
- 11 Karen Hollinger makes the point that while in *film noir* the 'conventional narrative is disoriented and the image of the erotic, strong, unrepressed woman dominates the text, even in the face of narrative repression', these films reaffirm the inability of patriarchal society to 'answer the question of "what the woman wants" or even to understand it'. Karen Hollinger, 'Film Noir, Voice-over and the *Femme Fatale*', in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1986), pp. 244–258, pp. 246 and 258.
- 12 Bill Blake writes in *Understanding the Americans*'An open sewer is often preferred to a whited sepulchre. For, despite all nominal adherence to a capitalism that meets no serious theoretical challenge, the folk still believe that no one makes a lot of money except by crime.' p. 167.
- 13 Sheridan, 'The Woman Who Loved Men', p. 6.
- 14 Palmeri discusses this with reference to Gibbon, p. 10.
- 15 Polenberg, p. 133.
- 16 Polenberg, p. 137.
- 17 Marshall B. Clinard, *The Black Market*(New York: Rinehart, 1952), p. 28.
- 18 Clinard, p. 332.
- 19 Polenberg, p. 137.
- 20 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*(London: Abacus, 1995), p. 48.
- 21 Here Stead refers specifically to the fact that Britain and France retreated in the face of German blackmail over Czechoslovakia in the Munich Agreement of 1938, but also to the consistent failure to

- oppose Hitler. More specifically she would be referring to the Allies' failure to respond to the German denunciation of the Treaty of Versailles, the German occupation of the Rhineland in 1936, Allied refusal to enter the Spanish Civil War and their failure to respond to the occupation of Austria. Hobsbawm, p. 36.
- 22 Arthur S. Link and William Catton, *American Epoch: A History of the US Since 1900* 2 vols, (New York: Knopf 1955), 2, p. 650.
- 23 Merle Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty* (New York: Russell & Russell 1946), p. 246.
- 24 Alan Wald, in *Writing From the Left* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 69. discusses this point and mentions some newer work by Cary Nelson, Paula Rabinowitz and Constance Coiner that may change the status of the scholarship contributed by Rideout and Aaron.
- 25 Walter Rideout, in *The Radical Novel in the US, 1900–1954* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1956), discusses each of these sub-genres on pp. 260, 266, 270.
- 26 Susan Sheridan discusses a similar point in her article, 'The Woman Who Loved Men', p. 7.
- 27 Rideout, p. 259.
- 28 Roth's novel has much in common with Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* published in the same year, 1934. Both novels expose the effects of poverty on character, and blend documentary realism with modernist techniques.
- 29 Rideout, p. 286.
- 30 Susan McKernan argues that this feature of socialist realist writing, its 'reconciliation of the two strands of literature, the concern for the life of the individual and the concern for society, by means of the theory of the typical' was the most important positive outcome of socialist realist theory. Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment* Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1989), p. 31.
- 31 Stead in a letter to Rella on 16 April 1942, *A Web of Friendship* p. 98.
- 32 Rowley quotes Stead's article in *New Masses* 'Pro and Con on Aragon' 17 February 1942, pp. 23-4, p. 287–8.
- 33 Rideout, p. 266–7.
- 34 Rideout, p. 266.
- 35 Judith Kegan Gardiner, in her introduction to the Virago edition of the novel published in 1981, p. ii, and Sheridan in her 1992 article discussing Stead as satirist, p. 8.

- 36 All page references are to Christina Stead, *The People with the Dogs* (London: Virago, 1981).
- 37 Rowley, p. 269.
- 38 Rowley, p. 268 quoting a letter from Stead to Blake written on 7 May 1942.
- 39 Chekhov is quoted in Elisaveta Fen's introduction to *Chekhov: Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 29.
- 40 Stead in a letter to Nadine Mendelson and Lina Lewin, 1 September 1947, *A Web of Friendship* p. 109.
- 41 John McKelvie Whitworth, *God's Blueprints: A Sociological Study of Three Utopian Sects* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1975), p. 118.
- 42 Whitworth, p. 127.
- 43 Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), p. 89.
- 44 *The Little Hotel* was not published until 1973.
- 45 Rowley, p. 187.
- 46 Amongst Stead's papers held in the National Library of Australia there are a couple of folders describing the puppets that Stead and Blake owned. Their two favourites were Nello and Jan Callojan and there are numerous drawings of the puppets, conversations with them, and short skits involving these two household personalities. MS 4967, Box 6, folders 44 and 45.

