

Christina Stead and the Synecdochic Scam: *The Little Hotel*

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In this essay celebrating Christina Stead's Centenary, I first review American Stead scholarship, as I've personally participated in it, before performing a close reading of *The Little Hotel*.¹ My argument is that this wonderful short novel is underappreciated and that a formal approach can discern its shapely rhetorical structures. By drawing attention to Stead's "synecdochic scams," I highlight the way that she uses synecdoche, the literary figure of representing a whole through one of its parts, in order to portray the economic, sexual, and gender structures of her society. She critiques these structures as one colossal "scam" or scheme of exploitation with many manifestations. Then I break away from the formal restraints of New Critical explication to read *The Little Hotel* through the lenses of two contemporary theorists of masculinity, Australian sociologist Bob Connell and the late French post-structuralist theorist, Pierre Bourdieu.

I

I don't know how I first heard of Stead, but in the mid-1970s she was one of the authors on lists of women writers all feminists should know. For example, *The Man Who Loved Children*, *House of All Nations*, *The Puzzleheaded Girl* and *Miss Herbert* are listed in *Women and Literature: An Annotated Bibliography of Women Writers* published in 1976 by the Women and Literature Collective of Cambridge, Massachusetts. This source cites only two other Australian women writers, Henry Handel Richardson and Shirley Hazzard. Accompanied by a flattering line drawing of a composed, middle-aged woman, it comments, "Stead herself presents an enigma to feminist readers: outspokenly scornful of the Women's Liberation

Movement [. . .] she nevertheless depicts vividly and with great feeling the constricted lives of married and single women” (145). “Fortunately,” it continues, “since 1960 a Stead revival has been underway, and the old titles are gradually being reissued. Stead has since returned to Australia where she still writes prolifically” (145). From a later perspective, this description seems overly optimistic.

In January of 1977, I petitioned the Convention Coordinator of the Modern Language Association, the huge United States organization of university teachers of English and other literatures, to hold a Special Session on Stead. I did not list the panelists, explaining that “Christina Stead is a greatly undervalued novelist whose work has received very little critical attention.” “The main purpose of my Special Session is to bring together scholars now working on her fiction,” I said, but “since I do not yet know who they are,” I wished to put in a call through the Modern Language Association by advertising the coming session. One colleague wrote me that a graduate student was “drooling at the mention of Stead and [was] very keen” to give a talk on Stead’s politics. Joan Lidoff told me that she’d recently completed a dissertation on Stead and that she had interviewed her for the U.S. feminist journal *Aphra* in 1976. Joan was then turning her dissertation into a book. She wrote, “as far as I know there is nothing besides R. G. Geering’s work” out in literary criticism of Stead. Including the panelists, there were a total of nine people in the room at our December 1977 Special Session; they were Diana Brydon and R. T. Robertson from Canada; Susan (then Higgins) Sheridan and Helen Tiffin from Australia, and Joan Lidoff, Linnea Johnson, Diva Daims, Jan Wilkottz, and myself from the United States. At least five of that nine subsequently published on Stead.

I introduced the panel as follows (the MLA program listed Judith Kegan Gardiner as discussion leader and Linnea Johnson and Joan Lidoff as panelists):

Louisa Pollit’s Declaration of Independence from the oppression of her family makes psychological and symbolic sense at the end of *The Man Who Loved Children*, but we recognize that Louie’s claim that she is “going for a walk around the world” is more appropriate, and less ironic, when applied to her author. Stead shows the desperation and ambition, the detachment and global scope, even the eye for detail and the unhurried pace of the round-the-world traveller. [. . .] Meanwhile, we stay-at-home younger enthusiasts may have trouble understanding her trip, if, fascinated with the vivid pictures, we focus only on one scene or flip blurringly from character to character, work to work. For us as critics of Stead’s fiction, the problems of placing and understanding her work are complicated by the varied traditions, genres, and settings of her thirteen novels, by their appearances and reappearances over the last thirty-five years, and by

the rhythms and unfamiliarities of our own intellectual travels. [. . .]
Like many other living writers, she confuses or confirms our theories
with each new story she writes, with each new interview she grants.

I went on to say that “Many of us have discovered Stead for ourselves only recently and we want to share our enthusiasm like explorers. We find we join an already creditable band of her admirers. Saul Bellow and Lillian Hellman say she should have won a Nobel Prize and list her among their most esteemed authors, yet most of our friends and colleagues have still not heard of her.”² I also said that “she is rarely included in general assessments of twentieth-century fiction. [. . .] Even the MLA program committee misplaced her” by listing our 1977 session under American Twentieth-Century Literature. “The MLA Division on Women’s Studies is attempting to reload the literary canon at this convention,” I noted, “and we are part of the enterprise.”

