

Christina Stead's Workshop in the Novel: How to Write a "Novel of Strife"

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Christina Stead was a Marxist who, at times, publicly endorsed Stalinist views on art. Yet her novels do not conform to the rigid paradigms of socialist realism, and they often criticize Marxist characters. This has led some readers to see her declared Marxism as a token allegiance to the politics of her husband, William Blake, and other men she knew and admired, such as the communist critics, Ralph Fox and Mike Gold. In this way, it is possible to read Stead's novels as the work of a liberal individualist, or an unconscious feminist, despite her apparent communism.

Stead did not publish the kind of literary criticism that would help us reconcile her practice as a novelist with her political commitment. Her most important public comment on her art is probably the notes for her speech to the League of American Writers' Congress in June 1939, entitled "Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel," where she argues for a "novel of strife" that offers multiple viewpoints rather than a thesis, leaving readers to make their own conclusions (Geering and Segerberg 198).

Certainly, she could not be called a literary critic on the basis of her published reviews. She wrote half a dozen reviews for the communist journal *New Masses* in the 1930s and early 1940s, two for the *New York Times Review of Books* in 1946, several for *Friendship*, the magazine of the Australia-Soviet Friendship Society in the late 1950s, and one for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1954. Ann Blake points out that Stead wrote only one review for the *Times Literary Supplement* probably because her charge that the *Sewanee Review* was a semi-official "organ of American intellectualism" distributed by the Ford Foundation stimulated some bitter correspondence from America (32). On this matter, Stead's views were certainly in accord with fellow-communists.

Hazel Rowley sees Stead's reviews for communist journals as exercises in submission to Party opinion, suggesting, for example, that her first response to Boris Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago* was positive, but that she "dutifully" modified this to align with an accepted communist position when she reviewed the novel as "anti-socialist propaganda" for *Friendship* (Rowley 423–24). There are at least four drafts of this review among Stead's papers in the National Library of Australia, and it is clear that, though she recognized Pasternak's poetic abilities from the start, she shared the perception of most communists (for example, Katharine Susannah Prichard) that the novel was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1958 as a Cold War propaganda exercise (NLA MS 4967, Box 7, Folder 46; Prichard and Shadbolt 30–32). It would be extraordinary for a reviewer in a communist journal not to say so.

Her papers in the National Library reveal Stead as a careful reviewer, conscientiously researching the background to the books she reviewed, and struggling to adhere to the severe word-limits. But most of her literary opinions survive in letters or in the copious notes among her manuscripts. These are the opinions of a writer, and, except where they are written to the author in question, they do not show signs of any obligation to balance. Rowley gives a representative example when she cites Stead's opinion of Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976):

He is a devoted noble soul, etc. but he is trying to spread altar-juice all over Australia's dark and bloody history hoping that up will come lilies (of the soul), whereas it was those very Anglicans he admires so much who created the crime, the penal system, the brutal floggings etc. [. . .] A lot of hard work and honest craftsmanship has gone into this hardwon bilge. (517–18)

Rowley comments: "Scathing though she was, she had completely misunderstood White's intention. It was exactly the sort of opinion, hotly defended, that used to madden Stead's friends." Given the context of Stead's opinion—a letter to her agent and friend, Cyril Abels—it is surely more interesting as an indication of Stead's way of reading than as an attempt at objective assessment of *A Fringe of Leaves*. We can see it as evidence of Stead's continued interest in history as shifting forces of power, so that, even in such a throwaway comment, Stead, the Marxist, sought a political reading of the historical background to White's novel.

Stead was not a critical theorist but rather a reader interested in the craft and dynamics of a novel. She took note of the dull parts of the books she read, and she recognized their appeal even when she disapproved of their politics or sentimentality. Almost all of her typed notes on books begin with a plot outline (she was particularly interested in finding archetypal plots), then note any stylistic problems and those elements in the work she sees as powerful. An interesting example is her response to Thea Astley's *A Boatload of Homefolk* (1968)—apparently

she read this novel because its blurb claimed that Astley was the best Australian woman writer since Christina Stead. Stead found the novel:

vigorous, slapdash but strong sound and light effects, strange pursuit of some aging characters, so that word old or emphasis on repulsiveness of age appears in every line [. . .] Miss Verna Paradise, ridiculously overpainted, “the wolf in her loins” etc. Really shameful, but no doubt this violence part of the writer’s personality.

