

**WAKERS AND SLEEPERS: THE DYNAMICS OF
CHRISTINA STEAD'S 'DRAMA OF THE PERSON'**

by

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To my father
and the memory of my mother.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any higher degree or graduate diploma in any tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This thesis begins with an introductory survey of the various influences which shaped Christina Stead's vision of life and her interest in drama is identified as an important aspect influencing her work. Her kinship with Balzac, Henry James and others in the European tradition of the dramatic novel is evident. Her concerns as a dramatic novelist are then examined briefly and some of the criticisms of her ability to create character successfully are dealt with.

From the outset, Stead uses both drama and dream as metaphors through which to express the illusory quality of life. The thesis demonstrates that in many ways these terms become interchangeable. It explores Stead's use of myth and legend and of the drama and fiction of the past to reinforce her conception of the theatricality of her characters and their lives.

The emphasis of her 'drama of the person' is upon character rather than plot. Since she sees life as drama, a struggle, the forms of her novels reflect the flux or process of her characters' lives as they struggle to realise their dreams. Dialectic, manifested in character, imagery, style and theme, operates over the corpus as well as within each individual novel, contributing to the impression of flux or dynamic movement that is essential to drama.

In keeping with Stead's use of the metaphor of life as dream or drama, her characters fall into the categories of 'wakers' and 'sleepers' according to the strength of their will to direct their lives. The 'wakers' are those strong-willed characters whose aspirations are brought to fulfilment as they actively shape and direct their lives. Their dramas are marked by a narrative movement from entrapment towards their ultimate destiny. The 'sleepers' are those characters whose lives are marked by the aimlessness of inertia as they fail to break free

from the forces of stasis and they succumb as victims of fate. A consistent pattern of imagery associated with these different categories augments the psychological dramas of the characters.

Stead's method of characterisation is a process of unmasking as each aspect of the multi-faceted *personae* in her dramas is revealed in the different roles they enact. Speech, in dramatic monologues and dialogue, exhibits a strong theatrical bias. Her characters are represented as actors in their plays of life and their actions, speech and gesture accord with this.

Stead's dramatic method combines detached naturalistic observation of and close engagement with her characters and their situations. Her presentation allows her characters to expose themselves directly in their ironic predicaments. In using this method, Stead has much in common with the dramatist.

The principles of her 'drama of the person' operate throughout the novels making her work an ongoing drama. The major novels are examined, for the most part chronologically, as a demonstration of this ongoing drama.

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Thesis Material Already Published:

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CHAPTER ONE

'Introduction and Background'

'Do you ever stop and look at trees and shadows, Edward, or do you only think of your family all the time? Have you any of the mystic in you?' He had at first been puzzled by this because Margot was not a mystic. Once, she had said, 'You, I am sure would only write works of imagination, that is all you have in you. I prefer books of analysis where the writer explains a people's motives. You never understand anyone that I can see. That is the weakness of living all your life in one setting. You get shortsighted.'

She knew Edward was shortsighted. She said on one occasion, 'On the benches in this park, what do you see?'

'I see a sort of . . . huddled masses, blocked-out shapes.'

'While I see every detail, what they are wearing, and even their characters from this distance.'

She had a bitter idea of people. What she meant by a work of imagination was an adventure story.

Christina Stead, *The People With the Dogs*.¹

¹ *The People With the Dogs* (Boston, 1952; rpt. London: Virago Press, 1981), pp. 80-81.

i. 'Introduction'

Close scrutiny of the above passage from *The People With the Dogs* provides some insights into the background or tradition of writing in which Christina Stead's dramatic novels can be placed. Margot, the character speaking to Edward, refers to two kinds of novels, 'books of analysis' and 'works of imagination'. The first kind appears to be a translation of *roman d'analyse*, the term used by Guy de Maupassant in his preface to *Pierre et Jean* to describe the kind of novel whose aim was close psychological analysis of characters. The modern tradition of the psychological novel flowed from the early French Realists, especially the *cercle Flaubert* which included Edmond de Goncourt, Turgenev, Emile Zola, Alphonse Daudet and Guy de Maupassant. Stead has claimed that she followed Maupassant as a master of style and his influence can be seen in the particular kind of attention to detail which Stead shares with Maupassant.² The second kind of novel mentioned by Margot, the vague, all-encompassing category of 'works of imagination', brings to mind a much later writer in the tradition of the psychological novel, who himself owed much to the French Realists and Naturalists, Henry James. James dismisses arbitrary and prescriptive definitions of the novel by saying that the only meaningful distinction between novels is that there are bad ones and good ones. The narrator's enigmatic statement of Margot's equation of 'works of imagination' and 'adventure stories' recalls the question asked by James in his essay 'The Art of Fiction' — 'what is adventure?'.³ Stead would probably agree with James that there is as much 'adventure' in tracing the consciousness of a character as

² Christina Stead, in the entry under her name in *Twentieth Century Literature* edited by Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1942), p. 1329.

³ Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) in *The Portable Henry James Revised Edition* by Lyall H. Powers, 1968, Edited and introduced by Morton Dauwen Zabel (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 408-09.

there is in a work like Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Both Christina Stead and Henry James were admirers of Balzac and his literary heirs, Flaubert and Zola.

Although it may seem a radical comparison to make, Stead and James share certain characteristics of dramatic intention and of intensity in their treatment of character. Their interest in the psychological novel with its emphasis upon the detachment of the dramatic method may be due to the influence of the European Realists on both writers. A comparison of James and Stead is appropriate and relevant when we consider the 'dialectic intelligence' and the strong moral sense which control the work of both these writers.⁴

Margot is revealed in the short passage from *The People With the Dogs* as being no expert either on the complex subject of the imagination or on literature, but her exposure of Edward's shortsightedness does suggest that his imagination lies dormant since he is unable to see life in the impressions before him. However, if we agree with Margot that there is a direct connection between the quality of a writer's vision and the kind of novel written, then in reading Stead's novels we conclude that in Stead the imagination was highly developed. Stead's particular, profound and ironic vision is a synthesis of Margot's categories of analysis and imagination. The qualities of her vision make her contribution to Australian literature unique; in fact, her genius transcends the boundaries of the literature of her native country. She saw herself as an Australian-born citizen of the world, and it is as a truly great Australian writer endowed with the strength and far-sightedness of one who did not spend her life in one setting, that we should regard Stead.

The connection between vision and writing is the link between this chapter and my subsequent discussion of the selected novels. My research of Christina Stead's dramatic novels began with an investigation of her background to find out how her intense and unusual vision of life was formed.

⁴ Morton Dauwen Zabel uses the phrase 'dialectic intelligence' in his introduction to *The Portable Henry James*, p. 14.

Stead's fiction is complex and problematic to many readers: the contents of her novels are more like a tangled thicket, to use an image used by Stead herself to describe life, than a neat, well-trimmed, garden.⁵ In order to negotiate the tangle we need to find a strong thread of interest that links the apparently incompatible elements in her novels. The aim of this survey of different influences on Stead is to identify that strong thread.

Christina Stead begins her novels in the Balzacian manner by carefully piecing together the details of her characters' backgrounds. Her psychological analysis of character is grounded in a clear presentation of the family, the city, social, economic and political conditions – all those circumstances which help to define her characters and their lives. An understanding of their inner reality proceeds from the objective presentation of their external reality. Stead's analysis attends to the background details in order, it would seem paradoxically, to focus more sharply upon the character in the foreground. In her notes on 'The Workshop in the Novel', Stead emphasises the importance of such detail in, as she phrases it, '[serving] up your character alive':

All the things that affect a person, sex, age, race, birthplace, early work experiences, early sex experiences[,] traits, vanity, ambition – conditions [such as] lack of money, health, and so forth, forever – must be thought of by the author.⁶

This study of Stead's dramatic novels begins in a similar manner with a consideration of Christina Stead's own background, not to analyse her character, but to analyse the forces which shaped her vision and therefore her writing.

⁵ The image of the thicket is used by Catherine Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (Chapter 5) and by Nellie Cotter in *Cotters' England* (in the penultimate chapter). It is also recognisable in the overgrown orchard of *The Man Who Loved Children* and the chaotically growing hop vine in *The People With the Dogs*.

⁶ NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84, 'Workshop in the Novel', [Section on] Character. The reference to 'character alive' may be a reference to Ralph Fox, whose book, *The Novel and the People*, she recommends in a reading list on character in this folder.

In *Twentieth Century Authors*, Stead provides selective autobiographical details which she considered to have been significant in the early development of her career. Much of the information presented here comes from that source, supplemented by autobiographical information given by Stead in various interviews which she granted. The collection of Christina Stead's papers at the National Library of Australia (NLA MS 4967) is a valuable source of information for her views on writing and the composition of her many novels. In the absence of a Stead biography, her literary trustee and long-time friend, Ron Geering, has been a valuable source of information to me, helping to confirm impressions I had already formed of her and also providing new insights into her extraordinary character and life. Some references are also made to Stead's autobiographical novels in this chapter but these have been kept to a minimum in this general survey.

ii. 'Background'

Christina Ellen Stead was born in Rockdale, New South Wales, on July 17th, 1902, the daughter of David and Ellen Stead (nee Butters). After her mother died in 1904, her father remarried and Christina became the eldest in a large family. The two earliest influences upon her, stemming from her childhood experience, are science and literature. These two influences seem to account for the duality which is characteristic of Stead's vision and as this chapter proceeds, it will become clear that dualism is a major factor informing her work.

Under the influence of her naturalist father, who was employed as an ichthyologist by the State Fisheries Department, her childhood consisted of 'fish, natural history, Spencer, Darwin, Huxley, love of the sea . . . and the advancement of man'.⁷ Her father wanted her to become a scientist. In an interview with Joan Lidoff, Stead explains:

When I was very young, I used to get dragged to these terrible meetings, weekly or monthly meetings, of scientists, very honourable men and women, of course. But what repelled me, it's shameful of me, but it's true, is the women used to dress very plain: long plain skirts, their hair way back in a bun, and I couldn't stand it. Not for me! And as for the men, they were jawing all the time and I was too young to care what they were jawing. As I was the daughter of a *very great orator* I had enough of it already.⁸

Such experiences would certainly deter a young girl from choosing a career as a scientist, yet it would appear that science trained her to observe people and their lives objectively, a talent which Stead converts to excellent purpose in her novels. Her talents of observation and registration include the ability to record accurately the sound of her characters speaking and to sustain their voices in

⁷ Kunitz and Haycraft, p. 1329.