CHAPTER 4

- 1 Helen Yglesias, *New York Times*, 13 June 1976.
- 2 Rowley, p. 393.
- 3 Rowley, p. 442.
- 4 Lionel Gossman summarises Aristotle in *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 232.
- 5 Gossman, p. 227; Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p. 187.
- 6 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 58.
- 7 Gossman refers to this as the 'incommensurable nature of history and fiction', p. 295.
- 8 Griffin, p. 52.

- 9 Griffin, p. 41.
- 10 By ontological questions I mean the text poses a problem about whether 'history' is ontologically prior to fiction—in this thesis I quote historical sources as though there is some recoverable history that can support Stead's fictional interpretation of her period; but this is merely an attempt to find consensus among the various 'stories' and histories and I do not presume that something called 'history' outside the novel takes primacy over the history within the works.
- 11 Hayden White and Frank E. Manuel, 'Rhetoric and History' in *Theories of History*, Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar, 6 March 1976 (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, 1978), p. 14.
- 12 Weisenburger interprets O'Connor's view this way, p. 51.
- 13 White, *Theories of History* p. 24.
- 14 I draw on Terry Eagleton's definition of rhetoric in *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 205.
- 15 Terry Sturm, 'Christina Stead's New Realism' in *Cunning Exiles* ed. Don Anderson and Stephen Knight (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974), p. 21.
- 16 *Time*, 23 September 1966, p. 74, NLA, Papers of Stead, Stead's review clippings file.
- 17 Michael Wilding, Review of *Cotters' England* *London Magazine* 7, 8, 1967, pp.98–100, p. 100.
- 18 All page references to the novel are to Christina Stead, *Cotters' England* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974).
- 19 *A Web of Friendship* 29 June 1949 p. 116.
- 20 Rowley, p. 356, the year was 1949.
- 21 Rowley, p. 356.
- 22 Rowley, p. 357.
- 23 Williams, p. 195.
- 24 D.H. Lawrence, 'England, My England', in *England, My England and Other Stories* ed. by Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 8.
- 25 Lawrence, p. 16.
- 26 NLA, Papers of Stead, MS 4967, Box 5, folder 32, notes of 22 November 1949.
- 27 George Orwell, 'England Your England', in *George Orwell: A Collection of Essays* (London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1946), p. 274.

- 28 Orwell, p. 267.
- 29 Ann Blake, 'Christina Stead's English Short Stories', *Southerly* 53, 4, (1993), 146–60, p. 146.
- 30 Rowley, p. 344.
- 31 Rowley, p. 367.
- 32 Blake, p. 160.
- 33 Rowley, p. 357.
- 34 Rowley notes that Stead read Lawrence for the first time in 1929, and thought him 'a marvellous man', p. 121. Rowley quotes Stead in an interview with Joan Lidoff, 1973, p. 204.
- 35 Graham Martin talks about Lawrence's struggle between engagement and withdrawal from history in "History" and "Myth" in D.H. Lawrence's Chatterley Novels', in *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), p. 65. The letter to which he refers was written on 3 December 1926, and appears in *The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, ed. by H. Moore, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1962), 2, p. 952.
- 36 *The Guardian*, 30 June 1967, NLA, Papers of Stead, Stead's review clippings file.
- 37 Graham Holderness, 'Miners and the Novel: From Bourgeois to Proletarian Fiction', in *The British Working Class Novel in the Twentieth Century*, p. 22.
- 38 Weisenburger, p. 51 refers to a letter from O'Connor to John Hawkes in which she reminds him of Thomas Mann's statement to this effect, in *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 470.
- 39 Weisenburger, p. 12.
- 40 Rowley, p. 359.
- 41 Griffin offers a long discussion on the interest of the satirist in food and the various interpretations of feasts, and good and bad eating, p. 191.
- 42 Don Anderson makes a similar point about Henny and Nellie, who tend to eat on their own in 'Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties', *Southerly* 39, 1, (1979), 28–45, p. 34.
- 43 Griffin, p. 195.
- 44 Hewison quotes Connolly in *Horizon*, April 1947, in *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War, 1945–60* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p. 14.