She concludes, “It’s good magazine writing, impressive in externals: sometimes style marred by involved cultist eloquence. She attacks and blows to pieces the unfortunate among her characters like the hurricane itself” (NLA MS 4967, Box 7, Folder 47).

In her personal notes, Stead could call Saul Bellow a “verbomaniac” and complain that the author was “too much with us” in a John Updike novel (Box 7, Folder 49). These are the opinions of a reader who resists an author’s manipulation, and a writer who cannot abide clichés. Nevertheless, she responds to passion and even to “sincerity.”

The most sustained evidence for Stead’s approach to the novel is her working notes for the Workshop in the Novel she taught as an extramural course at New York University in the 1940s. These notes provide an insight into how Stead approached the writing task, and how she saw the novel as a genre in the years towards the end of the war. They also give some clues to the way Stead could function as both a committed Marxist and an open-minded writer. They help, too, in placing Stead in an international mid-twentieth-century context, rather than limiting our perspective to her position as an Australian writer, or as a woman/feminist writer.

Stead taught this course in two consecutive terms, Fall 1943 and Spring 1944, and again in 1946 (Rowley 315). The manuscript notes in the National Library consist of several ring-bound notebooks, broken apart for typing (Box 11, Folder 84). They seem to be incomplete and it is likely that Stead revised some of the classes when she began work on the second course. Initially, it seems that she planned the twelve classes under the following headings:

1. Choice of subject, finding themes.
2. Making a Start. Schemes and plans. The “message” (Read, quote starts of authors).
3. Kinds of novels (odyssey, picaresque, historical, autobiog. biog. many-charactered, three-charactered, etc.) Discuss epoch, local

(town-country) conditions of each: kinds of characters in each and subject suited to each, also temperament of author—(journals, notebooks, use in novels) What did you do as a child? (“People who hate me”).

4. Characters, Character-Study. Where to get characters—use those you know best: how to study those you know [. . .] Kinds of character, protagonist, antagonist, third-party, backchat characters, traditional etc.

5. Characters, Character-Study. Animating the characters [. . .] you must yourself be an actor (or experimenter) to some extent.

6. Composition. Various kinds of writing needed: scenes, conversation, fine writing, statement, how reading influences your language. *Forces* that build, author’s temperament, characters, “I will.”

7. Composition. Construction of the scene, of dialogue of drama. Sources (Dickens’ source in stenography).

8. (Or insert before) The Hero. The use of Extras (the masses, the crowd) Read books on stage-management.

9. Colour, Personality of the novel. Analysis of novels, *Moby Dick*, *Green Mansions* “colour novels” etc.

10. Novel of Social Criticism, Political novel, Novel of Reportage and other modern forms, Attitude of novelist towards his society.

11. Novelist’s attitude towards himself: the “prison of the self.” Novelist’s personal problems.

12. Study of Critics, Journals, the like.

Stead seems to have revised these headings as she went, replacing the class on The Hero with another class on Character, assigning Dialogue to class 9, and devoting classes 10 and 11 to Composition and Style. There is no record of the original class 10 notes with their intriguing reference to the political novel and the attitude of the novelist towards society. Notes for the class on the Hero, undoubtedly based on Ralph Fox’s ideas, are also missing.

In the first class Stead planned to talk to her students about the impulse to write, suggesting that “to express something” was not enough, but that writing needed “to combat something,” as well as “to shape something” and “to express self and others.” She noted that “to make money” was “the poorest and worst from any point of view.” She typed out a long quotation from the Southern United States novelist, Ellen Glasgow, to illustrate the desire to “combat something” as the starting point for the novel (Glasgow claims to have been driven by a desire to combat the sentimentality of novels about the South). This note is then crossed out in favour of Wordsworth’s tract on the Convention of Cintra, quoting it from Ralph Fox’s *The Novel and the People* to illustrate the way that protest is the source of art (Fox 157).

Stead adds that the combination of revolt and the writer’s “interpretation of life” “always end in creation—but first is necessary an analysis of the problem that first attracted attention, of your own small society, and even of yourself chiefly in relation to that society.” She supports this by quoting from *The Hollow Men*, a book written by the American communist activist, Mike Gold: “Flaubert’s mortal disgust with humanity and contempt for politics was in itself a terrific political gesture. His writing was inspired by his personal revolt” (13). Thus Gold gives a rather broad definition of the political gesture, one that suggests that a communist can find ways to encompass any admired writer as politically sympathetic. Unlike Gold’s contemporaries, Flaubert did not have the option of joining the Party and writing proletarian novels.