⁸ Christina Stead, in 'Interview with Christina Stead' by Joan Lidoff, Surbiton, England, 1973, in Lidoff, *Christina Stead* (New York: Frederick Ungar Press, 1982), pp. 182-83.

their invariably long speeches.

As well as the voices of scientists, there was another kind of voice which Stead listened to, and enjoyed, in her childhood. This was the voice of the story-teller, the spell-binder. Her grandfather, Samuel Stead, was a great story-teller and while he was alive 'the family was full of Dickens'.⁹

Evidently her grandfather's recitations and ham-acting helped bring alive the spirit of Dickens and the idiosyncratic voices of his characters. Stead acknowledges the influence of Dickens and calls him a 'very dramatic writer'.¹⁰ Her father, too, delighted her with stories, which, she recalled, fired her imagination and talked her awake, having the opposite effect to that intended.¹¹ Her own story-telling career began early. As she cared for the younger members of her family she told them fairytales from Andersen and Grimm as well as stories of her own.

Stead's scientific background and her passion for literature constituted two apparently contrary impulses in her youth: they provided her with a mixture of an objective and subjective appraisal of the world. Science and the natural world provided her with one source of wonder and helped to establish in her 'an interest in men and nature, a feeling that all were equal, the extinct monster, the coral insect, the black man and us, the birds and the fish';¹² while literature provided her with another.

From science she gained a knowledge of, and consequently a respect and admiration for, all forms of life and this emerges clearly in her interest in all types of people in the creation of her characters. In science she was able to

⁹ Lidoff interview, p. 203. See also Stead, 'A Waker and a Dreamer', *Overland*, 53 (1972), 33.

¹⁰ Lidoff interview, p. 203.

¹¹ Stead, 'Ocean of Story', *Australian Literary Studies*, 10 (1981), 181.

¹² Stead, 'Ocean of Story', p. 182.

discover the truths of the natural world which were no less strange than the 'truths' of literature. Science and literature fed her imagination which developed as a strong creative power enabling her to synthesise both influences in forming her penetrating vision of the human condition. Thus, we find the genesis of the combination of scientific analysis and potent imagination which characterises her work.

Stead's imagination takes her beyond the sense impressions of the external world to the hidden 'world' of fantasy, and both constitute equally important aspects of her reality. A product of this ability is Stead's superb irony. In revealing the fantasy lives of her characters, Stead exposes the discrepancy that often exists between the way her characters see themselves and how they are seen by others, and between the way they think they live and the life actually lived.¹³

In Stead's novels, imagination is a faculty which lies dormant in some of her characters, while in others, it is fertile, giving her characters a creative freedom from the emptiness and dulling repressions of life. She frequently establishes a dramatic contrast between the imaginative fantasy lives of her characters and their everyday experience. Imagination is certainly a factor which helps to intensify the lives of Stead's characters. It is the experience of Joseph Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, for example, that once his imagination is awakened, his life takes on a greater intensity than before. Fantasy and dream are the means to liberation for some of Stead's characters, who, like Joseph, wish to transform their lives, but for others, in whom fantasies contribute to a mania or sickness of the mind, they serve only to entrap characters within their own delusions.¹⁴

¹³ Jennifer McDonell, in 'Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*', *Southerly*, 44 (1984), observes this in the character of Sam Pollit, p. 395.

¹⁴ James Volant Baker, in his discussion of Coleridge's fancy and imagination, writes of 'the diseased condition' of either faculty leading to derangement or mania. (*The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination* [Louisiana: State University

Stead's autobiographical portraits of Teresa Hawkins and Louisa Pollit and information provided in other sources previously mentioned, show that she was a voracious reader. Teresa Hawkins read Louys' *Aphrodite*, Ovid's *Art of Love*, the works of Petronius, Aretino and the Marquis de Sade. Louisa Pollit, in *The Man Who Loved Children*, found literature a source of strength in helping to shape her dream of life. She appears to have been familiar with ancient Greek drama (as her play 'Tragos: Herpes Rom' testifies) and she certainly read *The Cenci* and other Romantic poetry, as well as composing the odes to Miss Aiden. Stead claims that George Lewes's biography of Goethe had a strong influence in forming her dream to go to university.¹⁵ She also adored Shelley.¹⁶

There is a strong representation of romantic literature among those works which Stead cites, including fairytales, legends, horror stories and weird tales of the supernatural – all of which help explain the strong presence of grotesque and gothic elements in her work. Tony Thomas, in his study of Stead's work, *'Nightmare World'*, provides a detailed survey of literary influences which he identifies as the sources of these elements.¹⁷ Joan Lidoff acknowledges the influence of grotesque elements in her definition of the style that she calls 'domestic gothic'.¹⁸ It is now generally recognised that both grotesque and gothic elements contribute to the distinctiveness of Stead's brand of psychological realism. If Stead sees some people as grotesque and uses the grotesque as part of her revelation of characters' fantasies and dreams, it is because she realises, like Balzac and Dickens, its potential in the representation of psychological drama. The use of all these elements (fairy tale, legendary,

Press, 1957], p. 128).

¹⁵ Stead, in Lidoff interview, p. 190.

¹⁶ Stead, in Rodney Wetherell's 'Interview with Christina Stead', transcript in *Australian Literary Studies*, 9 (1980), 446.

¹⁷ Anthony Paul Thomas, "Nightmare World": A Study in the Fiction of Christina Stead, Diss. University of Western Australia 1970, Ch. IV 'Sources', pp. 58–80.

¹⁸ Joan Lidoff, 'Domestic Gothic: The Imagery of Anger, Christina Stead's, *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *The Female Gothic* edited by Juliann E. Fleenor (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983), p. 111.

supernatural, grotesque and gothic) is not inconsistent with the realist tradition which was referred to earlier in this discussion, for, as George Lukács points out:

Balzac used the romantic element, the grotesque, the fantastic, the bizarre, the ugly, the ironically or sentimentiously exaggerated only in order to show up essential human and social relationships.¹⁹

This statement applies equally to Christina Stead who incorporates these elements to similar purpose in her novels and tales.

Stead's attraction to, and use of, these elements might be thought inconsistent with her scientific background, but such thinking is an absurdly reductive view of the scientific imagination. She also believed in the supernatural as a constant, though hidden, facet of life, claiming personal experience to support her belief.²⁰ This should be weighed with Stead's declaration: 'I was brought up by a naturalist, and I am a naturalist. I say what I see, [sic] and if you see what you see, you understand it'.²¹ As a naturalist with mystic inclinations, it may be concluded that she was engaged in 'a search for that deeper essence of reality that is hidden'.²² When she claims to say, that is, write, what she sees, we must take into account her extraordinary and dualistic vision of life.

Stead's extensive reading of scientific works included Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *The Voyage of the Beagle*, Cuvier's *The Animal Kingdom* and a variety of other books on natural science and psychology. Like the romantic literature she read, these books appealed to her strongly developed 'sense of

¹⁹ George Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (London: The Merlin Press, 1972), p. 94.

²⁰ Personal conversation with R. G. Geering, 14 June 1985.

²¹ Stead, in Wetherell interview, p. 441.

²² Lukács, pp. 83-84.

drama, and personality and psychology'.²³

Of the French authors whom she acknowledges, Balzac stands out as her favourite and as having the most pervasive influence. Speaking to Rodney Wetherell, Stead says:

I read all the French books in the Municipal Library in Sydney, and Balzac was one of my main discoveries. I loved him. Yes, and I still do. I think he's great.²⁴

The idea behind Balzac's *Human Comedy* was to present the drama of life, 'drama' here being used as a term to differentiate his work from the romances which preceded it. Like Balzac, Stead conceives of life as drama and presents the whole human personality in dramatic terms. Her vision includes not only an awareness of the external drama of events, but also the internal drama of character made manifest in action. In her delineation of character, Stead makes one a reflection of the other in a process which gives new meaning to E. M. Forster's term 'round character'. Stead's method of characterisation may be described as 'a drama rounding itself out'.²⁵ Terry Sturm calls her method 'new realism' because it

incorporates the naturalism of older modes, but transforms it into a new kind of realism that is primarily geared to the intensity of her characters' experience, rather than a simple 'documentation' of environment.²⁶

In calling Stead's method 'new realism', Sturm overlooks the long tradition of the realistic novel. In English fiction we have the Richardson stream of psychological realism, while in the tradition of the French novel,

²³ Stead, Wetherell interview, p. 446.

²⁴ Stead, Wetherell interview, p. 446.

²⁵ Christina Stead, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, (London, 1934; rpt. Sirius Quality Paperback Edition, London: Angus and Robertson, 1981), Ch. 5, p. 133.

²⁶ Terry Sturm, 'Christina Stead's New Realism: *The Man Who Loved Children* and *Cotters' England*' in *Cunning Exiles - Studies of Modern Prose Writers* eds. Don Anderson and Stephen Knight (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974), p. 11.

psychological realism has always been a strong feature. The tradition of the realist novel oscillates between the representation of social reality (which Sturm refers to as 'documentation of environment') and psychological exploration (the 'intensity of her characters' experience'). J. P. Stern, in his comprehensive study of that tradition, argues that 'realism' has the advantage of being able to combine both.²⁷ In the nineteenth century, the French Realists, beginning with Balzac, incorporated the idea of drama into this tradition. The Russians, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, took it up in the European tradition, with Henry James following as the chief American exponent and developer of its potential in the dramatic method characteristic of his novels. Thus, writers who were as different from each other as Dickens, Balzac and James, to cite a few, had recourse to this 'new' realism before Stead, and employed it to intensify the analysis of psychological states of their characters, to create a dramatic contrast which would exaggerate external reality; in brief, to reveal the 'extra' in the ordinary. The movement towards psychological realism eventually created 'the modern analytical novel which, if not written as *flowing* thought, caught the very atmosphere of the mind'.²⁸ Stead's novels belong in this tradition.

So far this survey of literary influences on Christina Stead suggests that her work has a kinship with that of Balzac and his successors, the French Realists and Naturalists, including the Naturalist dramatists, and novelists such as Henry James, who were the precursors of psychological drama in the novel. Although most critics have recognised Stead as a psychological writer, to my knowledge only R. G. Geering and Rodney Wetherell have acknowledged her place within this European tradition. Geering was the first to recognise

²⁷ J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 140-41.

²⁸ Leon Edel, *The Psychological Novel 1800-1950* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1955), p. 16.