We early panelists read *The Man Who Loved Children* as a novel illuminated by “political, psychological, and sociological” theories, chiefly Marxism and psychoanalysis, as well as materialist feminism. Joan Lidoff was interested in the “female ego” of Stead’s characters, and the other panelists, too, focused mostly on Stead’s female characters and their contexts, while Diana Brydon analysed Stead’s use of “the Australian legend,” leading to an “Australian pastoral radicalism” that was at last shaking off the “colonial cringe.” “Luckily for us,” I concluded, “nearly everything remains to be done in Stead scholarship. Stead’s plots and structures deserve attention, as well as her women and her images. [. . .] Moreover, we must begin to look at the whole Stead canon rather than only a few novels. [. . .] Finally, we must face making a claim for our author, placing and evaluating her work in the context of twentieth-century literature. It’s a pleasure now to begin.”

Well, Stead wasn’t just “our” author, and others had already “begun” writing about her, but it was true that the coming years would bring a wonderful bounty of Stead scholarship. In the United States, feminists situated Stead in a tradition of women’s literature, and this paper returns to my earlier call for more attention to her plots, structures, and imagery. In addition, we socialist feminists were especially intrigued by Stead as a writer on the Left. Many strengths of the Stead novels that are set in the United States, I claimed in 1980, “derive from Stead’s radical vision of society, yet they are also inhibited by the way in which her Marxist ideology undercuts her own profounder and less clearly articulated perceptions about women under capitalism” (Gardiner, “Stead’s American Novels”). After Stead’s death in 1983, a flood of texts and letters became available under R. G. Geering’s executorship and then Margaret Harris’s, and Chris Williams’ and Hazel Rowley’s biographies appeared in 1989 and 1994.

In 1990, Hazel Rowley and Susan Sheridan petitioned the Modern Language Association to hold another meeting on Stead, to commemorate the fiftieth

anniversary of *The Man Who Loved Children*. The Modern Language Association turned them down. I suspect that the convention screeners didn't recognize either Stead or the eminent Australian scholars. The following year a Stead session was approved, with Robin Dizard convening and Margaret Harris, Susan Sheridan, Louise Yelin, and myself speaking.³ Yet Stead still has not achieved sustained recognition in the United States. I can only speculate on the causes. As both cause and effect of oblivion, inexpensive paperbacks of her novels have not been readily accessible: Amazon.com now reports that most of her titles are again out of print. Many of the novels are longer than those usually taught in survey or postcolonial literature classes, and instructors may be less interested in assigning grumpy old white expatriates than young writers who speak for their emerging nations. To American students, Stead's Marxism may seem naive, her views of our country jaded, her homophobia repellent, her prose old-fashioned, and her fiction unstructured. I've recommended her books to numerous students and friends. "I started *The Man Who Loved Children*," they usually tell me, "but I quit after a few pages." Especially in women's literature classes, I find, students still want likable female characters—either tragic or triumphal—with whom they can easily identify.

Jennifer Gribble noted in 1994 that "feminists responding to [Stead's] sharp observation of the social oppression of women have attempted to read her 'against the grain' of her own avowed distaste for the feminist movement" (4–5). We American feminists are a diverse lot. We few interested in Stead tend to trace the workings in her fiction of gender in conjunction with other axes of inequality, including social class, ethnicity, "race," and sexualities. I disagree, then, with those critics who faulted American feminists for oversimplifying Stead, as we critiqued Stead for oversimplifying feminism.

II

As a materialist feminist, I especially value Stead's acute portrayals of the effects of specific forms of patriarchy and capitalism on her characters. I used to focus on issues of "female identity." Now I find myself intrigued with Stead's depictions of dominant masculinities. I'll get back to these, but first I want to analyse *The Little Hotel* as a well-made little novel, using the techniques of an old-fashioned formalism or "New Criticism," and attending especially to the structural and rhetorical patterns in her work by way of revealing her underestimated artistry. Despite some gaps in its narrative point of view, *The Little Hotel* is a shapely piece of fiction, with coherent parallel plotting, a careful array of interconnected characters, and rich patterns of imagery. Stead's published interviews, letters, and the biographies fill in our knowledge of her professed views and ways of writing. However, as Susan Sheridan has warned, these materials may also tempt the scholar

to overemphasize Stead's professed realism and the real-life models for her characters (17). Stead fostered this tendency in her readers, for example, by writing to her niece Margaret Hanks that the characters in *The Little Hotel* "are all, without exception, real people. It's not possible to invent people like the people people themselves invent!" (qtd. in Williams 8). However, just because her characters ventriloquize remarks she heard or letters she was sent, that does not mean they lack artistic independence. Unusually for Stead, in *The Little Hotel* we hear less of her characters' speeches than we might like. The characters and their pasts are gradually revealed, with much left open to our imaginations. This is a subtle novel, a term rarely applied to Stead.