- 45 Griffin, p. 52.
- 46 Susan Sheridan, *Christina Stead* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), p. 108.
- 47 'Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel'.
- 48 Griffin discusses exactly this point with reference to Pope in 'Epilogue to the Satires', p. 51.
- 49 Griffin, p. 53.
- 50 Rowley, pp. 440–2.
- 51 Sheridan, p. 116.
- 52 See David Foster's novel *Mates of Mars* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1991).
- 53 NLA, Papers of Stead, MS 4967, Box 2, folder 10, 'The Golden Dishes (Brother and Sister)'.
- 54 Introspectionism is loosely synonymous with structuralism, 'the school of psychology founded on the method of careful and systematic introspection'. It has been criticised for 'not leading to a true examination of the contents of consciousness.' Arthur S. Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 373. It seems to me Stead was satirising the entire notion of 'talking' as a method of self understanding.
- 55 Griffin, pp. 89–90.
- 56 Griffin, p. 87.
- 57 Griffin includes a valuable discussion on this in his chapter entitled 'Satiric Closure'.
- 58 Ann Blake makes a similar point when describing the 'compromising political writers' of *Cotters' England* and *I'm Dying Laughing* in 'Christina Stead's English Short Stories', p. 146.
- 59 Ross is quoted in Hewison, *In Anger*, p. 5.
- 60 Blake, pp. 146–60.
- 61 *Overland* began publication in 1954. Its stated role, according to Ian Turner was 'to develop a radical tradition, including within that the Marxist tradition; to encourage a working-class audience and working-class writers ... and to take part in polemics against the Right.' William Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 538.
- 62 All page references are to Christina Stead, *Ocean of Story* ed. by R.G. Geering (Melbourne: Viking, 1985).

- 63 Griffin, p. 132.
 64 Frank Kellaway, 'Writer as Naturalist', *Overland*, 103, July (1986), 76–77, p. 76.

CHAPTER 5

- 1 Edward Mendelson defines and explores the genre of the encyclopaedic narrative in 'Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon', *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976), 1267–1275.
 2 Christina Stead's literary trustee, R.G. Geering, prepared the manuscript of the novel for publication after Stead's death. Stead had worked on the novel on and off for more than twenty years and there was a massive amount of text, with revisions, altered typescript and changes in the plot. In his preface to the novel Geering comments on some of the changes he made to the text, and it is possible that without his sustained work on the manuscript *I'm Dying Laughing* Stead's most important novel, would never have been published.
 3 Stead in a letter to Nettie Palmer, 5 December 1950, *A Web of Friendship*, p. 121.
 4 Williams, p. 241.
 5 Letter to Nettie Palmer, *A Web of Friendship* p. 121.
 6 Rowley, p. 460.
 7 Stead in a letter to Leda and Stanley Burnshaw of 10 November 1966, *A Web of Friendship*, p. 272. Stead sent the manuscript to Stanley, explaining that 'You are the only person I know who knows part of the story.' Rowley, p. 459.
 8 Letter to Burnshaws, 15 April 1973, Rowley, p. 501.
 9 The early drafts of the novel are held in the National Library of Australia, MS 4967, Boxes 11–14.
 10 The House UnAmerican Activities Committee was set up in 1938.
 11 All of the notes and background materials referred to here are held in the National Library of Australia, as cited in previous chapters, under the collection heading Papers of Christina Stead, MS 4967, Box 11, folder 85.
 12 Notes on the Packer book appear in NLA, MS 4967 box 11, folder 85 and on *The God that Failed* in folder 86.
 13 Rowley, p. 370.