Stead's kinship with Balzac in a brief comment in which he points out the similarity of Adam Constant's view of Paris in Stead's *House of All Nations* to that expounded by Vautrin, a character in Balzac's *Old Goriot*.²⁹

Balzac's influence on Stead includes both thematic concerns and style. For example, in *Old Goriot*, Balzac represents Paris as a city of corruption, a slough of despair or misery, where his dramas are enacted in the lives of ordinary people. 'Money is life itself, it's the mainspring of everything' is Goriot's anguished cry.³⁰ Money, or the lack of it, and city life, are important themes in Stead's novels. Goriot's cry is echoed by many of her characters in their struggle for survival in a world where money confers power and enables some to realise their dreams. However, the strongest connection between Stead and Balzac is stylistic, particularly in their belief that, within the dramatic novel, the characters must articulate their own concerns.

Both Stead's and Balzac's characters are moved by passion to voice their fears, hopes and miseries, freely expressing their own philosophies of life, which may explain and justify their actions, and they do so with the utmost eloquence and force. This is a fundamental aspect of the dramatic method of both authors which allows them to play the part of observer and recorder, keeping that distance which is characteristic of the playwright or dramatic novelist. The voicing of their characters' dreams or illusions is matched by their attempts to act upon them; thus they are responsible for creating their own dramas *themselves*. The characters may address an audience within the novel but they are often speaking for and to themselves, since their audience 'knew themselves powerless to relieve their neighbours' troubles, and in talking them over they

²⁹ R. G. Geering, *Christina Stead: A Critical Study* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1969), pp. 183-84.

³⁰ Honoré de Balzac, *Old Goriot*, (Paris, 1834; rpt. Penguin Classics Edition, trans. Marion Ayton Crawford, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 242.

had all exhausted their capacity for sympathy'.³¹

The impulse to self-expression in many of Stead's characters often flows from a need to talk rather than to act, hence it may be said that their words quite literally bring them to life. Their lengthy monologues, in their repetitiveness of theme and often content, reveal the otherwise hidden passions by which the characters are driven. In Stead's novels speech is a major dramatic vehicle fulfilling the aims of psychological realism.

Stead was herself a verbalist. She relished words and served them up in unexpected and uncommon ways, combining them together in surprising images or using rare and archaic words for their startling effect. This enthusiasm is particularly noticeable in her early fiction which is more ornate and lyrical in style than her later work. We may attribute this early verbalism to the influence of another aspect of Stead's background. As Kenneth Slessor records in his book *Bread and Wine*, verbalism and the love of rare, long, or unusual words, were features of certain artistic and intellectual circles in Sydney during the nineteen-twenties, the period of her youth.³² Jack Lindsay also provides a vivid picture of Bohemian life in Sydney at that time in his autobiography *Life Rarely Tells*, and his account agrees with Slessor's.³³ Stead read the Lindsays' publication, *Vision*, and she claims to have met some of the members of this circle 'once or twice'.³⁴ In her first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Stead provides a detailed portrait of a Bohemian circle similar to that dominated by the Lindsays, especially in Chapter Six which deals with the Workers Education Association (WEA) classes frequented by some obviously

³¹ *Old Goriot*, p. 41.

³² Kenneth Slessor, *Bread and Wine: Selected Prose* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970), Chapter 4, 'Norman Lindsay', p. 117.

³³ Jack Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells: An Autobiography in Three Volumes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982).

³⁴ From a slightly edited transcript of the interview with Ann Whitehead, 'Christina Stead - An Interview', *Australian Literary Studies*, 6 (1974), pp. 240-41.

Bohemian characters. Her portraits of these characters reflect her concern for detail and accuracy in rendering the subject matter and style of speech of artistic and intellectual people in Sydney at that time. Above all, Stead seems to have been aware of the intoxicating power of words and used them accordingly.

When her characters speak they often use dramatic gesture or adopt a pose which draws attention to their individuality, compelling their listeners in such a way as to make them spectators to the scene. Stead's egotists and strongly passionate characters lend themselves to exaggeration which makes them more theatrical than the ordinary characters we encounter. This particular theatrical aspect of Stead's characters links her dramatic method closely to drama proper and it is to drama and dramatic influences that this discussion will now turn.

Shakespeare and Webster are claimed as important early influences by Christina Stead.⁸⁵ She was also attracted to ancient Greek drama. Her notes for 'The Workshop in the Novel', which outline her method of 'creating the dramatic situation' in the novel, reveal a clear bias towards Greek drama, as the following quotation from these notes shows:

The chief character, protagonist, is almost always faced by a second character of equal or nearly equal importance, called the antagonist, in old classic drama.⁸⁶

The dual concept of protagonist and antagonist may be seen in many of Stead's novels. In relation to the psychology of her characters, Stead again refers to the ancient Greek dramatists, saying that '[they are] wonderful at psychology, *normal* psychology'.⁸⁷ The ancient Greeks also appear to have influenced

⁸⁵ Stead, in Wetherell interview, p. 445.

⁸⁶ NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84, 'Workshop in the Novel', No. 7 (Character).

⁸⁷ Stead, in Lidoff interview, pp. 199-200. In the same interview Stead debunks Freud as a psychologist who was only interested in the abnormal, but she does give him credit for recognising the importance of dreams.

Stead's notions of fate and destiny. Fate, in her novels, implies taking the wrong direction in life or being unable to harmonise the individual will-to-power with the will of others. Destiny, on the other hand, is a concept important to the creative life in which the struggle to pursue one's own direction is manifested dramatically in the novels as a dynamic process to achieve fulfilment or harmony. Stead's dramatic use of dualism includes the presentation of the fated lives of her characters with as much intensity as she invests in the presentation of the lives of those who vigorously pursue their destiny. Stead sees the web of emotional entanglements of her characters as part of the whole pattern of interwoven fates and destinies, which is indeed a tangled thicket.

The Naturalist playwrights also come to mind as influences helping to shape Stead's dramatic method. She shares with Ibsen the creation of larger-than-life characters. Ibsen's intense investigation of character involves portraying polar conflicts between figures who represent divergent human passions.

Passion is a quality integral to Stead's characters and it is often an important part of her establishment of the dramatic situation. Her method of portraying passion, especially in those characters who are 'mad' with it, involves histrionic displays of emotion in facial expression, gesticulation, gesture and stylised use of language, all of which contribute to the impression of a performance being given. The Russian director, Konstantin Stanislavsky, appears to have influenced Stead's overtly theatrical method of portraying the passions of her characters.³⁸ Proof of the strong influence of the methods of the dramatist on Christina Stead's method of characterisation is again found in her 'Workshop in the Novel' notes, where she recommends many books on the

³⁸ Stead writes that Stanislavsky's rules for character creation are valuable for the novelist. (NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84, 'Workshop in the Novel', No. 7 [Character]).

dramatic art relevant to the art of character creation.³⁹

Stead explores the phenomenon of the self-destructive power of passion as well as its creative power. Some of Stead's egotists, who are motivated by strong, fixed passions and ideas, demonstrate the very real danger of adopting a fixed response to life. The adoption of an extreme position, vision or attitude to life which admits of no development or change, effectively denies the general principle of life, or drama, as a dynamic process. A note written by Stead expresses her observation that '[life] is perpetual motion. (My own principle.) Stockstill destroys'.⁴⁰ This note was written in relation to puppeteering but the point is relevant to her dramatic presentation of character. The extreme behaviour of some of her characters is suggestive of a lack of self-control, an aspect which is related to the destructive power of passion to over-ride reason. The presence of puppet-like figures in her novels signifies Stead's awareness of the dehumanisation of people caused by isolation, ideology, or passionate obsession. Her egotists do not undergo transformation as do the egotists in the fiction of the nineteenth century; they are instead the products of her times which offer many examples of unchecked egotism.

On the subject of passion, there is one playwright who immediately presents himself as an influence on Christina Stead – Strindberg. Stead claims to have read Strindberg at the age of fifteen and declares that 'there was only one true writer who told the truth about families, and that was Strindberg'.⁴¹ The truth, as defined by Strindberg, lies in the stark representation of 'those points in life where the great conflicts occur, which rejoices in seeing what

³⁹ These are: Lajos Egri, *How to Write a Play*; George Pierce Baker, *Dramatic Technique*; Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*; Georges Polti, *The 36 Dramatic Situations*. (NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84.)

⁴⁰ NLA MS 4967, Box 6, Folder 45, 'Marionettes II, "Jan Callowjan", General Principles of Marionetting', note 5.

⁴¹ Stead, in Wetherell interview, p. 446.

cannot be seen every day'.⁴²

Like Strindberg, Stead presents 'great conflicts' and she rejoices in the unusual *and* the ordinary in her writing, for both are part of the life she seeks to represent. The universal struggle between man and woman, presented very powerfully in Strindberg's plays *The Father* and *Dance of Death*, where each character attempts to destroy the other and destroys himself or herself in the process, is also the basis of the dramatic conflict in Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*. Struggle is the condition of life, especially when seen from a Darwinian perspective, and therefore the focus of dramatic interest in the work of both Strindberg and Stead, is on the process, the struggle itself. In the course of the struggle the various facets of personality are exposed to bring the truth of that personality to light — a process of unmasking. In Stead's novels, the character with the strongest will is usually the victor in the struggle. To pursue the comparison between Stead and Strindberg further, we also see that the struggle may manifest itself in the conflicts of opposing ideas and illusions and that, driven by these, people tend to be the agents of their own destruction. The struggle between man and woman in *The Man Who Loved Children* is a clash of singular visions, ideas or passions: between romantic idealism which inflates everything into abstractions, in Sam Pollit, and a Zolaesque naturalism which reduces everything to objects of disgust, in Henny Pollit. These two characters are locked in a position of irreconcilable conflict which is reflected in every aspect of their characters, but most dramatically revealed in their dialogue as their innermost thoughts and feelings are passionately screamed aloud. The gulf between them is so wide that they hardly speak the same language. The action of the mind, reflected in speech, is given greater emphasis than the action of the body, although the inner state of Stead's characters is clearly reflected in their exaggerated physical state.

⁴² Strindberg, quoted by Raymond Williams in *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), p. 109.

Dialogue is for Stead the part of the novel nearest the stage, and in relation to dialogue, she recommends that 'certain dramatists are good study for novelists – Ibsen, Tchekov'.⁴³ (Chekhov is also mentioned in 'Ocean of Story' as an important story-teller.⁴⁴) Strindberg, however, stands out from these Naturalist playwrights as the one with whom Stead has most affinity in her presentation of her characters' psychological dramas. Just as Stead shares Balzac's interest in the passions of characters, she also shares Strindberg's method of revealing them in intense outbursts of speech.