One reason for returning to a New Critical approach, then, is that its limited ideology, its independence from history, biography, and society permits a fresh look at Stead's fiction, which is so often judged formally inept. The working premise of New Criticism was that successful literary works are unified and coherent, with each part fitting into a harmonious and intelligible whole. Within this whole, imagery, language, and other details play out in repetitive patterns illustrative of universal themes like nature and art, appearance and reality, good and evil, and the individual and society. In the next section, I will move from this formal analysis to larger social contexts, especially connections between gender and changing economies.

The little novel now called *The Little Hotel* was written by the early 1950s as "Mrs Trollope and Madame Blaise" and rejected for publication at the time (Blake 143). Two pieces appeared as separate short stories—"The Hotel Keeper's Story" in 1952 and "The Woman in the Bed" in 1968, both republished in the collection *Ocean of Story*. *The Little Hotel* itself was published as a whole only in 1973, and, uniquely, first in Australia (Harris 17). According to Rowley, Stead's friend Oliver Stallybrass, "edited it carefully, suggested minor changes, altered the title [. . .] and sent it around to publishers" (501). The novel is set in a small, unfashionable Swiss hotel where a group of postwar expatriates appear aimless and adrift. Saul Bellow's jacket puff calls the novel a "little gem," and there were numerous favorable reviews of it at the time of publication. Early reviewers called Stead a "magnificent and truly original novelist" and the book anything from "engaging though minor" to "masterly," and a work of "technical perfection" (qtd. in Williams 283). Many, however, compared the novel disadvantageously to Stead's earlier work. Writing in *The Nation*, Barbara Baer opined that "although there are no great themes, no significant events, and no literary experiments in *The Little Hotel*, the guests' own chatter reveals their characters—and their situation as the castaways of European history—with the same merciless accuracy that makes the conversations of Stead's more ambitious novels so riveting" (501).

The Little Hotel still has not received much scholarly attention. Rowley praises the novel's "wonderful miniature portraits" and says it "explores the fear of loneliness

and old age, and the effect of money and class on human relationships” (387). My own treatment of the book in my 1989 study, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing, and the Politics of Empathy*, concentrates on changes from the short stories to the novel and on the themes of female identity and female bonding: “friendship and treachery link” the female characters, I wrote, and “female identity consolidates for good and for ill in the disrupted atmosphere of postwar Europe” (69). Other recent critical comments tend to focus on the characters as cultural representatives. Diana Brydon says, “As Europe enters the Cold War this little hotel represents, as if in microcosm, the ambiance of the times” (138). Jennifer Gribble claims the novel’s “pathos” springs from “the death-throes of empire” (103). She, too, uses the figure of the “microcosm” or miniature world. “Stead finds here a new model of communal living for her social microcosm,” she says, “suggesting how the most trivial of daily transactions illumine larger territorial and national rivalries, and how postwar readjustment is undermined by hidden guilts and collaborations” (102). Like several other Stead novels, *The Little Hotel* presents people in a collective setting that both imitates and avoids the traditional nuclear family.

As in films like Irving Thalberg’s *Grand Hotel* and novels like Stead’s earlier *House of All Nations*, an era and a place are indeed anatomized in *The Little Hotel*, but I’d like here to scrutinize the book more in terms of its formal structures—its narration and characterization, the shaping of its interrelated plots, its images, and its rhetorical figure—so tracing some of the “underlying patterns” Brydon notes (141). Stead’s works are often not so “plotless” as they have been called; instead they may be firmly plotted as they swing to their inexorable denouements, even though their basic structures often are obscured by swelling verbiage and subsidiary characters. *The Little Hotel* is unusual in its restraint, even though, like other Stead novels, it displays a wide international gallery of eccentric characters. Through its relatively slim figure, the novel’s structure shows like anorectic ribs.