- 14 The relevant folders are found in MS 4967, folders 85–87, containing notes and background material and folders 88–107 containing drafts of the novel.
- 15 NLA, MS 4967 Box 11, folder 86.
- 16 All page references to the novel are from Christina Stead, *I'm Dying Laughing*. R.G. Geering (London: Virago, 1986).
- 17 The word translates as 'likeminded'.
- 18 Diary note, 12 January 1951.
- 19 Letter of 30 June 1953, *A Web of Friendship* p. 142.
- 20 Diary note, 16 January 1951.
- 21 NLA, Papers of Stead, MS 4967, Box 15, folder 111 Diary 'The Travellers Bed and Breakfast', 8 November 1950.
- 22 Diary note, 7 November 1950.
- 23 Stead quoted in a letter to Edith Anderson, 13 December 1950, Rowley, p. 362.
- 24 Stead in a letter to Leda and Stanley Burnshaw, 6 March 1967, *A Web of Friendship* p. 279–80.
- 25 EE means Emily in the diary notes; this note is dated 3 February 1951.
- 26 R.G. Geering's preface to the novel quotes Stead, p. viii.
- 27 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 1.
- 28 Rowley, p. 277.
- 29 In Chapter 5 of The First Book of Rabelais's *Gargantua*, one of the drinkers says as he drinks: 'The Saviour's words are on my lips: "Sitio", I thirst!' (*The Complete Works of Rabelais* trans. by Jacques Le Clercq (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), p.20). However Diana Brydon misattributes the quotation, referring to it as Gargantua's birth cry. Gargantua's birth cry is not 'I'm thirsty' but "'Drink, drink, drink!'" as though inviting the company to fall to.' (*The Complete Works of Rabelais* p.23) The birth cry occurs in Chapter 6 of The First Book, entitled 'The Strange and Wonderful Manner of Gargantua's Birth'. Brydon states that 'Gargantua's birth-cry in Rabelais re-placed the sacred words of Christ dying on the cross in a comic secular setting of rebirth. Stead's repetition of these words puts Emily in double focus as tragic hero and comic picara, as someone capable of "dying laughing"'. ('Other Tongues Than Ours: Christina Stead's *I'm Dying Laughing*, *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 22, Fall,

- (1989), 17–26, p. 20). Because she mistakes the quotation for Gargantua's birth cry Brydon's comments about using the sacred words in a comic setting of rebirth are misleading, and thus the direct association she suggests between Emily and Gargantua and the idea of the secular rebirth of a heroic figure is less convincing.
- 30 R.G. Geering notes in his preface to the 1986 edition that 'UNO 1945' was the opening chapter of the 1966 version of the text.
- 31 John Michael Cohen makes this comment in his introduction to the work by François Rabelais, *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 17.
- 32 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts.: MIT Press, 1968), p. 75.
- 33 This fragment probably dates from 1946, and is found in the NLA, Papers of Stead, MS 4967, folder 86.
- 34 Hellman talks about the period in which she was blacklisted from 1948 until 1956, commenting that she did work in the theatre. She claims that she is unable to forgive and forget. 'Too many lives got mangled for the wrong reasons. It was a very cruel time.' Hellman in an interview with Rex Reed, November 1975, in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*, ed. by Jackson R. Bryer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), p. 180.
- 35 Hellman, in an interview with John Phillips and Anne Hollander, 1964, in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman* p. 61.
- 36 Hellman in an interview with Marilyn Berger in 1979 in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*. Hellman is quick to point out that while her partner Dashiell Hammett went to jail for six months and both of them were blacklisted, and therefore could not work in Hollywood, their suffering was economic. Hellman went to work at Macy's for a while in order to make a living. p. 250.
- 37 Hellman, p. 251.
- 38 Hellman in the interview with Berger, continues 'but simple-minded people trained in drama. And simple minded people who were very, very frightened people.' p. 252.
- 39 Berger refers here to comments Hellman makes in her book, *Scoundrel Time* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976).
- 40 Interviews with Hellman, p. 255.
- 41 The character Moffat Byrd is based on John Howard Lawson, whom

Rowley describes as the 'unofficial leader of the Hollywood communists from 1937-50'. He was imprisoned with other members of the Hollywood Ten, p. 308.

42 Hellman p. 62.

43 Arthur Miller, *Timebends A Life* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 339.

44 Miller, p. 182.

45 Miller, p. 182.

46 Miller p. 184.

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Index

A

Abels, Cyrilly, 8, 79
Amis, Kingsley, 20
Aragon, Louis, 111
Aristophanes, 13
Aristotle, 127, 189
Auden, W.H., 13
Austen, Jane, 18
Australian Literature Censorship
Board, 66

B

Bakhtin, Mikhail, 128, 189–90
Balzac, Honore de, 23
Baudrillard, Jean, 73–4
The Beauties and Furies, 2, 11, 19,
22, 23, 24, 26–45, 46, 47, 56,
76, 103, 158, 199
Beckett, Samuel, 159
Bellamy, Edward, 109, 115
Bildungsroman 11, 60