Other features of Strindberg's plays which are seen in Stead's work, are the use of dream and the associated language of myth to signify psychological drama. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the period which coincided with Stead's youth, there was a climate of interest in ancient art, myth and ritual fed by the works of Jane Ellen Harrison and Gilbert Murray on ancient Greek tragedy and by Sir George James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The interest in these subjects was matched by a parallel interest in psychology, particularly in the theories advanced by Freud, Jung and Adler. The suggestion of a close relationship between drama, myth and psychology worked powerfully on the imagination of many different writers of the period. Through the work of the psychologists this interest in myth extended to an interest in dreams and their importance in showing up aspects of the psyche which could be interpreted according to their shared symbolic language. In Strindberg's later work, particularly in *A Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata*, life is presented as dream. The human struggle becomes internal: in Strindberg's plays the characters are images or *personae* within the private agony of a fragmented personality. The atmosphere of the plays is evocative of the uncertain, illusory quality of the dream-world. The references to Frazer, Adler, and Strindberg's

⁴³ NLA MS 4967, Box 11, Folder 84, 'Workshop in the Novel', Dialogue No. 10.

⁴⁴ Stead, 'Ocean of Story', p. 182.

Spook Sonata in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* clearly indicate Stead's awareness of this background.

Just as she held a belief in the supernatural, Stead was interested in dreams and attached psychological significance to them. She incorporates dreams in her portraits of characters as a fundamental part of the characters' 'hidden' or psychological lives. She even recorded her own early dreams which were apparently so vivid to her that she attempted to visit the places she saw in them to discover whether in fact they did exist.⁴⁵

Stead distinguishes between waking dreams (day-dreams or fantasy), and sleeping dreams, and incorporates both into her portraits of characters to express their hidden life and to show how their dreams shape their lives. Throughout her fiction Stead alludes to the illusory quality of life and, in some novels, particularly *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *Cotters' England*, there is an evocative, dream-like atmosphere similar to that found in the plays of Strindberg.⁴⁶ Stead's use of dream, either as fantasy or sleeping dream, takes on importance when her characters attempt to enact their dreams in waking life so that their lives demonstrate, in a real sense, private dramas being played out.

The association between the dream or drama of life and the quality of illusion fundamental to both is reinforced in Stead's novels through her use of the metaphor of the play. The use of the theatrical metaphor as a paradigm of life is a pervasive notion that goes back a long way in western literature. Calderón's play *La Vida es sueño* brings together the notions of life as play and as dream. Although it is not known whether Christina Stead was acquainted with the works of Calderón, she was certainly well acquainted with

⁴⁵ NLA MS 4967, Box 6, Folder 38, 'Lydham, Early Sydney, Family', page headed 'Awake' 3.

⁴⁶ Anita K. Segerberg, in 'Towards a Style of Her Own : Influences on Christina Stead's Early Fiction', Diss. University of Auckland, New Zealand, 1986, also recognises Strindberg's influence and discusses the correspondence between *The Ghost Sonata* and Stead's *The Beauties and Furies* in Ch. IV, 'Christine, of Paris', pp. 135-147.

Shelley's work, including *The Cenci*. While Shelley was engaged in writing *The Cenci*, and even beyond then up until his death, he was engrossed in the plays of Calderón, and in style and dramatic composition, Shelley's works bear his stamp.⁴⁷

It is possible to trace Stead's idea of life as dream or drama back to Calderón through Shelley, but Shakespeare's plays also make use of the theatrical metaphor and he is acknowledged by Stead as an important influence. In the plays of Shakespeare we find a further link between dream and drama. Hamlet, in his conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example, describes a play as a 'dream of passion' (*Hamlet*, II.ii.562), a phrase that also describes the impressionistic nature of Stead's first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. That novel not only captures the dream-like atmosphere of the past in which persons and events are like shadows brought to life, but there are references within it to the theatrical metaphor of life and the image of the veil of Maya, the Indic metaphor for the illusory fabric of life. Images such as veils, mists and stage-curtains are all components of the theatrical metaphor found in Stead's novels. In addition, Stead makes frequent use of night imagery or underworld imagery including references to sideshows or the fairground, mirrors, and even the occult or fairytale, to refer to the world of 'other-reality' or illusion. There are direct references to pantomime, burlesque, tragi-comedy and even tragedy as generic terms to describe the quality of the illusion being represented. All these serve to reinforce the impression being created by Christina Stead of life as illusion and specifically of life as drama.

The Musical Critic's speech on his vision of life in *The Salzburg Tales* is interesting for the way in which it illuminates Christina Stead's vision of life and her method of observing it in such close detail. It also reminds us of Balzac

⁴⁷ See Salvador De Madariaga's essay 'Shelley and Calderón' in *Shelley & Calderón and Other Essays on English and Spanish Poetry* (London: Constable & Co, Ltd, 1920), pp. 3-48.

in his observation of the passing human parade. Because it expresses very clearly the naturalist's method of observation and incorporates the theatrical metaphor, summing up, as it were, the strands of this discussion so far, the Musical Critic's speech is reproduced here in full:

'That is how I look at life altogether, as a spectator who looks at a vast stage-setting. If you have five minutes to observe a man, from a secret cranny, you will find out a great deal about him. Does he shake his head, loosen his collar, noiselessly gargle his throat and brush his hair with his hand, does he take out his handkerchief and refold it, button and unbutton his coat? What is the colour of his eyes, hair, skin: what is the quality of the cloth in his coat, and of what cut is the garment? Is he fat or thin? What are his half-dozen tics? Does he peer round, or stand upright facing the way he should go? Does he look into jewellers' windows, or bars, or banks? Has he a stick or a bag: what paper does he carry? Does he seem to criticise the chiselling of window-sills, or the knot in a tie? Does he stop to see a deflated tyre or to peer in at a closed shop? What is his gait, what his tread? There are a thousand things to observe which will give away the party he votes for and the amount of his bank-balance. And for this reason, I am an inveterate and shameless eavesdropper, I listen at the doors of rooms, I pussyfoot along the corridors, I read private letters and stare at people in their emotion. My own life is too calm for my energy, I suppose that is the reason. At any rate, I chortle over the butt-end of a conversation, and pick up chance remarks uttered as I pass in the street, as loafers collect cigarette-ends: all is there, the wrapping, the sort of tobacco, the evidence of fire, and even a bit of fire left to warm the mouth and bring tears into the eyes. My friends say, that is a lounge-lizard's philosophy, but it is only a loge philosophy: I am a connoisseur of the things people say in the dark. Last night for instance — but no, that is too near home, and you will not trust me near you if I listen in, in Salzburg. Let us say, last season, in Paris, I heard such a little conversation in the dark, only one of thousands; I will repeat it to you and tell you no more than I heard'.⁴⁸

The Musical Critic's vision of life and his precise method of observing people might be those of Christina Stead herself.

⁴⁸ Christina Stead, *The Salzburg Tales* (London, 1934; rpt. Sirius Quality Paperback edition London : Angus & Robertson, 1983), 'Interlude' between 'Sappho' and 'The Little Old Lady', pp. 367-68.

Stead was certainly interested in the theatre, including puppet theatre, and opera. In the collection of her papers at the National Library of Australia (NLA MS 4967) there are numerous schemes for short puppet plays consisting of casts of characters and scripted dialogue. These reveal a tremendous sense of humour and skill in repartee, especially in the 'Nello' collection. Christina Stead and her husband William Blake had puppets called 'Nello' and 'Jan Callowjan'. Stead invested them with distinct personalities: Nello appears to have been the humorous one while Jan Callowjan was serious. It almost seems as though she used her puppets as *personae* through whom she gave expression to her unpublished lighthearted poems, sketches and stories, recorded by her as Nello's 'dreams'. In talking to Joan Lidoff on the subject of puppets, Stead remarks: 'The odd thing about puppets is that if you have a favourite puppet, and every puppeteer has one, this is your soul. It's like an oracle that speaks to you'.⁴⁹

The evidence of Stead's involvement in puppet theatre and her schemes for puppet plays need to be considered in relation to her response to Rodney Wetherell's question, whether she ever 'had it in mind to write a play or a film script?'. Stead replied:

Never, I'm very bad at plays. I haven't the slightest idea how to begin. It's a different type of mind, you know. When you write a play you must have a very strong feeling about the three-sided room as the stage is called, and the exits and entrances. I have no such feeling.⁵⁰

Although she may never have attempted to write a full play for the stage she did have some experience as a senior script writer for M.G.M. in Hollywood in 1943.⁵¹ In the interview she gave Ann Whitehead for the ABC radio programme

⁴⁹ Stead, in Lidoff interview, p. 217.

⁵⁰ Stead, in Wetherell interview, p. 445.

⁵¹ Entry for Christina Stead in *Contemporary Authors - A Bio-Bibliographical Guide to Current Authors and Their Works*. Eds. James M. Ethridge, Barbara Kopala (Michigan: Gale Research Co., 1966), Vol. 15, p. 415.

'Lateline', broadcast 13 August 1973, Stead refers to her Hollywood experience as 'a dreary sort of office job . . . not creative'.⁵² Her novels, however, gave her the creative outlet for her script-writing ability. Passages of lively dialogue throughout the novels demonstrate her skill in this area and there is also considerable evidence of her feeling for dramatic exits and entrances.

Turning from drama and other related dramatic influences to pick up another thread of influence in Stead's background, we come to a strong literary and philosophical influence, that of Nietzsche. Stead read Nietzsche at an impressionably young age. She tells Barry Hill in an interview:

When I was at high school, I knew *Thus Spake Zarathustra* by heart, I assure you . . . Nietzsche has a tremendous influence on me. [It has] nothing to do with theory or philosophy [but it] has to do with his words, his poetry, the way everything was a chant.⁵³

Literary and artistic life in Sydney during the first two decades of this century, the period comprising Stead's formative years, was under the sway of 'Australian Nietzscheanism'.⁵⁴ Stead's attraction to Nietzsche may have been motivated by the same interest which drew her to Dickens, the Romantics, Balzac and the playwrights mentioned earlier in this discussion, that is, her interest in the element of drama and the effect of dramatic voice. But perhaps too, like Norman Lindsay and his circle, Stead found in Nietzsche, as well as in the literature of the Romantics, the idiom of revolt against society.⁵⁵ Whatever the case, her novels certainly demonstrate that the power of Zarathustra's dramatic voice had transferred Nietzsche's thought to Stead. Indeed, if we

⁵² Stead, in Whitehead interview, p. 244.