The Little Hotel has a frame in which we’re introduced to the narrator, Madame Selda Bonnard, the genial host of an inn. She opens the novel with an apostrophe to us, her audience: “If you knew what happens in the hotel every day!” (7).⁴ She says that a former client, a woman, telephoned that her daughter-in-law had just died in murky circumstances. This mysterious death in the novel’s opening lines foreshadows the ominous end of one of the novel’s main characters, Madame Blaise. The innkeeper’s opening and closing anecdotes are of murder, madness, confusions of identity, and tales of complicity in the guilts and atrocities of World War II, as each character to whom she introduces us stands thematically for an interplay between secrets and revelations, official lies and uncomfortable truths, and synecdochically for the traumatic hidden residues of a postwar Europe that wants to forget the past and get on with its present profiteering.

But why has the former guest telephoned a hotelkeeper? She apparently needs a friend. “I am looking for a friend too. I am always looking for one,” Madame

Bonnard confides (7). Her girlhood was ideal, spent arm in arm with her friend Edith in a relationship characterized by physical warmth, openness, equality, and reciprocity: the two women “never had any secrets” from each other (7). In contrast, Madame Bonnard’s married life has not been so pleasant; her husband praises German efficiency, spies on the guests, and is rumored to be carrying on a sordid sexual affair. As the novel unfolds, we readers find ourselves ambivalently in the position of Selda’s friends, hearing her secrets and those of her guests, sifting the truth from partial and confusing stories, vacillating between being observers and seeking connections, and wondering about her reliability as a narrator. “[Y]et,” as Madame Bonnard says, “you are always astonished at how people can muddle their lives” (16).

Another hotel guest that Madame Bonnard mentions is “the Mayor of B.,” a former Belgian official with a bipolar (or manic-depressive) disorder. He spends money lavishly, buying champagne, drinking with the servants, and running wild in the nude. Apparently a collaborator in the War, he obsesses about official documents and “germ contact with Germans” (10). Sent off to an insane asylum, he escapes from the train, thus being luckier than the concentration camp victims so recently transported through Europe. The Mayor’s association of “germs” and “Germans,” of collaboration with madness and disease, continues throughout the novel, in the delusional jealousy of a servant who was a Mussolini youth: many of the novel’s servants echo the hotel guests in an upstairs/downstairs fashion. In the coda of the novel, Madame Bonnard again describes amusingly unbalanced guests: a postman who has had a nervous breakdown and another young man call each other “dirty spies” and madmen (143–44). So the contaminating atmosphere of postwar paranoia continues, even as Madame Bonnard sees a new era unfolding. The impoverished British are being displaced. The Americans and French race through town in their automobiles, and the little Swiss hotels are taken over by “trades unions” and “block bookings by the travel agencies” as a diminished Europe enters the circuits of global capital under American hegemony (144, 142).

Madame Bonnard’s main guests are two women with their male partners, named as in Stead’s original title, “Mrs Trollope and Madame Blaise.” Their plots are chiasmic, crossing and then diverging. Dr and Madame Blaise are among Stead’s wonderfully horrifying creations, moral monsters locked in battle with one another yet perfectly allied in their predations on others. Both agree that “[a]ll marriage is hell” and the home a prison (92). Like many of Stead’s most memorable characters, the wealthy Madame Blaise is a manipulator and a dreadful wife, mother, and acquaintance. She regards her daughter with misogynist disgust, saying women are all “frumps,” and her perverse love for her son would rather see him homosexual—or dead—than attached to another woman (92). Dependent on her husband for drugs and on Mrs Trollope for companionship, she is also an aggressor, upbraiding Mrs Trollope for her unmarried status and reviling her in

racist terms because of her Dutch-Japanese mother. (Madame Bonnard says that when Madame Blaise quarrels with Mrs Trollope, she'll also say she was "most likely a Jew" [25].) When, as she predicted, Madame Blaise dies shortly after returning to her husband's home, she nevertheless achieves her revenge: her will leaves all her money to a troll of a housekeeper but only if her snobbish, marriage-hating, but greedy husband marries the servant.

Madame Blaise's repulsiveness reflects one source of her fortune—Nazi money. Whereas the mad Belgian mayor fantastically deeds a hotel to Madame Bonnard's five-year-old son, making his own reparations for the guilts of war, the Swiss Madame Blaise has enriched herself more grimly by getting Nazis to entrust their property to her. She revels in her lack of accountability for these debts: "Where are Nazis now?" she asks; "Dirt, filth [. . .]. No one worries about that trash" (102). The "filth" of the Nazis has become hers as well. She doesn't bathe; she hides under layers of clothing; and she repeats her theft of war plunder by stealing a banknote from Mrs Trollope's purse.