Fox’s and Gold’s books were overtly communist, and Stead filtered their ideas, so that the word “communist” never appears in her notes. At the same time, Gold’s book makes no claims to teach the art of writing; it is a polemical literary history and attack on the “literary renegades” who have abandoned the Left with the beginning of the Second World War. The book is subtitled, “The Great Tradition: Can the Literary Renegades Destroy It? A Timely Comment on American Literary Trends and Figures Between Two World Wars.” Gold’s Great Tradition is the proletarian American novel of the 1930s, exemplified by Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). He uses “renegade” in the same sense that Stead was to use it as the working title for *I’m Dying Laughing*—for writers, like Dos Passos (and, later, Emily Wilkes/Ruth McKenney) who abandoned the Party.

For her second class, Stead compiled a list of novels that she thought her students should have read. It is firmly based on the European naturalist tradition of the nineteenth century, including Zola, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Proust and Hardy. Novels that are less known today, such as Charles De Coster’s *Tyl Eulenspiegel*, or W. H. Hudson’s *Green Mansions*, are frequently referenced in Stead’s notes. While she does not include *Jake Home*, a novel she admired by Ruth McKenney (the model for Emily Wilkes in *I’m Dying Laughing*), she does reference it in the course notes as an example of the powerful use of direct political material. A second list of books

about the problems of women's lives—possibly added because several students, as well as the teacher, were writing on this topic—shows how European Stead's literary reading (often in the original French) had been, including works by Ibsen, Chekhov, Diderot, Strindberg, Marie Bashkirtseff and the Goncourt brothers. At the same time, her list does include most of the novels praised by Fox in *The Novel and the People* (though he attacks both Joyce and Proust as reactionaries).

In her notes, Stead advised her students to examine their own prejudices and moral attitudes, and she gave them a long list (alphabetically from A to R) of sources of subjects for novels (scrapbook, real persons in daily life, personal experiences, the classics, police and law records and so on). She comments in detail on Works of Propaganda (F in the alphabetical list of subject sources):

A writer will perhaps wish to use his talent to put forward in acceptable form his social or religious beliefs. This is also good form or organization for he has then only to go to his own people to get his characters, and he has a firm and comparatively eternal [. . .] standpoint, which will give firmness to his writing and depth to his perception.

She goes on to cite the example of the French writer Georges Bernanos as a Catholic writer who believes in evil and is embroiled in contradiction as a result:

Nevertheless, this writer has great power he can describe for pages states of mind which have the compulsion of delirious fancies and his figures are not what we call superhuman in literature that is, all too human, personages with the intensities of will, vice and frailty which we encounter in our personal loves and quarrels; This intensity is only encountered I believe when the faith of the writer is not only completely absorbed by him but also has taken on his own personal interpretation.

This seems like a paraphrase of Engels on the need for the novelist to absorb his beliefs rather than parade them (Becker 483–5) though Stead deliberately takes a Catholic rather than Marxist novelist as her model. Stead's commitment to the "novel of strife" is evident in the way that "power" and "intensity" are terms of commendation for her.

Even in this first lesson, Stead's notes break into her list of subject sources (M. Proverbs, Sayings) to write:

If you are passionately interested in character above all, you will collect your characters round you, live with them, not only in your

heart and mind but actually in life, as much as possible, call them up on the telephone, lead more of a closet life; almost in a phalanstery of characters [. . .]

In the first class on character Stead expanded on this, offering her students:

A golden rule: always draw from a model: keep sketches, keep notes mental or otherwise of people who will serve as models. Do not be ashamed to ring up a model, you can tell him (or not) as you please. [. . .] Characters live within you, to a certain extent. When they are living, use them. If you are “haunted” by a certain person, use that person.

Stead declared that “character is the secret of the novel, remember people come from certain classes [added insert: sex] [. . .] they have jobs and passions. What are they?”

Stead’s consistent use of her friends as the source of her characters meant that she lost some of them, and she has been portrayed as an angry and even vindictive person in the biographies. Yet this kind of advice suggests that she might be better seen as an artist who worked from life as a conscious method, even though that might mean the sacrifice of life for art. Many of her comments on friends support the view that Stead lived inside the fictions she was making, even when with friends and relatives who were also her characters.