⁵³ Barry Hill, 'The Woman Who Loved Silence', *The Age*, "Saturday Extra", 17 July 1982, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Jack Lindsay coins this phrase in his autobiography, *Life Rarely Tells: An Autobiography in Three Volumes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), Ch. 26, 'Nietzsche in Australia', p. 207.

⁵⁵ Lindsay, p. 207.

consider all those influences discussed so far in this survey, it would seem very difficult for Stead to have escaped the Nietzschean influence. His philosophy of life blends well with her background in science that formed her view of life as an inevitable struggle and, of course, Darwinian thought, which is behind Nietzsche, informs the work of the Naturalist novelists and playwrights whose influence upon Stead has been identified earlier in this discussion. In the idea of life as struggle we arrive at the convergence of the two influences, science and literature, with which this chapter began. Whilst Darwinism posits a blindly deterministic evolution, Nietzsche argues the idea of a consciously willed, creative evolution⁵⁶ which is still based on the notions of selection and survival, but with a very important qualification. The survival of the strongest, which in Darwinian definition implies physical strength, is translated in Nietzschean terms into the survival of those with the strongest *will*, a term which includes psychological or spiritual strength.

Nietzsche's 'will-to-power' is the principle which helps the individual, particularly the artist, in the struggle for fulfilment. It is the means by which the artist (the 'dreamer') can control the potentially self-destructive Dionysian forces at work in the personality. The exertion of conscious will on the pattern of life is analogous to asserting artistic control over one's destiny, and this aspect of Nietzschean thought can be seen to operate in the lives of Stead's characters. Nietzschean will-to-power enables her characters to escape oppression for, as Nietzsche aphoristically states: 'Willing liberates: that is the true doctrine of will and freedom'.⁵⁷

Nietzsche's doctrine of contrariety: 'Not only cunning is found beneath a

⁵⁶ Rebecca Baker also makes this point in 'Christina Stead: The Nietzsche Connection', *Meridian*, 2 (1983), 117.

⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Parts I-IV, 1883-1892; rpt. translated with an introduction by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), Part Two, 'On the Blissful Islands', p. 111.

mask: there is much goodness in guile'⁵⁸, a dualistic doctrine, relates to Stead's method of characterisation. A character has more than one face and he or she is seen differently depending on the angle from which the view is taken; thus Stead's microscopic view of character is seen to give way to a more prismatic view as each aspect of character is exposed to light. The prismatic view is linked with more theatrical elements in her treatment of character, and it will be examined later in this discussion.

The scientific, literary and philosophical influences which have been traced in this survey have all helped shape Stead's intense and unusual vision of the world. In various ways, their influence on Stead is due to the way in which they appeal to her 'sense of drama, and personality and psychology'.⁵⁹ Drama, in the broadest sense of the term, is implicit in the nineteenth century Darwinian view of life as struggle. As a naturalist, Stead tended to see life in these terms. Evidence of the link between the concepts of struggle and drama for Stead is found in her editing of Jonah Raskin's typescript of the interview which she granted him. Originally she had said to Raskin, 'I'm interested in sex, yes, in male and female conflicts', but, in editing the transcript, she crossed out 'conflicts' and inserted 'drama'. In her memo to Raskin prior to the publication of that interview, she writes: 'please put male and female drama — I don't like the word conflicts[.] I am not interested in sex conflicts and strongly object to the expression "battle of the sexes"'.⁶⁰ She was always very careful not to be branded a feminist writer and this caution may have prompted the memo to Raskin. Although she objects to the use of the word 'conflicts' in a sexual

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra; Beyond Good and Evil*, 'The Masks of Truth' in *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature* edited by Charles Feidelson Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 754.

⁵⁹ Stead, Wetherell interview, p. 446.

⁶⁰ NLA MS 4967, Box 7, Folder 52, 'Interview with Jonah Raskin', page 2 of 'Memo to J.R. Your Interview'. The interview referred to is Jonah Raskin, 'Christina Stead in Washington Square', *London Magazine*, N.S. 9, No. 11 (1970), 69–77.

context here, her comment about the ancient Greek structure of drama with protagonist and antagonist, mentioned earlier in this discussion, indicates clearly that she recognised the dramatic value inherent in opposing characters engaged in a struggle of wills. This is supported by other evidence found outside the novels. For example, in Stead's typewritten summary of George Polti's 'Dramatic Situation No. 9: The Gallant Attempt' is her marginal handwritten inscription: 'Struggle, the musculature of every dramatic situation, is seen naked here.'⁶¹

Drama underlies the work of Nietzsche, both in his conception of life and in Zarathustra's dramatic voice. The dramatic principle of the essential dualism of man and the natural world also informs her vision. Stead's method of characterisation seems to confirm the Bakhtinian principle that '[consciousness] of self is possible only if it is experienced by contrast'.⁶² Life, as she presents it in her novels, is a process, a flux, that occurs between two poles.⁶³ It is, again in Bakhtinian terms, a constant struggle between forces that seek to close the world in system and forces that oppose completedness.⁶⁴ This dualistic approach to life has a wide and old philosophical background which includes the ancient Greeks who used it to dramatic purpose. In thinking of life in this way and in making use of polarities in her presentations of life, Stead inevitably has a strong inclination towards drama.

The dialectical emphasis in Stead's vision of life pervades all aspects of her novels, creating an identifiable and constant tension within them. Each

⁶¹ NLA, MS 4967, Box 7, Folder 47.

⁶² Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1984), Ch. 3 'The Architectonics of Answerability', p. 92.

⁶³ Bruce Holmes makes a similar point in his study of Stead's work, 'Moral Dialectic in the Fiction of Christina Stead,' Diss. University of Newcastle, N.S.W., 1984, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Clark and Holquist, pp. 79-80.

element in her work has its counterpart so that it would seem at first that these contradictions produce a dislocated effect on the narrative. We find, for example, that naturalistic description gives way to gothic fantasy and the grotesque, and the abrupt shifts from one to another are a source of disorientation for some of her readers. However, if it is recognised that the dynamic principle of drama unites these different elements, no such disorientation should be experienced. The gothic elements, for example, are basically theatrical. Certainly it cannot be denied that in Stead's novels there is that exaggeration of emotional response and language of gesture which is borrowed from drama proper. The contrasting elements in her work do not exist in a mutually exclusive relationship where each must be regarded as being isolated from the other, but instead, they relate to one another reciprocally, to express the dynamics of the dialectical principle. *Drama* governs the dynamic process of change which occurs between the extremes.

Previous studies have acknowledged the duality of Stead's work, one of the most recent being Gina Mercer's paper which observes the pattern of thesis and antithesis throughout.⁶⁵ But none has, to my knowledge, recognised this practice as being an essential part of Christina Stead's presentation of life as ongoing drama.

Since Stead's vision of life meant that she saw life as drama, it follows that she wrote 'the drama of the person'. She has declared:

I'm a psychological writer, and my drama is the drama of the person . . . I wait and wait for the drama to develop. I watch the characters and the situation move and I don't interfere. I'm patient. I'm lying low. I wait and wait for the drama to display itself.⁶⁶

This statement, which recalls the Musical Critic's speech quoted earlier,

⁶⁵ Gina Mercer, 'Christina Stead - A Radical Author: Patterns of Thesis and Antithesis', *SPAN*, No. 21, October 1985, p. 137.

⁶⁶ Christina Stead, in Raskin interview, p. 72.

conjoins up a vision of Christina Stead as an intrepid naturalist, lying concealed in an urban jungle hide from where she can closely observe the behaviour of her subjects. It expresses Stead's main tenets in regard to the novel: her primary interest in character, her conception of life as drama, and her preference for the dramatic method in which the objectivity of the naturalist and the invisibility of the dramatist are combined.

It remains now to demonstrate more fully how Stead's idea of drama and her dramatic method manifest themselves in her novels and this is the purpose of this thesis. The first tenet of her work has received considerable critical attention but the other two, embracing dramatic conception and method, have been, so far, relatively unexplored, except for the observation that the dramatic principle operates in her dialectic. The studies of Gregory Hill and Bruce Holmes recognise this principle at work in the opposition of ideas which contribute to the dramatic structure of her work.⁶⁷ With the present resurgence of interest in Stead's narrative techniques, it is inevitable that more scholarly attention should be given to Stead's drama and her dramatic method.

The focus of the dramatic method is, of course, on character. In Percy Lubbock's view, the art of the dramatic novelist consists of animating the scene presented before the onlooker, the reader. The pictorial method is used first to set the scene, so to speak, to create a generalised picture of circumstances and the situation from which the drama unfolds. Then, like the playwright,

[the] author places [the characters'] parts in the mouths of the players, leaves them to make their own impression, leaves us, the audience, to make what we can of it. The motion of life is before us, the recording, registering mind of the author is eliminated. That is drama; . . .⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Gregory Hill, 'The Use of Ideas and Ideologies in the Characterisation and Dramatic Structure of the Early Novels of Christina Stead,' Diss. Australian National University, 1978; and Bruce Holmes, Diss. cited above.

⁶⁸ Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, (London, 1920; rpt. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1965), p. 111.

and that is how Stead begins her dramas.

When Christina Stead states that she writes 'the drama of the person', her interest is obviously in people and 'what they do with their lives and what their lives do with them'.⁶⁹ Accordingly, the object of the novel to her is characterisation.⁷⁰ She claims that she does not invent people or plots and in this she is being true to her role as a naturalist, observing and writing what she sees. Stead also says, making a passing reference to the metaphor of the play:

I have been interested in depicting scenes in which I myself have taken part either as actor or spectator: and in this sense, my books and stories may be called scenes from contemporary life.⁷¹

Her idea of writing exactly what she sees means that she exposes people and events as they appeared before her. As R. G. Geering writes:

She clearly believes the novelist's task is to present people as they really are — and in ways that will make them acceptable to her readers. Yet the most common criticism of her work (apart from its alleged lack of form) is that, for all her great talents, she does not possess the essential gift of the realistic novelist, the capacity for creating thoroughly credible characters or, as it is sometimes put, 'the ability to create characters in the round', . . . [especially in] the early books.⁷²

Character has been singled out for attention by many critics, the views expressed being as various as the characters themselves. When Stead's characters come under attack for being less than 'thoroughly credible' it seems that they are accused of being ideograms, that is, that they are mere vehicles for the expression of certain ideas. This view sees Stead in the habit of polemicising through her characters, a view which challenges the veracity of her own stated

⁶⁹ Stead, in Wetherell interview, p. 441.