Besides drug addiction, Madame Blaise is associated with other diseases and corruption as well. Her husband sadistically gives her photographs of cancerous and mutilated patients. She calls the men in these pictures her "gigolos" and fantasizes that she will leave the doctor for a gigolo (91). The "gigolo" is one of the recurring figures in the novel, as in *House of All Nations* where the "house of all nations" is both a bank and a brothel, another metaphor that links sexuality with exploitation. In *The Little Hotel*, corrupt men live on women's money, which the women have received from other men through inheritance or divorce. Dr Blaise admits he married Madame Blaise for her money. Princess Bili has a young fiancée who wants her to fund his girlfriend as well as himself. And the staid and wealthy Yorkshire businessman, Mr Wilkins, who is engrossing Lilia Trollope's money under the guise of careful financial management, is flattered to be called her "gigolo" (89).

Thus *The Little Hotel* is unified by its careful framing, its parallel plotting, its imagery of disease and corruption, food and poison, and its synecdochic figures of the madman and the gigolo. The madmen are still suffering from the guilts of World War II; the gigolos are part of the corrupt, gendered profits of the postwar rush for private life; the two become interchangeable.

The novel's heroine is middle-aged, divorced Mrs Trollope, whose name recalls both an eminent British male Victorian novelist and a female tramp. Although she is far from perfect, she is the one character in the book who develops for the better over its course, as she both affects the other characters and is affected by them. She resides at the hotel in adjoining rooms with her long-time companion, Mr Wilkins, who is amassing a fortune, in part at her expense, while refusing to marry her and insisting on being called her "cousin." The American bigot Mrs Powell loudly calls Mrs Trollope "that Asiatic" and tries to persuade the other

hotel guests that she is a communist, though Mrs Trollope's political views are conventional and inconsistent (34). Even the servants sometimes taunt Mrs. Trollope by referring to their own casual lovers as their "cousins" and snidely commenting that "She is a very well-born English lady, a little altered in appearance by her residence in the Orient!" (50). Mrs Trollope responds to such snubs by fearing to become like her persecutors, explaining that their "jealousy and loneliness are cruel diseases" to be pitied (54).

Mrs Trollope looks in the faces of the women at the hotel and sees her own possible fates mirrored, as she does in the dining room mirror she faces at every meal. Another English expatriate, Miss Chillard (who is the eponymous "the woman in the bed" in Stead's 1968 short story), acts as the catalyst for Lilia Trollope's resolution to risk personal autonomy rather than succumb to such lonely helplessness. The man that Miss Chillard fancied has married her sister instead, and she has since become ill. She treats her own mother like a paid companion and longs to travel to a fancy spa. The pathetic dependence of these women on others, and the sad, cruel ways they seek to assert themselves, affect Mrs Trollope as negative reflections: "Who would lead such a life? 'And I am leading it,' said Mrs Trollope to herself" (70). Instead of turning against the disagreeable invalid, Mrs Trollope's first act of independence is to fund Miss Chillard's trip to her favorite doctor, using money that Mr Wilkins thinks will buy him a gift motorcar.

Lilia Trollope initially appears as a futilely feminine woman, compliant, pretty, nurturant, helpful, and perfectly willing to subordinate her needs to the man who loves her or to any woman who seeks her help. She is constantly seeking to mother people. In order to feel useful, she accepts the role of companion to a sick woman, though she quits the job when Mr Wilkins complains that her employment makes *him* look "absurd" (29). She has beautiful hands and a good head for figures; though she rejects her lover's obsession with profitable exchange rates, she allows him to put her cash in the hotel safe under his own name. She engages their rooms and lies about their relationship as he directs her, identifying Mr Wilkins by the ironically egalitarian and familial title of "cousin" (78).

Genuinely kind, she insists that people should treat one another decently. She gives gifts to the servants and consoles Madame Bonnard for her errant husband. She repays the other women's ill-temper and cruelties with generosity. She rarely speaks ill of others and does not harbor a grudge toward her lover, yet is "ashamed when she compared her dreamed life of true love, happiness, hope and trust with the insignificance of her present life" (108). Because he was so gallant when she was married to a rich philanderer, she expected Mr Wilkins to marry her as soon as she was divorced and went abroad with him. Instead, he treats her coldly, although he does become affectionate especially on those occasions when he wants a gift or another installment of her fortune entrusted to him. At every meal in the dining room of the little hotel, "Mrs Trollope sat facing Mr Wilkins and the

mirror in which she saw reflected all the guests in the dining room, and the kitchen” (26). Though seeking recognition, she does not see herself reflected in his eyes, because he reads the financial papers throughout their meals. Rather than descend to his level, argue, sue for her property, or continue living with him without love, she decides to leave him.