Stead went to “her own people” to get her characters; as a Marxist, she went to Marxists—Ruth Blake for Letty Fox, Anne Dooley for Nellie Cotter, Ruth McKenney and Richard Bransten for Emily Wilkes and Stephen Howard. This was not the outpouring of a vengeful personality; she saw this as a way to express her own Marxism. As indicated in her comments on George Bernanos, she focussed intently on Marxists like Nellie Cotter and Emily Wilkes in order to draw out the contradictions and paradoxes in their positions. For Stead, this was a form of Marxist art.

“One other important source” for subjects (R marked with a tick against it) was the neglected areas of life, the “tabous and silences”:

What is passed over in silence for reasons of various tabous? “Can I speak about it?” “Is there a good pressing reason for speaking about it?” Am I muckraking or have I a superior purpose?

What are the leading new or present types, and situations which are handled badly or without due thought? (e.g. marriage situation, still treated as if monogamous marriage was the rule. Without praise or

condemnation, it must have brought some amazing changes in our social relations. To write short stories about the sufferings and complaints of one party or the other is NOT a treatment of this subject;

Yet what richer than the materials on this subject? Another type untreated—the revolutionary. The new status of women. etc.

At this point in Stead's life, *For Love Alone* (1944) was in the process of publication and she had drafted *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946)—two novels that address the taboo of women's sexual desire and promiscuity. *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (1948) would examine both sexually predatory behaviour and the unpatriotic subject of profiteering in New York during the war. These notes suggest that Stead had chosen these subjects as part of a considered project to address the changing social position of women and its influence on their sexual behaviour.

In the class on Situation, Stead used Georges Polti's *The Thirty-six Dramatic Situations*—evidence, again, of her interest in archetypal models for fiction—and advised students that plot derives from the conflict between characters. She told them to read plays and to list their own characters and setting before imagining these characters in action. She suggests that the writer imagine each character thinking "I will" in order to see the way each is likely to move and respond to others.

In the list of critical references for the students at the end of the course, she includes Constantin Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*, Lajos Egri's *How to Write a Play* and George Pierce Baker's *Dramatic Technique*. Stanislavski was particularly important to Stead's writing. He demanded that his actors think their way into the parts they were playing, giving full consideration to the social situations and emotions of their characters. This later became bowdlerized as The Method by American actors, such as Lee Strasberg, with an emphasis on finding the emotional essence of each character, rather than the full range of social elements. In contrast, Stead's use of Stanislavski emphasises the need to place each character in their social situation, including class and gender, as part of a Marxist analysis.

Through all her practical advice, Stead stressed the need for students to understand their own position in relation to their characters, and their characters' positions in relation to the social world. She asked the students to write out their proposition before they began their novels—that is, the central idea "that the author believes," telling them that "if he proves it in his own terms, he is likely to have a good book, even if it does not accord with current philosophy or current conditions."

Clearly, in Stead's eyes, the proletarian novel had become a cliché. Among her notes is a long list (later crossed out) of the themes she found in contemporary American fiction: "Boss-exposure (muckraking): dignitary exposure: popular hero-exposure [. . .] girl sells sex to fill stomach standby [. . .] fight and strike stories, hardluck, relief of hardluck." She was critical of these standards of the social realist

novel, clearly aware that this kind of fiction had become a form of cliché by the 1940s.

Stead also talked about various organizational plans for novel projects, such as those of Zola, Balzac, Sinclair Lewis and John Galsworthy. It seems she saw such a plan as a “total inclusion system”:

similar in outward affairs to the total recall or “stream of consciousness” method in the single life, unwilling to caricature, even to characterise, some modern writers include everything that is supposed to pass through a person’s mind and the smallest things are supposed to have great meaning [. . .] It shows a lack of firmness, of experience and a fear in a changing world (Joyce, Proust, even Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos) But the writer cannot work satisfactorily without the power and desire to select.

So Stead (like Fox and Gold) was ready to criticize these great modernists for their indiscriminate detail. When she discussed dialogue, Stead offered a range of examples, criticizing Hemingway’s minimalism, in particular, as dull.