⁷⁰ Stead, in book review of Louis Aragon's *The Century Was Young* in *New Masses*, 47, 20 January 1942, 23.

⁷¹ Christina Stead, quoted in *Contemporary Novelists* ed. James Vinson, (London: St. James Press Ltd., 1972), p. 1170.

⁷² R. G. Geering, *Christina Stead* Twayne Series revised paperback edition (London: Angus & Robertson, 1979), p. 182.

beliefs about the object of the novel. Such a view appears to have been perpetuated as a result of careless misinterpretation of Stead's statement that her novels begin with an idea. In reply to Rodney Wetherell, who asks Stead how the novel begins to grow, she says:

I get an idea, and it grows for some time. This is beginning now, in fact, and I don't rush about it. . . . Then I write character, because really I'm a character writer.⁷³

This quotation has been misused in the past to show that her novels are novels of ideas rather than of character, a view with which I strongly disagree. The idea to which Stead refers is rather like James's 'donnée'. That is, she conceives of a situation, then the characters involved, and particularly, how the *passions* of her characters create the situation; then she proceeds to work upon that until the outline of her novel becomes clear.

An idea or ideal which may dominate to the extent of becoming the driving force of that character's life constitutes a passion and that, generally speaking, is a vital ingredient of drama. The point was made earlier in this chapter that passion plays a significant part in the formation of Stead's characters and the particular *dramatic* value of passion in 'the drama of the person' is emphasised here. Stead's interest in presenting the *effect* of passion on personality is the interest of a playwright or a dramatic novelist. She is not interested in presenting ideology for its own sake: her dramas are based on the lives of thinking and feeling people, not thoughts in abstract.

There seems to be, among many critics and theorists of the novel, the idea that character must be shown in process. Marvin Mudrick, for example, states that 'characters observed as entities or as principles or as ideograms impede the fictional action'.⁷⁴ Mudrick's view conforms to the notion that

⁷³ Stead, in Wetherell interview, p. 444.

⁷⁴ Marvin Mudrick, 'Character and Event in Fiction' in *The Yale Review*, 50 (1961), 207.

character should not be static but should exhibit some change as proof of its vitality. David Daiches also defines character as

a process not a state, and the truth about men's reactions to their environment — and what is man's character but his response to environment? — can be presented only through some attempt to show this process at work.⁷⁵

Daiche's statement could be interpreted as a naturalist's method of observing character and his idea of 'process' comes close to Stead's idea of the struggle of character.

Many conventional views of what is 'right' about character in a novel are not necessarily appropriate to all novels, as Henry James points out in 'The Art of Fiction'. The novelist's successful creation of character is not a question of static or dynamic qualities but, very basically, a question of recognition. In recognising the likeness of characters to people in real life, the reader acknowledges the success of the novelist's mimetic art. 'The characters, the situation, which strike one as real [writes Henry James] will be those that touch and interest one most, but the measure of reality is very difficult to fix'.⁷⁶

Christina Stead based her characters on people she knew or who she had met. Her impressions of them are formed by her intense, unusual and often ironic vision. To highlight the method of character creation used by Christina Stead, I refer again to Balzac, whose method, it was argued earlier, seems to have been a model for her and one which also fits Daiche's definition of character as process.

The idea for Balzac's dramas in the *Human Comedy* derives in part from his response to Cuvier's *Animal Kingdom*, a work which, it is helpful to recall, Stead also acknowledged. Balzac asks:

⁷⁵ David Daiches, *The Novel and the Modern World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 20.

⁷⁶ Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) in *The Portable Henry James* Revised Edition by Lyall H. Powers, 1968, ed. and introduced by Morton Dauwen Zabel (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 397.

Does not society make of man, according to the environment in which he acts out his life, as many different men as there are varieties in zoology?⁷⁷

In *Old Goriot* Balzac interprets the zoological analogy in primitive terms. He employs the metaphor of Paris as a forest inhabited by savage tribes, each struggling for existence, with survival being dependent upon hunting prowess. His influence in this respect can be traced in Stead's work to the metaphor of the hunt, found not only in the romantic image of the dark hunter and pursued victim fleeing through the thicket, but also generally manifested in the relationships between her characters in terms of predator and prey, the exploiters or oppressors and their victims, the exploited or oppressed. The forest metaphor becomes in Stead's novels the city jungle or desert. Within this environment, both human and natural, the development of individual character often takes place against a background of conflict expressed either in terms of contrasting imagery to suggest the general 'battleground' of social and economic conditions, or in opposing personalities, thus presenting the initial situation, or background, from which the drama gradually unfolds. Frequently this situation suggests that the process of development will be slow as the protagonists struggle against the conditions which beset them, but it is *process* nonetheless.

Like Balzac's *Human Comedy*, all kinds and conditions of people, 'as many different men as there are varieties in zoology', are represented in Stead's dramas. In an extension of the *Animal Kingdom* idea, a hierarchy of a kind exists, ranging from the 'god-like' (Bertillon as 'Mercury' in *House of All Nations* is an obvious example) to the lower orders of creatures, like the toady, Aristide Raccamond. Yet even among the 'lower orders' there are predators in human society just as in the animal kingdom. Despite the obvious ugliness

⁷⁷ Balzac, quoted by Lyall H. Powers, *Henry James and the Naturalist Movement* (East Lansing: University of Michigan Press, 1971), Ch. 1 'The Cultural Background', p. 15.

(morally or otherwise) of some of these 'lower orders', Stead, being true to her naturalist's approach, views them and their behaviour as being marks of their 'species'. She apports no blame, saying typically, 'you can't criticise dingoes for being dingoes'.⁷⁸

The struggle is all-important in the process since it reveals the strengths and weaknesses of character. Poverty adds to the struggle of life and the burden includes disease, neglect and lack of nourishment, both physical and cultural. Such background factors inevitably influence the ensuing drama since they may distort or warp the characters' subsequent development, producing a 'crippled' or imbalanced personality. The worst kinds of cripples to be found in her novels are the egotists, the Nietzschean 'inverse cripples': 'men who are no more than a great eye or a great mouth or a great belly'.⁷⁹

Poverty may dehumanise but unbridled egotism destroys, and both occur in observable processes. The problem for egotistical characters lies in reversing the process once begun. Stead's egotistical characters are incapable of change unless they first recognise the dangers inherent in adopting extreme positions wherein they most resemble puppets being 'manipulated' by selfishness. The ironical and the most awful aspect of Stead's treatment of egotism, however, is her recognition that some egotists, like Sam Pollit, possess great power and vitality that defy self-destruction. Such characters threaten destruction on a huge scale if their sphere of power is unlimited.

There are those characters in Stead's novels whose struggles or machinations have enabled them to make it to the top: these are the strong, charismatic, dominant personalities who exercise power over other people. Stead's sympathy lies with those who are oppressed or betrayed but she cannot suppress her attraction to the powerful and strong. Such characters possess

⁷⁸ Stead, in Wetherell interview, p. 441.

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Part Two: 'Of Redemption', p. 160.

inherently greater dramatic potential than the weak or mediocre characters.

It is with Stead's creation of egotists that we can come to grips with the issue of her ability to successfully create character. According to a common view of character expressed by such critics as Bernard Bergonzi, 'literature should enjoin both writer and reader to respect and even love the characters of a novel'.⁸⁰ John Bayley also believes that the idea of character in modern fiction has sunk into the 'middle deeps' where it has survived as a diminished and mechanical form which is observed rather than loved.⁸¹ These critics are being unnecessarily prescriptive in their views of character. They imply that detachment, either on the part of the writer or the reader, precludes human qualities in a character since they both refer to the diminution of character in the twentieth century novel. There is absolutely no obligation upon the novelist to create characters whom we can *love*, since, according to the line of Bayley's argument, *any* sign of affective involvement should do. Therefore our dislike of a character is sufficient sign of the effectiveness (and affectiveness) of characterisation. (Iago, for example, is a great character, one who is universally hated as much for his recognisably human weakness as for his demonic distortion. Literature is full of such characters.) Of course while Stead may maintain her impartiality, *we* react in certain ways to her characters. Even if we cannot love them, they should not be written off as mere 'mechanical forms'. Frankly, there are some whom we openly dislike, and here the egotists come especially to mind, nevertheless they succeed as workable, credible characters.

Stead's egotists are static in that they appear as fixed, unchanging characters and as such, they may be seen in Mudrick's terms as 'entities' but they are never abstractions or representations of certain ideologies. A striking

⁸⁰ Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1970), p. 51.

⁸¹ John Bayley, *The Characters of Love - A Study in the Literature of Personality* (London: Constable & Co., 1960), Chapter 1 'The Worlds of Love - Conceptions of Character', p. 39.

aspect of Stead's portrayal of her egotistical characters is the way in which their egotism traps them, causing them to react repetitively and predictably in a pattern of behaviour which likens them to puppets. Given that, they retain enough recognisably human qualities to arouse a response. The psychology of an egotist makes for very interesting character creation.

The ambivalence of the reader's response to many of Stead's characters is possibly the result of Stead's vision as an ironist. Because her irony exposes the antipathetic and sympathetic qualities of characters, it is difficult to respond to them without reservation or qualification. Stead's irony forces us to admit that the world she represents is not fixed, but subject to shifts of values and attitudes, not least of which include our own.

Power is at the core of the relationships between Stead's characters, and the struggle for power is often that which impels the development of independent personality. Power of one person over another is anathema to Stead except where it is manifested in the important recurring figure of the friend or ally. This benevolent figure assumes a positive role in assisting certain characters to achieve their goals or direction in life.

In narrative terms there are two possible movements or directions in Stead's dramas governed by contrasts or opposing forces. The drama of the person proceeds from resistance against centripetal forces found either within the personality of the character or outside, embodied in other characters, or found in social, political and economic forces.

If we extend the general principle of drama to include further theatrical references, we see that 'direction' is important in the drama of the person. Each of Stead's characters is seen to have the responsibility for directing his own drama of life and of course this is where the Nietzschean will-to-power is exercised in personal control. This is an important factor since it denies any charge of determinism operating in her characters' lives. But Stead reveals that extremes of control, either too much or too little, are equally dangerous in the

development of character. It may even be that the element of control is what differentiates drama from melodrama. Certainly the examples of some characters seem to confirm that the absence of personal control makes melodrama of their lives. Yet, the extreme route is taken willingly by other characters in pursuit of their dream or destiny.