The midpoint of the novel is one of Stead’s nightmare dinner parties, neatly bringing together many of the novel’s characters and then separating them. The dinner celebrates the twenty-seventh anniversary of the love affair between Mr Wilkins and Mrs Trollope: they “said it was like old times and they went off to dance together in a pretty coupling, their faces lit up. Anyone could see that they were for a moment back in the East they had had together” (101). However, the dinner is also the occasion for their exploitation by Madame and Dr Blaise, who unite to humiliate the English couple despite their warfare with one other. The fates of the two couples meet here, one joined by long hatred, the other by long love, before they permanently divide.

Like other good people in Stead’s fiction, Mrs Trollope feeds others, bringing crackers to Miss Chillard, treating her friends to food and wine, and feeding sparrows at her windowsill—like her author (to abandon New Critical restraints on such connections) who also spent long, humiliating years as the unmarried partner of a hotel-dwelling exile in Europe (Rowley 354). The Blaises, in contrast, deliberately run up their hosts’ bill by ordering overpriced champagne and caviar. They are portrayed as leeches or vampires, creatures who feed off the blood of others. Supposedly a physician and healer, Dr Blaise collects photographs of diseased patients and feeds his wife addictive drugs that kill her. Yet he joins with her in “the satisfaction [. . .] of leeching onto the little rubber salesman,” and she agrees to insult the “little salesmen and their half-caste mistresses running here to be safe from doomsday and thinking themselves our equals;” she says, “Let’s leech all we can out of the damned ruined robber Empire and lick up the bloodspots” (102).

III

Stead was both ahead of her time and permanently shaped by the Marxist orthodoxies of the 1930s. She now appears as a global feminist writer who analyses the variability and transformation of categories of identity such as nationality, social class, and gender, under the pressures of international migration and changing economies. I’ve called this paper “Christina Stead and the Synecdochic Scam” because I think that her central technique is to show that a small swindle—like the Blaises’s appropriation of Nazi property or Mr Wilkins’ appropriation of his mistress’s money—is part of the whole system of inhumane individualism fostered by

capitalism. “Any serious picture of a woman is a ‘statement about women, the family, etc.’” Stead wrote, underscoring her habit of representing categories through individual cases, often apparently bizarre and extreme ones (Letter to author). Here I turn from the formal function of such scams in organizing her fiction to their prescient social analysis.

In *The Little Hotel*, all the characters and their relationships are shaped by the specific history of capital. The English, including former colonials like Lilia Trollope and Robert Wilkins, are immobilized (along with their money) by Labour government regulations designed to secure the failing pound against the incursions of the postwar dollar economy (Cairncross 73). The rich characters in the novel dither endlessly about where their money will be safest. Princess Bili wants to go to “South America where they have dictators and an organized society and excellent servants,” (96) and Madame Blaise wants to move her funds to safety in the United States. The novel is set in Switzerland, officially neutral in the war though suspected of harboring purloined Nazi treasures, a country famous for sick people and sanatoria, beautiful vistas and a polylingual populace, a microcosm of European capitalism. Mr Wilkins wishes he “could get some dictator or president to declare that Switzerland is going to be first victim in the next war—so that the Swiss franc would drop and we could get it cheap—then we would be rich, transfer back into dollars, go abroad” (86). Meanwhile, Lilia Trollope tells Mr Wilkins that “it is the Bank” of England that has made the poor invalid Miss Chillard “a cheat,” even as he has become her similarly corrupting “bank” (73).

Despite the characters’ apparent stasis, Stead shows a mobile concatenation of forces, the vigorous counter-offensive the privileged make against restraints in order to maintain maximum assets and a monopoly of power, privilege, and leisure. From this perspective, the eccentrics at *The Little Hotel*—the bipolar Mayor of B., with his fake deeds infected by German germs, the drug-addicted Madame Blaise and her homicidal husband, and the multiply-married Princess Bili—become not just foolish characters but oddly representative cogs in the complex machinery of global capital.

The hotel and the scams and scandals within it are examples of synecdoche, each small part standing for the whole system. This system is not only a financial system but also one that involves a restructuring of personalities, of individual dispositions, and of gender. I want to look more closely now at the category of gender. American literary critic Louise Yelin has recently written that “in their concern with class, capitalism, the bourgeois family, and national identity,” Stead’s “novels are ‘always already’ global;” she continues, “Each represents a specific, national class configuration [. . .] as inevitably and asymmetrically gendered and as a product of a global conjuncture and an imperial history” (“Christina Stead Now” 3–4). Similarly, in *The Men and the Boys*, Australian sociologist Bob Connell emphasizes that not just individuals but also institutions are gendered; that gender

is not a thing but “a process of configuring practice,” a project in history (28).