Blake, Ann, 10, 137–8
Blake, Bill, 9, 11, 30, 46, 53, 69, 87,
94, 96, 132, 138, 163, 171
Blech, Mollie, 68
Bransten, Richard, 138, 169, 175,
179
Brophy, Brigid, 18
Browder, Earl, 110
Burnshaw, Stanley, 169
Burroughs, William, 20
Burton, Robert, 13

C

Campbell, Roy, 20
Carter, Angela, 18
Catullus, 22
Cervantes, 11
Chekhov, Anton, 102, 119, 120
Cinema, 46, 99, 120
Connolly, Cyril, 147
Coover, Robert, 21

Cotters' England 3, 8, 10, 19, 25, 94,
96, 98, 112, 126–62, 163, 164
Cusack, Dymphna 78, 88

D

Davies, Peter, 31
de Lillo, Don, 202
Dickens, Charles, 19, 23, 33, 46,
55, 96, 97, 98
Doestoevsky, Fyodor, 23
Domitian, 16
Dooley, Anne, 10, 132, 133,
144
Dooley family, 7, 8
Dooley, Patrick, 144

E

Eliot, George, 18
Ennius, 16

F

Fadiman, Clifton, 54
Farrell, James T., 110
Fielding, Henry, 11
film noir, 99
Fischer, Louis, 171
Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 23
For Love Alone 2, 7, 12, 42, 68, 75,
113, 151
Foster, David, 10, 157
Freud, Sigmund, 102, 128, 129,
157, 158, 160
Frye, Northrop, 13, 14, 21, 22

G

Gaddis, William, 20, 21
Gide, Andre, 171
Gissing, George, 87
Greenblatt, Stephen, 22, 23

H

Hadrian, 16
Hall, Ruth, 9, 46, 67, 114
Hardy, Thomas, 149
Hawkes, John, 21
Hellman, Lillian, 23, 192–3, 194–5,
202
Herbst, Josephine, 110
Hippocrates, 189
Hitler, Adolf, 45, 83
Horace, 1, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22
House of All Nations 2, 6, 11, 19,
24, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34,
45–57, 94, 145, 146, 158, 176,
199
House Un-American Activities
Committee (HUAC), 7, 170,
192–3, 195
Humphries, Barry, 143
Hurst, Alf, 94, 104
Hutcheon, Linda, 178
Huxley, Aldous, 20, 22, 23, 202

I

I'm Dying Laughing 3, 5, 6, 7, 10,
20, 23, 25, 28, 50, 54, 55, 69,
73, 90, 93, 95, 96, 98, 107, 112,
121, 124, 127, 128, 138, 139,
146, 153, 167–198, 200

J

James, Florence, 64, 78, 88, 127
Joyce, James, 20
Juvenal, 1, 2, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22,
127, 146, 157, 158

K

Kazan, Elia, 195–6
Koestler, Arthur, 171

Kotlarsky, Aida and Max, 113, 114,
122, 176
Kristeva, Julia, 98
Kunz, Mr and Mrs, 124

L

Lawrence, D. H., 23, 135, 139,
140, 157
Lenin, V.I., 55, 56
Letty Fox: Her Luck 3, 5, 7, 10, 11,
24, 58–75, 77, 80, 93, 95, 99,
102, 113, 133, 197, 199
The Little Hotel 124, 164
A Little Tea, A Little Chat 3, 10, 11,
17–18, 19, 23, 25, 40, 50, 66,
90, 91–112, 113, 115, 119, 124,
125, 129, 139, 172, 173
Lucian, 189
Lucilius, 16, 18
Lurie, Alison, 18

M

Macbeth, 89
MacDonald, Ramsay, 50
Maltz, Albert, 110
Mann, Thomas, 141
The Man Who Loved Children 2, 7,
12, 93, 134, 139, 145, 146, 197
Marston, John, 13
Martial, 16
Marx, Karl, 3, 128, 129
McCarthy, Joseph, 169, 201
McCarthy, Mary, 67, 202
Miller, Arthur, 23, 195–7, 202
Miss Herbert, (The Suburban Wife),
3, 24, 32, 40, 58, 59, 60, 63, 73,
75–90, 95, 107, 126, 127, 162,
163, 165, 199
Mitford, Nancy, 23, 35, 202
More, Thomas, 159