In the theatrical sense it is important that her characters are self-directed and that they have control over the direction of their own lives. Teresa Hawkins in *For Love Alone* and Louisa Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children* both have a strong sense of personal destiny. They exercise their will in directing their lives towards their chosen goals and they are both prepared to take extreme action to ensure that they are achieved. Characters like Louisa and Teresa are 'wakers' who assume responsibility for actively shaping and making meaning in their lives. The pattern of dialectic operates in the dramatic process of shaping their lives since they pass through a nightmare period of suffering (self-induced or otherwise) before their dreams are realised. Other characters who lack either the will or the creative energy to direct their lives actively toward some goal of their own, are 'sleepers', caught in an endless, purposeless struggle. According to Stead's use of the theatrical metaphor, these characters are like puppets manipulated by fate or their own fatal weakness. The creative will in these characters lies dormant waiting to be awakened.

In Stead's presentation of 'the drama of the person' there is a very strong impression of watching the characters on stage as it were. Her method of characterisation, through prolonged and intense observation of different facets of personality, is a process of unmasking, to continue the theatrical metaphor. The *personae* or masks adopted by the characters in different situations conform to Stead's idea that life is drama and that each person adopts and acts out many different roles. Each character sees, and may reflect, different aspects or facets of the others. This constitutes the prismatic view of character referred to earlier and it is supported by Stead's frequent use of mirror and light

imagery. For example, Baruch Mendelssohn, a character in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, watches the 'performance' of Catherine Baguenault 'with an irrepressible curiosity and enthusiasm, as if he saw a new facet turning to the light, a drama rounding itself out'. In Joseph Baguenault's vision of Mendelssohn we find the same light and mirror imagery:

Baruch's glasses gleamed and his opulent personality, gracious, smiling, flattered, considerate, revolved through a dozen facets before he spoke.⁸³

Each observable facet of character is like a reflective shutter implying that there is a hidden life still to be revealed. The outer world of events and the environment, presented naturalistically, give way to the inner world of character as the spotlight shifts to the drama of human personality. A corresponding shift in style reflects the conditions of the character's mind. Stead's analysis of her characters includes the presentation of their 'hidden life' either in fantasy or in uninhibited speech.

Her characters' urge to talk is arguably the most outstanding aspect of Stead's dramatic techniques. While they speak, we are conscious of an intensely felt emotional and intellectual life and a reservoir of energy which, when spent, leaves us, but not necessarily the speaker, exhausted. Stead's characters do not always speak naturalistically but will adopt the self-conscious pose of actors and use the full-blown rhetoric of theatrical speech in the tirades which they deliver. The theatrical aspects of character are consistent with the references to lives as plays in which the characters are the principal actors and directors. As Stead once pointed out, her purpose in making her characters so eloquent is to demonstrate that anybody 'can talk like Medea' about their troubles and that everyone is a 'fountain of passion'.⁸⁴ The great danger of this aspect of her

⁸² Stead, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, (London, 1934; rpt. Sirius Quality Paperback Edition London: Angus & Robertson, 1981), Ch. 5, p. 133.

⁸³ Stead, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Ch. 5, p. 155.

⁸⁴ Christina Stead, in a review by Jean Williamson, 'Christina Stead Tells of Her

dramatic method is that the characters' interminable speech can become a barrage. It has a great effect upon the way in which we react to her characters and judge them.

Minor instances of Stead's idea of drama being translated into the novel also occur. She frequently lists her casts of characters at the beginning of novels and the structural divisions of many novels correspond with the acts and scenes of plays.

Stead's idea of drama is a very strong thread running through her novels. An awareness of how Stead translates her idea of drama into the novels helps us to untangle some of the critical problems which her work presents. It allows for an interpretative approach to her work, since her novels can be understood in reference to the psychological and philosophical meanings of the drama of the person, and it also allows for an evaluative approach, since her method of creating character and situation can be assessed in terms of what constitutes the dramatic in the novel.

The discussions of the selected novels in this thesis will concentrate upon the major aspects of her drama in terms of meaning and method as these are manifested in the portraits of her characters and their lives. The chapters are arranged to follow the chronological order of the publication of each novel, with two exceptions, Chapter Five, which puts *The People With the Dogs* before the discussion of *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, and the last chapter, which discusses *House of All Nations*.

There are several reasons for choosing to leave the discussion of *House of All Nations* until the final chapter. The arrangement of the earlier chapters is designed to trace a pattern in Stead's drama of the person from youth through to old age. The effect produced by the pattern over the novels from *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* to *The People With the Dogs* is a sense of gradually diminishing intensity as the fervour of youth mellows into the more comfortable pace of full

maturity. The protagonists of these novels are identified as wakers and the dynamics of the process of awakening are accentuated by grouping these novels together. *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (1948) should properly come before *The People With the Dogs* (1952) in a chronological treatment of the novels but its discussion is held over to be included with *Cotters' England* (1966) to highlight the occurrence of a different pattern. These novels deal with much older characters who are identified as sleepers and their dramas are marked by their failure to find fulfilment; it is logical that their discussion should come towards the end. *House of All Nations* does not fit either of these patterns. Even though it belongs with *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The Beauties and Furies* at the beginning of the corpus, it is quite a different novel, thematically and stylistically. Stead displays greater confidence and deftness of touch in handling the complex range of observations and ideas in *House of All Nations* than she does, for example, in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*.

It is possible to see the corpus of Stead's work as one large, continuous drama of the human condition. As each novel ends one does not feel that the affair is finished or that the problem is solved, and other novels take up the loose ends to continue the exploration of alternatives in a pattern of dialectic operating throughout her work. The whole creates an impression of Christina Stead as a funambulist, keeping her balance as a dramatic novelist, observing and presenting the drama before us, but rarely, if ever, blocking our view of her characters' performances.

CHAPTER TWO

'The Age of Storm and Stress'

Seven Poor Men of Sydney (1934)

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

Macbeth V.v.24-28.

And the belief that life is a dream and we the dreamers only
dream, which comes to us at strange, romantic and tragic
moments, what is it but a desire for the great legend, the
powerful story rooted in all things which will explain life to us.
...

Christina Stead, 'Ocean of Story'.¹

'And why not?' she said to herself. 'Their life was nothing but
a dream, the whole world, their fever, their failures, their love
was nothing but a dream and incoherent when told.'

Christina Stead, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*.²

¹ 'Ocean of Story', *Ocean of Story: The Uncollected Stories of Christina Stead*, ed., with an afterword, R. G. Geering (Ringwood, Victoria: Viking, 1985), p. 8.

² *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, (London, 1934; rpt. Sirius Quality Paperback edition London: Angus & Robertson, 1981) Ch. 7, p. 260. All subsequent references are to this edition of the text.

Seven Poor Men of Sydney, Christina Stead's first novel, developed from an idea of hers to write an encyclopaedia inspired by a footnote reference she found to the 'Lives of Obscure Men'. Although the encyclopaedia project was abandoned, the idea of writing about humble or 'obscure' lives eventually found expression in two of Stead's novels, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *Cotters' England*, which bear certain similarities to each other.³ The title of *Seven Poor Men* derives from Dickens's *Seven Poor Travellers*.⁴

In the epilogue-like 'Endpiece' we discover one of the poor men of the title, weary, and buffeted by a storm raging around him, hurrying to reach his home. This bent-backed traveller is Joseph Baguenault, an obscure man who has survived the storms of his youth to reach a place of calm. The novel finally comes to rest in his quiet, tired reflections after the other impassioned voices, which have dominated the novel, have finished speaking. The storm sets Joseph thinking about his youth:

'Long ago! Now it is only like a dream from which you awaken and feel tremulously near to tears without knowing the reason,' murmurs Joseph, as he hurries along the cliff-road towards his cottage. 'Why were we so shaken then? Was it because we were young?' ('Endpiece', p. 318.)

Everything that happened so long ago exists now in the recesses of Joseph's memory in dim and hazy outline. The people of his past are like shadows, 'poor players', to whose performances throughout the novel he had been mostly a silent and often uncomprehending witness and whose actions and gesticulations are now lost in time. From Joseph's perspective in 'Endpiece', the events and people of his youth take on the illusory aspect of a dream. It is from this perspective that he begins to explain his life by telling the story of the seven poor men to his wife.

³ R. G. Geering, in 'Christina Stead in the 1960s', (*Southerly*, 28 [1968], 33) identifies the common incest theme of the two sets of brothers and sisters in the novels.

⁴ Christina Stead, 'A Writer's Friends' in *Ocean of Story: The Uncollected Stories of Christina Stead*, pp. 496-97.

The story as it is told in the novel is not the one told by Joseph, for he possesses neither the language nor the imaginative power to bring those shadows of the past to life in the manner displayed by the novel. The version of events that we have before us is Christina Stead's imaginative and dramatic interpretation of the dream. Stead adopts a perspective similar to Joseph's in looking back at the past, but there the comparison ends. Stead liberates the passions of her characters in prose which is dense, complex and rich in images, reflecting a dream's imagery.