According to current theories, masculinity must be demonstrated not only in relation to women but to other men. Pierre Bourdieu says that “manliness” is a “*relational* notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of *fear* of the female, firstly in oneself” (53). When Mrs Trollope was still married, Robert Wilkins superseded her husband as her gallant protector. Years later at the Swiss hotel, however, he has only one major rival, and that is a rival not for women but for social standing. At the pivotal anniversary dinner, he is bested by Dr Blaise, who assumes a racist class superiority to him. The doctor feels safe in upping the ante for expensive food, making himself a parasite on Wilkins’ bounty: “I managed him well, didn’t I?” the doctor gloats to his wife, because Mr Wilkins is “not an Englishman of class and he didn’t dare countermand my orders” (102).

According to Connell, today’s gender order is defined by struggles for dominance between different masculinities, chiefly those based on physical violence and those based on expertise. Stead links the two, with Nazi depredation and imperialist plantations filling the bankbooks of Dr Blaise and Mr Wilkins, respectively. The milder Wilkins also faintly echoes the doctor’s homicidal misogyny. Whereas the doctor really does kill his wife and marry another woman, Mr Wilkins merely jokes about tipping “Lilia over the edge of some Alp” in an “accident” and having “to get another wife,” “a girl with long blonde hair” (96, 125). Together the two men make visible the “collective collusion” that Bourdieu calls men’s mutual investment in misogyny and male domination (75).

Currently, Connell claims, masculinities are “globalizing” (46). Although neoliberalism “speaks a gender-neutral language of ‘markets,’ ‘individuals’ and ‘choice,’” this economic system is deeply gendered, defining a new “transnational business masculinity” that is flexible, calculating, and egocentric—characterized by conditional loyalties, declining responsibilities, libertarian sexuality, and commodified relations with women, rather than by physical dominance (52–53). I apply this list to *The Little Hotel’s* Mr Wilkins, who gets “real amusement out of watching the men at work” in factories and wharves (28), though his “only genuine pleasure” is preparing “his daily chart, for analysis of the currency fluctuations and stock market quotations,” “anywhere in the world” (95, 27). He has graduated from the rubber business in Malaya to being an exchanger of currencies, profiting from his snug Swiss hotel through transnational flows of fiscal information. As he becomes a harbinger of new financial practices, he changes by adopting the new managerial masculinity that Connell describes. No longer the chivalric colonial lover of a married woman, he is now devoted to his “currency fluctuations,” becoming more egocentric and less loyal to his long-term mistress. “If I want half a dozen of those pretty Swiss handkerchiefs for Jessamine my married daughter,” says Mrs Trollope, “I do not hear a word from him for a whole hour

and then he brings me a calculation of what it would cost me in France, England, South Africa, the Argentine and the U.S.A.": "and this chart is to be the chart of my life" (95).

From our postmillennial perspective, Mr Wilkins reads as a clear exemplar of the new masculinity. His transformation from passionate lover to egocentric calculator with a "heart of stone" can be seen as a transition from a colonial to a multinational capitalist masculinity, while his apparent rationality and manly protectiveness mask his depredations on his mistress's assets (108): "I think I have managed our little affairs very well the last twenty-five years," he tells her complacently (72). Furthermore, Connell connects dominant masculine "gender with the most important source of violence in modern history—imperialism" (220). Mr Wilkins, as an English rubber planter in Malaya, has benefited from the exploitation of third-world resources and labor, while the mixed-race Mrs Trollope, both a colonialist and a subject of imperialism, leaves much of her money behind her with Mr Wilkins when she seeks her children and self-respect in England. It is appropriate that Stead places Mr Wilkins, at the end of the novel, doing business in apartheid South Africa.

In *The Little Hotel*, Stead adumbrates the characteristics of contemporary managerial masculinity that Connell's taxonomies describe. She portrays the psychologies shaped and embodied in response to economic, political, and gendered social structures. She dramatizes, for example, how it feels to be the colonial woman of the new managerial man. Bourdieu also stresses the ways that gender is built into social institutions and individual personalities, as in the yielding femininity of women like Lilia Trollope and the casual domineering of a Mr Wilkins. In Mrs Trollope's futile efforts to get her lover to understand her point of view, one might see what Bourdieu calls the "*cognitive struggle*" over meaning that creates gender hierarchy, gendered individuals, and sexual desire (13). Mr Wilkins' blandly evasive replies to her exemplifies that "*libido dominandi*" that Bourdieu says "is never entirely absent from the masculine libido" (21).