N

Nabokov, Vladimir, 20, 73
Nashe, Thomas, 13
New Critics, 21

O

Ocean of Story 162
O'Connor, Flannery, 21, 129, 141
Orwell, George, 20, 22, 23, 87,
136–7, 202
Owen, Robert Grant, 109

P

Packer, Herbert L., 170
Paris Writers Congress 1935, 172
The People with the Dog 3, 6, 10,
17, 19, 25, 92, 93, 107, 112–25,
133, 172
Persius, 16, 18, 22
Pinter, Harold, 146
Plautus, 22
Pope, Alexander, 40, 155
Powell, Anthony, 20
puppets, 4, 123, 124
The Puzzleheaded Girl 10, 77
Pynchon, Thomas, 20, 21, 73, 201

Q

Quintilian, 13

R

Rabelais, 11, 69, 103, 155, 188–9,
198
Rella, Ettore, 111
Roman Empire, 16, 74
Roman society, 18, 152
Ross, Alan, 162
Roth, Henry, 110, 117
Rushdie, Salman, 20, 45, 73, 201

S

The Salzburg Tales 2, 11, 31

Satire

as history, 1, 7, 14, 24, 48, 50,
51, 93, 104, 123, 125, 127,
129, 162, 170

Augustan, 20, 140

definition of, 12

encyclopaedic, 3

generative and degenerative,
21, 61, 89, 132, 202

Horatian, 28, 30, 47, 70, 92,
125

Juvenalian, 24, 28, 57, 92, 191

Menippean, 128

postmodernist, 20, 21, 73, 89,
167, 178, 201

purpose of, 8

social, 19, 20

women and, 3, 18, 66

Seven Poor Men of Sydney 2, 12,
22, 34, 49, 74, 133, 151, 176,
197, 198

Sheridan, Susan, 3, 7, 102, 103,
153, 157

Silone, Ignazio, 171

socialism, 9

socialist realism, 61, 62

Spender, Stephen, 171

Stead, Christina,

as intellectual, 11

and cinema, 46

composition of novels, 203

publication dates of novels,
203

short stories, English, 94, 117,
129, 162–6

translation work, 87

Sterne, Laurence, 103

Strindberg, August, 127

Sturm, Terry, 130

Swift, Jonathon, 45, 128

T

Trajan, 16

Terence, 22

'Types, Known From All Time', 5,
204

U

Urquhart, Sir Thomas, 13

'Uses of the Many-Charactered
Novel', 4, 5, 61–2, 130

V

Virgil, 22

W

War profiteering, 9, 96, 103, 104,
105, 106, 108–9

Waugh, Evelyn, 20, 22, 23, 35, 202

Weisenburger, Steven, 5, 21

Weldon, Fay, 18

Wells, H.G., 51

West, Nathanael, 21, 23, 202

White, Hayden, 127, 128, 129

White, Patrick, 143

Wilding, Michael, 131

'Workshop in the Novel', 63

Wright, Richard, 171

Y

Yglesias, Helen, 126

Z

Zatz, Asa, 113, 117

Zola, Emile, 23, 140



Christina Stead was an accomplished satirist, yet critics have largely chosen to ignore the satire in her fiction. In this work, Anne Pender reviews Stead's novels as inheritors of the tradition of satire that dates back to the Roman satires of Horace and Juvenal, arguing that Stead's distinctive satirical fiction presents a contemporary view of Stead's own historical period from 1930 until the Cold War.

With her meticulous approach to the political events of her day and her intense study of the people around her, Stead satirises the follies of her confrères on both sides of politics. This study links Stead's satire with those of Orwell, Huxley and Waugh and also to the dramas of Arthur Miller. Drawing on Stead's notes, diaries and manuscripts, Anne Pender examines eight of Stead's novels and her English short stories and puts forward an argument about the centrality of satire to discourse about culture and history. In recasting Stead as a satirical novelist, this book draws attention to the intellectual rigour and encyclopaedic breadth and vision evident in Stead's fiction. Moreover, *Christina Stead: Satirist* demonstrates Stead's very significant contribution to the radical novel in the twentieth century.

Anne Pender lectures in Australian literature at the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, King's College, University of London. She earned her doctorate from the Australian Defence Force Academy, University of New South Wales in Canberra and also has a Master's degree in Education from Harvard University.



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