

Christina Stead's Satire and the Public Sphere

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Christina Stead's fiction has been celebrated for its naturalism, narrative power, political intensity, dramatic strength and verbal mastery. Yet one striking feature of Stead's work that has passed largely unnoticed is its satirical vigour. Stead wrote powerful satire and she marvelled at the satirical impulse in the people around her. Stead describes the eccentric anarchist, Philip Christy in *The People with the Dogs*, as a man with a 'grandly indifferent soul ... gifted with the kind of penetration which is called cynical, satirical; in fact he was unscrupulously sharp and instant in his judgments' (261). Stead identified with this kind of sensibility – she was attracted to the role of the satirist as an intelligent and judicious sceptic. On first visiting the United States in 1935, Stead called it 'the land of boundless importunity' ('Scramble' 22). In 1941, when she was writing *Letty Fox: Her Luck*, a satire on sexual politics in America, she wrote to her partner Bill Blake declaring: 'I feel splendid, nastier and more Stead-ish each day' (qtd in Rowley 280). Like Lizzy Bennett, Stead was 'a connoisseur of human folly'. She even managed a satirical quip on her deathbed. Discovering that she was to be given an honorary doctorate just as she lay dying made her laugh. Looking up at her friend, academic Ron Geering, she said with a wry smile 'they're making me one of you' (qtd in Williams 317). But Stead did not write the way she did because she enjoyed feeling nasty or because she was bitter or perverse – in spite of what Hazel Rowley suggests in her biography. Christina Stead adopted satire in order to document her own historical period and to comment on the public sphere. In this paper I would like to talk about how Stead used the techniques of the satirist to engage with the public sphere. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which Stead's satirical novels form an historical project.

How *did* Stead use satire to interpret history? Firstly, Stead's characters (mostly based on her friends) are historically representative; secondly, through fantastic allegory and excessive language Stead captured the mood and spirit of her own period; and thirdly, Stead's fiction writing is packed with historical allusion and fact, so that we do not need to do any further reading in order to understand her commentary on her times.

The word 'satire' dates from the sixteenth century and comes from the Latin word 'satira, a later form of satura, which means "medley"'. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* explains that satura in this case is elliptical for 'lanx satura, 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' (867). 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 (Preminger 738). 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. More vituperative than those by Horace, Juvenal's satires rail with indignation and deliver a graphic rhetorical attack on the particular vices of Rome in Juvenal's time. Australia's great contemporary satirist, David Foster, links the word satire with 'satur' which means full or replete, having the same root as the word 'saturate' (63).

One of the most compelling aspects of Stead's fiction is its fullness and variety, its excessive richness of language, ideas and emotions. Thus the definition of satire 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' (243). In descriptive prose, direct speech and in free indirect discourse Stead revels in excess. For example in *Cotters' England* we are treated to this:

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)

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 and vitriolic way.

At the literal level, Stead's works deal with overeating, gross self-starvation, insatiable lust and rampant materialism. Indeed Stead's satire, recalling Sterne and Rabelais, focuses on the sexual and gustatory rather than the excremental. But the excessive behaviour of Stead's characters is also revealed through the endless verbal excess to which they subject all who come into their orbit. It is in Stead's portrayal of monstrous talkers that her distinctive satirical style emerges. As Auden states, 'The commonest object of satire is a monomaniac' (202). Via the excesses of her characters, Stead portrays the excesses of her period. I'd like to comment on

how Stead does this in three of her post-war novels.

In her Juvenalian satire, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (1948), Stead denounces folly and the evils of the free market. Robbie Grant is a rapacious war profiteer and an insatiable cad. Grant, like many he represents, is exultant when the Japanese declare war on the US, because of the opportunities for illegal selling at home and abroad. As Stead puts it in the novel, 'Everyone went out handshaking and deploring with the ear cocked for the moneyminting half-word' (52); 'Everyone scooped greedily in the great cream pot of war' (228).

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* 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 Stead's earlier novel *House of All Nations* (1938) and in her later satires, her analysis depends on extravagant distortion and excess. While the excesses of Stead's satire in this novel distance it from conventional history writing, the crudeness of the characters and the sustained excess of the novel convey the monstrosities of the period with frightening clarity.

In *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* Stead relentlessly denounces the corrupt, self-seeking and dangerous behaviour of Grant's 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. Stead's stance on vice and folly is much more analytical than a moralistic stance could be. The point of the satire is not simply to expose vice and folly, but also to examine 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 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 Stead's husband, Bill Blake, uses in his work *Understanding the Americans*, that American culture was 'the only culture that had gone from barbarism to decadence without the intervening stage of civilization' (51). Later in the story in a conversation between Grant's son and one of Grant's would-be mistresses and business cronies, Olivia Wright ('Livy') echoes the narrator's open scorn:

Livy cried out, 'Your old man likes them corrupt, too. He's corrupt himself. Why should he have told you all that? Doesn't he introduce you all round, to all these pills and pikers, and these pickpockets he's with day and night? ... I see through that bully-boy, though he's not transparent ... [sic] Very well, I'll get up early in the morning - I'll buy a house, I'll wear perfume on my handkerchiefs, I'll -'

She howled with laughter, 'I won't wash his feet!' she shouted. People in the soft, sophisticated, and depraved mid-Manhattan set which at that moment filled the bar turned, and turned back. (216)

Stead establishes midtown 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 narrowminded 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 (Manning 103). 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 all 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 Pommes 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)

In her next novel, an Horatian satire, *The People with the Dogs* (1952), Stead presents a decaying family obsessed with their pet dogs. Through Robbie Grant Stead denounced all that was wrong with American capitalism. In this work Stead 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. This novel has been described as Stead's most amiable and genially ironic work. The novel focuses on a decaying family and particularly on the lazy, 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.