For Connell, "to define a transformative project, from the point of view of ending oppressive constructions of gender, requires a structural concept—[. . .] equality" (100). Stead occasionally dramatizes an ideal equality, an equivalence of power and emotion, in her characters. When Mr Wilkins and Mrs Trollope meet after a short absence, for example, they "met with the joy and effusion of lovers and married people," (59) and they are once seen "crossing the public square hand in hand and walking together with the unmistakable trotting and nodding of the long married" (123). More frequently, however, she champions love as the goal of her own and her characters' lives. But love takes many shapes, most of them unequal ones, as she repeatedly shows us. If a relationship of passionate, egalitarian comradeship is her ideal, still she is a fine analyst of love in its more asymmetric forms, from the symbiotic and reciprocal hatreds of Madame and Dr

Blaise to the waning, self-interested love of Robert Wilkins. His love is always imbricated with economic advantage. In contrast, Lilia Trollope's emotional truth is that "she and Robert loved each other. 'We are one flesh,' she had said to him, with deep emotion.' 'And one fortune,' he said quickly, embarrassed" (119).

Bourdieu says that "love" is often "domination accepted," welcomed by women when it overturns the masculine control that otherwise rules their lives (109). Then, at the end of *Masculine Domination*, he suddenly eulogizes an ideal love, although the rest of his study has gone to show how thoroughly people's characters are shaped by the conflictual power structures within which we all live. A nonviolent world, he claims, can only be "made possible by the establishment of relationships based on full reciprocity," those of trust, mutual recognition, and the treatment of others as equivalent to the self rather than as instruments for selfish ends. From this perspective, love and friendship appear as a "miraculous truce in which domination seems dominated" and "male violence stilled" (110). Bourdieu turns to fiction, particularly Virginia Woolf's, to validate his visions. I turn to Stead's *The Little Hotel* for both validation and demurral.

Stead is at once an iconoclast about romance and an idealist about love. Speaking of her story "Street Idyll," which nostalgically celebrates Stead's long relationship with Bill Blake, Ann Blake writes, "Stead's celebration of a loving marriage simultaneously presents love as an invasion of the self, as moments of self-obliteration" (157). Among feminists, Stead is perhaps best appreciated for her autobiographical "daughter-protagonists" in *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone*, novels Louise Yelin calls examples of "national family romance" (*From the Margins* 173). In contrast, *The Little Hotel* anomalously features a maternal heroine and a paternalist without children in an international, non-familial, fiscally-determined setting where romance and nostalgia are both appealing and outgrown.

"If I could only say what I feel," Mrs Trollope pleads with her Robert (73). "Do not try, Lilia; or you will be troublesome as usual," he replies. She persists, asking, "what is the use of money when it is no use? Our money is shut up and we are in jail because we must stay with it. [. . .] The money has us" (73). When he paternally calls her a "child" whose "little problems" are best left to him, she replies, "but I want to be free. Life seems very small to me this way [. . .] I can't go on all my life trying to love people at the *table d'hôte*" (73). Yet she also claims, "I must love people. It is all that consoles me for living abroad" (50).

Most of Stead's work displays the perversions of true love, especially as these are embodied in individual psychic structures through the unequal strains of a male-dominated gender system and a striated class hierarchy. In *The Little Hotel*, she shows a richly diverse panoply of attachments, from Princess Bili for her dog to the jealous servant for his wife to the murderous, complicit, and intimate hatreds of Dr and Madame Blaise. At the centre of all these are Robert Wilkins, colonial gallant turned calculating capitalist masculinist, and Lilia Trollope, who abandons

her lover and much of her money to preserve the nonmonetary “bond” of their remembered love (109).

Stead once wrote to me that she believed “true loving is freedom” (Letter to author). Focusing on *The Little Hotel*, I’ve tried to show here some of the interplay in her work between the sometimes elegant structures of her narratives and imagery and the social constraints that they mirror, the conflicts between love and freedom that women may face, and the strictures of the new managerial market masculinity of global capitalism.

Endnotes

1. I was honoured to participate in the 2002 Association for the Study of Australian Literature Stead Centenary celebrations. I especially thank Margaret Harris for inviting me to the Conference, for showing me the Stead sites in Sydney, and for leading a lively discussion of this paper.
2. For Bellow and Hellman’s views, see Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography* 535.
3. Unfortunately, Joan Lidoff died at age 43 the preceding year.
4. Brydon suggests that the audience is Stead herself (141).

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