When *Letty Fox: Her Luck* was published in 1946 it was attacked by reviewers in the communist press for not having a good, heroic communist character (Rowley 332). By then, the dogmatic communist literary models of socialist realism had caught up with Stead and other Left writers. A. A. Zhdanov’s 1934 speech to the First All Soviet Congress of Writers on socialist realism eventually led to rigid interpretations of the artist’s role by Party enthusiasts in the West. Stead’s attitude to such dogmatism is implied in Nellie Cotter’s patronizing advice to Caroline in *Cotters’ England*:

Writing’s not just a case of self-expression or conscience clearing. The muckrakers did their work. Now we want something constructive. You see, sweetheart, just to photograph a refuse yard with its rats, that wouldn’t help the workers one tiny little bit. It would only be glorifying your own emotions. (37)

And it appears in Emily Wilkes’s complaint in *I’m Dying Laughing* about the hypocritical puritanism of the Party which refuses to countenance any sexual nonconformism in proletarian characters:

But the Party and you, too, Godfrey, and all the rest of you here, you don’t like my serious writing which is about and for the working class because each worker and each Party member shall be the husband of one wife. Thus saith Holy Writ. (79)

While Emily ends as the ultimate Literary Renegade freed from the “narrow petty mumbo-jumbo orthodox views and straitjacket childish loyalties” of communism (382), Stead sympathizes with her early desire to write a truly Marxist novel, rather than the homely comedy that has made her reputation. It is not only that Emily’s *Johnny Appleseed* parallels McKenney’s *Jake Home* (which Stead admired)—Emily’s depiction of wayward sexuality mirrors Stead’s own interests. Clearly, Stead understood the complexity of her own position, seeking to remain loyal to a Party whose functionaries refused the analysis she saw as the basis for the writer’s art.

It is easy for critics to be misled by crude socialist realist formulations and assume that communist writing is, by definition, simple-minded propaganda. Stead could never be accused of such simplicities, yet her method, as revealed in these notes, suggests that her approach was scientifically Marxist. She wrote from life, as part of this Marxist project, analysing in detail the historical, social and sexual circumstances of her characters. She collected archetypal plots and situations, and she adopted methodical approaches to art from dramatic theorists such as Stanislavski. Despite the biographical insistence that her writing “used” real models, she transformed these models by a conscious process, selecting and shaping their lives to draw out the ironies of her characters’ positions. “Uses of the Many-Charactered Novel” offers her most succinct statement of this logic:

this form of novel is all a sidelong critique and mostly ironic. In the man-to-fate-to-man, or man-to-nature novel, the insoluble problems of life are stated in one or two simple moral propositions and from them are resolved. Here, it is not easy to take sides: the reader must draw his own conclusions from the diverse material, as from life itself. The author is not impartial, but not minatory, either.

This form of novel is noticeably philosophic. It cannot be as much an unconscious product as some of the great autobiographic, one or two character novels have been: it is a novel of strife, a world without whose only glimmer is in some philosophic view. Yet, on account of its same vast entertainment possibilities, it easily escapes the accusation of “thesis,” the wicket of the wicked critic. (Geering and Segerberg 198)

Stead had neither the interest nor the time to become a Marxist literary theorist, but her comments on novel-writing show that her writing process was fully considered and self-aware. Embedded in her lesson plans, in her letters and notes, and expressed in her novels, is a conscious development of Engels’s foundational advice to the Marxist writer—to “shatter the optimism of the bourgeois world” by describing the real relations in that world and refusing “conventional illusions”

about them (Becker 483). In Stead's practice this meant the analysis of characters, particularly Marxists living in the capitalist West, seeking out all the hypocrisies and conflict in their words and actions.

Of course, Stead's critique of her Marxist characters may look like an attack on Marxism itself. *I'm Dying Laughing*, in particular, follows closely both Emily's commitment to the Left among the hypocrites of Hollywood, and her extravagant decline as a rapacious American capitalist among the poverty-stricken post-war Europeans. Stead's intimate interest in her characters and the ironies of their commitments moves beyond any rigid formulation. Nevertheless, her notes confirm her conviction that the novel was about character, analysed in the social and class terms of Marxism, and she sought unconventional or hidden subjects as part of her desire to combat the complacent assumptions of capitalist society. Her "novels of strife" are far from the socialist realist conventions associated with the communist novel, but they may have shown the way to a more sophisticated form of Marxist art.

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