Stead's portrayal of this quirky, liberal family provides a focus for her analysis of American isolationism. Whilst Robbie Grant in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* embodies American economic aggression, Edward Massine represents American stagnation, resulting from excessive materialism, isolation and cultural decay. Edward's

passivity reflects the state of emasculated socialism in American politics during and after the War. Stead makes her allegorical purpose explicit by calling the decaying family seat in the Catskill Mountains, 'Whitehouse'.

The portrayal of this 'Cherry Orchard' family, as Stead called them in a letter to Bill Blake (qtd in Rowley 268), is similar to Chekhov's portrayal of the Russian gentry. That the title calls to mind Chekhov's 'The Lady with the Dog' makes explicit 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. 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 Dogs* 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.

Stead's satires, *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *The People with the Dogs*, also contain farcical episodes. 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 in a trolley car accident trying to rescue her, 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.

What I am proposing is that Stead's project was to present an explicit satirical history of her own time. Each of her satirical novels vigorously demonstrates Hayden White's idea that 'the difference between an historical and fictional account of the world is formal not substantive' (58). Indeed some of the earliest drafts of *I'm Dying Laughing*, held in the National Library of Australia contain slabs of factual notes, interspersed with fictional narrative, revealing a gradual shift from historical notes and commentary to fictional prose drafts. Some of this early material was cut from the manuscript and was replaced with more interesting dialogue. But a glance at any of the extensive background work demonstrates Stead's determination with regard 'to getting the book right'. In the published text Stead finds a balance between telling history and giving it life through the emotions of its representatives. Stead scatters various encapsulating paragraphs throughout the text, providing commentary on historical phenomena. For example in *I'm Dying Laughing*:

They had come to a starved and beaten continent, bravely expecting the worst. They were living, except for the shortages of milk and coal, better than they had done at home.

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. Vittorio, full of hope, had felt strongly, until April 18, that the people would win in his country. 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)

All Stead's main characters are historically representative and the reader is given clear cues to see them this way. In Stead's posthumously published satire, *I'm Dying Laughing* (1986), we are never in doubt as to Emily Howard's status as a representative of contemporary America. Comparing herself with the Statue of Liberty, Emily declares herself to be 'Mrs MidWest America herself' (6). Through this central character, Stead comments on the demise of the American left. Emily is based on Stead's good friend, Ruth McKenney, a writer and renegade communist. Stead's diaries held in the National Library of Australia reflect her fascination with Ruth McKenney, referred to in the diaries as Emily or sometimes EE. Also amongst Stead's papers are several thick folders of historical research for the novel, including a diary-style document for 1949, outlining what happened in the Committee hearings of communists every day of the year.

I'm Dying Laughing is Stead's most explicit satirical history. It is her most extravagant portrait of Cold War manners, the unravelling of the American left and the farcical workings of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Stead makes Emily representative of the US. In Stead's words, Emily is 'Henrietta Smith, the stamp of the nation' ('Diary' 9.1.51). Stead was fascinated with what she called in her diary 'the contemporary phenomenon of the "Renegade, Mr. and Mrs"' and the fact that these characters are in Stead's words, 'pure American' ('Diary' 16.1.51).

Early in the story, Emily and her husband Stephen, a self-confessed 'radical dandy', are betrayed by their friends in the Hollywood branch of the Communist Party. They arrive at a dinner party only to be hauled over the coals for their regrettable political views, in particular their references to pro-Roosevelt policies as 'reformist illusions'. The chapter entitled 'The Straightening Out', presents their 'trial' after dinner as fatuous, cruel and menacing. While Stead's immediate targets are the insipid communists of Hollywood, the allusion to the Washington hearings going on at the time of writing is unmistakable. 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).

Later on in the novel, Emily and Stephen name names in order to save their American passports and their income. But it is not the fact that they name names that Stead deplores in the satire. In fact the posturing and self-aggrandising of the 'parlour pinks', represented by the Hollywood Communists comes in for the most Juvenalian contempt in the novel. However the extent to which Emily and Stephen react to their own 'fall' is also mocked by the text as sheer histrionics. Yet Stead shows that their absurd over-reaction is a symptom of the times. The spectacle that the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings provided is linked with the fact that many of the 'star' witnesses emanated from Hollywood.

Lillian Hellman's recollections of the period reinforce Stead's comic depiction of the theatrical excesses of the hearings. Hellman was one famous witness who defied the Committee. She says:

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. (qtd in Bryer 61)

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. According to Hellman, the use of theatre people to testify at the hearings titillated the American audience, as virtually unknown politicians and I quote 'could get their names in the papers every day by using more famous people than they were' as well as playing on collective fear of Russia (qtd in Bryer 250). 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', to use Hellman's expression, emerges by implication in Stead's satire. According to Hellman, the Committee wished to hear drama and these people supplied it. Stead's depiction of the Howards' 'straightening out' is therefore a perfect unmasking of the masquerade of the HUAC hearings, as well as the cowardice of American communists at the time.

Christina Stead's comic portrayal of the excesses of American political culture is crafted through the allegorical connection between Emily and the United States itself. In its reflections on the excesses of national ideology and the failure of the American left, *I'm Dying Laughing* presents a powerful satirical vision of a culture in decline. Like Stead's other satirical novels it offers a significant commentary on the public sphere.

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