Seven Poor Men of Sydney tells many tales within the larger framework of the novel. It dramatises the struggles of the main characters as they are buffeted by the circumstances of their lives and racked by storms of emotion. The impression is created from the outset that the dream is no idyllic pastoral of youth, but on the contrary, the time of the dream is one of intense personal pain and suffering, disappointments and failures, for most of the characters. The atmospheric use of darkness and night imagery, together with the sounds of strange cries and piercing yells, suggest that the dream is a nightmare for many. The frame for the dream, or drama, of life in the novel is provided by the allusion to *Macbeth* in the lines which appear as an epigraph to this chapter. Graham, up to his neck in trouble, hyperbolically compares his own troubles to Macbeth's tragedy (Ch. 4, p. 107), but this is not intended as a serious allusion by the author. The allusion to Macbeth's speech on life is made twice in the novel, both times at moments of crisis involving Michael and Catherine Baguenault, two of the principal characters whose lives are marked by personal tragedy. The first occasion in which the allusion occurs comes after Kol Blount recounts his nightmares, or 'waking dreams' as he calls them, to Marion Folliot. Marion's unspoken response (Ch. 7, p. 260) echoes the speech of Macbeth. In his nightmare Blount watches helplessly as Michael Baguenault dies by drowning. It is a prophetic dream since he does not know of Michael's actual death until he is told of it by Marion. Reality and dream here resemble each

other strangely, since both are like old tales, fantastic and gloomy. The second allusion to *Macbeth* is implicit in the madman's tale in Chapter 11. The madman, who, in Nietzschean terms, is too much awake, sees acutely the painful reality of life hidden behind the veil of illusion. He recounts his vision of life through his incoherent 'tale of beauty and horror' (Ch. 11, p. 302) in a scene which recalls Macbeth's words about life being 'a tale / Told by an idiot'. . . . The madman's vision, which echoes other visions of souls struggling in the underworld, is of an oppressed people 'browbeaten and struggling in the dust' (Ch. 11, p. 313). In the confusion and disorder which marks the struggle, a babel of voices is heard:

the cries of the demented, the prayers of the religious, the murmurs of old women muttering their vengeance as they go along the streets after a lifetime of disappointment. (Ch. 11, p. 303)

Their cries, like the madman's, are incoherent and signify nothing. The madman's vision concludes with the image of the giant hand of 'Disorder, Lord of the Earth' pulling back 'a magnificent Chinese curtain' on which is embroidered 'the fair outward false semblance of things' (Ch. 11, pp. 303-04), a reference later reinforced by the image of the veil of Maya, a 'silk mesh . . . woven of the bodies of flying men and women with the gestures interlocked in thousands of attitudes of passion' ('Endpiece', p. 317). These are references to the veil of illusion which hides the hard and painful reality of suffering lives in the human drama being enacted. Only a genius or a madman possesses the extraordinary quality of vision to be able to see the reality beyond the veil. The madman's tale is short and powerful, and in its disturbing quality it, too, bears a resemblance to dream. The other characters seem to acknowledge its meaning by remaining strangely silent at its end. Catherine is the only character to voice aloud her recognition that '[t]hat is my life; only a madman knows it' (Ch. 11, p. 304). The madman and Catherine have a similar vision of life. Much earlier in the novel when Catherine confesses her tendency to excess to Baruch

Mendelssohn, she uses the image of a thicket to express the idea of the entanglements from which it is the object of every person to escape:

Under many hoods and hats, we are all the same
creature all the time trying to make its way out of a
thicket. (Ch. 5, p. 150)

Her reference to a thicket and the madman's vision of bodies writhing in the darkness allude to a Dantesque conception of hell. There are several allusions in the novel to life as a hell on earth, the most humorous being old Williams's tale of the stoker (Ch. 4, pp. 98–100). The final allusion to hell is in the description of the silk mesh, referred to previously, in the sentence beginning 'Thought flies along their veins' ('Endpiece', pp. 317–18). This phrase suggests the painting by Pierfrancesco Orsini of the mouth of hell around the upper lip of which is inscribed 'All Thought Flies'.⁵ In this case, the mesh or veil of Maya appears to represent a curtain that covers the mouth of hell. All these allusions reinforce the atmosphere of darkness which dominates the novel, felt even when the characters are seen in the bright light of day.

Seven Poor Men of Sydney is 'an old tale' (Ch. 1, p. 3) and its gloomy quality relates it to Shakespeare's winter's tales, described in *Richard II*:

In winter's tedious nights sit by the fire
With good old folks, and let them tell thee tales
Of woeful ages long ago betid. . . .
(*Richard II*, V.i.40–42)

We are reminded that Joseph begins his tale at night, sitting by the hearth, and that his thoughts are initiated by the phrase '[l]ong ago' ('Endpiece', p. 318). There is a further link between this novel and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in the similar evocative atmosphere in which 'old tales', legends or fairytales, were told.⁶ The novel itself begins its narrative of the seven poor men with a stock fairytale opening '[t]here was a family' (Ch. 1, p. 2), and this stylistic

⁵ Pierfrancesco Orsini's 'Bocca d'Inferno' at Bomarzo is illustrated in Robert Hughes's *Heaven and Hell in Western Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1968), pp. 198 and facing.

⁶ See also *The Winter's Tale*, II.i.22.

device links the novel strongly to the tradition of tale-telling in the long cold winters of Europe. This tradition gave rise to the folklore, fairytales and legends which are familiar to most readers. Such tales are usually dark, involving misfortune, suffering, or both, and they are frequently morbid. Within Stead's novel many such tales are told by different characters: old Williams tells his tale of *The Stoker*, Michael Baguenault tells his frightening tales, Catherine Baguenault tells her 'strange and long' narrative (Ch. 9, p. 263) and, as the group of friends are gathered at the asylum (an appropriate place for telling such tales), tales are told in turn by Fulke Folliott, Catherine, the madman and Kol Blount. The telling and the substance of these short tales reflect the wider tale itself which compares to the telling of a dream or a legend of times past, endowed with the disturbing power of the winter's tale.

In addition to the link between this novel and Shakespeare's old tales, the theatrical quality of the novel derives in part from the manner of telling such tales. The actual telling of a winter's tale can be regarded as a theatrical event in itself. John Nairn, in his study of Shakespeare's last plays, points out:

During the telling of a story, the presence of the real, unconquered night may have affected the listeners as the darkness of an indoor theatre (or cinema) affects the audience, at once liberating and concentrating the imagination. In such a setting the telling of a tale would have been a kind of theatrical event.⁷

It is not too difficult to imagine the telling of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* under these conditions; in fact, many of the tales told within the novel conform to the theatrical idea. These aspects of the novel highlight Christina Stead's prevailing dramatic intention and form a stylistic link between *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The Salzburg Tales* which also uses the theatrical metaphor as the basis for the telling of many tales.

The dramatic principle upon which *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is

⁷ John Nairn, 'Lear-Haunted: Shakespeare's Last Plays', Diss. University of Tasmania, 1986, Chapter 1, "A Fairy Tale Style", p. 22.

constructed is the dual principle of conflict between forces which constitute 'the eternal contrast and composition of the world' (Ch. 9, pp. 273-74). The lives of the characters, being 'obscure lives', are represented as struggles to escape their darkness, 'the condition of man' (Ch. 9, p. 273). Consequently it seems appropriate that Baruch Mendelssohn, a victor in the struggle, should use the military metaphor when he exhorts Catherine to continue her personal struggle against the darkness within her. He asks:

Why, why these retreats, these gentle dreams? We will win, soon those who can carry a battle-flag will have a host behind them; the host is there now, waiting in the twilight of morning by the wayside, after a long bivouac troubled by dreams and sickness. What are you waiting for? (Ch. 5, p. 151)

The victorious host he refers to is, of course, the new dawn, the light which banishes darkness. For some, like Mendelssohn, Fulke Folliot and Tom Winter, the struggle takes the form of the Marxist struggle in the lives of the workers (Ch. 5, p. 135). For others, the struggle is as much psychological as it is political and physical.

The dream-like quality of the novel emphasises that it represents a drama of hidden lives and that this drama is quite different from the conventional representations of observed life. As Mendelssohn tells Michael Baguenault:

Lives wind their way out by curious bypaths. You may have noticed, official drama is so fearfully unsatisfactory because of its big gross themes. Everyone knows it doesn't represent their own feelings at all. (Ch. 8, p. 242)

The process of inward struggle is manifested in outbursts of turbulent emotions which vie with the elements in their suddenness and quickly spent passion. The signs of the struggle are also seen in the physical appearance of the characters, in their aged, hollow faces, their bent, thin shoulders and dark-ringed eyes. The reader is spectator to the actions of the characters as their struggles take their course and their toll.

Stead believed in the power of story telling to make real the dream of life, as she indicates in the quotation from 'Ocean of Story' which appears at the beginning of this chapter. Stead's genius lies in her ability to capture the hard realities of everyday experience in strong, realistic narrative based on detailed descriptions of places, events and people, as well as in conveying the intensity and surreality of the hidden or emotional lives of the characters. The naturalistic mode, used for 'stage-setting' and description of external events, gives way to a highly wrought, poetic and emotionally fraught mode which represents the internal lives of the leading players in the drama.

Stead's characters may be seen as living in a world of illusion signified by the darkness of suffering their personal hells, the pain of which comes to light only when they express their feelings freely. But not every character is driven to the extreme of melodrama to demonstrate their passions, like Catherine Baguenault, who cuts her wrist (Ch. 11, p. 311). Her response, like her brother's, is the extreme reaction of one who suffers the 'sickness' of alienation which hangs over her life like a pall. These two characters are lost, aimless wanderers, condemned to a 'sentence of a hopeless fate' (Ch. 5, p. 140).

The novel dramatises powerfully the Zarathustrian message that life is indeed meaningless unless people mobilise the will to shape their lives. The character of Baruch Mendelssohn illustrates the principle that, given a direction or goal in life, a character can exert control over his life. Despite the loneliness, illness and poverty which have the potential for condemning him to a fate similar to that of Michael and Catherine, Baruch eventually succeeds in his ambition to escape obscurity. His voice in the drama speaks with the tones of reason, compassion and love, qualities without which other characters seem to flounder hopelessly. He laments the wasted lives he sees around him and advocates the traditional path of knowledge as a route towards the light which he regards as the goal of man. He tells Joseph Baguenault: '[g]rasp this and this, and you have invaded the whole question. More than that, you are on the road

for the capital city, you can take the kingdom' (Ch. 3, p. 93). (The 'capital city' refers either to Athens or Jerusalem, as the symbolic source of Light, the romantic goal of the quest.) Mendelssohn offers knowledge as a weapon with which the other characters might assail ignorance, poverty, disease and oppression, the manifestations of the forces of darkness in their lives. The path he advocates, represented as a quest, is the preferred alternative to the aimless wandering of those lost in the darkness.

In terms of the volume of prose devoted to it, the presentation of the physical environment is a small part of the background in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. The contribution made by passages of natural description is atmospheric, reflecting the contrasts of dark and light, storm and sunny calm. The details which are mentioned are consistent with the conventional European vision of an alien land that was held in awe and fear by the earliest European settlers in Australia. Those men told many tales of their constant struggle with floods, bushfires, and the problems of isolation. The efforts at the turn of the century to create a legend of these people resulted in a literature that concentrated on the outback and the rugged, pioneering types who forged an ethos, the mateship of the bush. As Christina Stead acknowledges:

Australia has always been a tale-teller's land —
and the tales were formed in the outback and round
the fires and by drovers and sheep-shearers.⁸

Her tale departs from the myth being created in that earlier literature. In this novel many tales are told of her characters' struggles in the city wasteland. Their hardships and isolation are felt as keenly as the privations of their rural counterparts represented in the 'official drama'.

The novel opens dramatically with a stark and threatening image: 'The hideous low scarred yellow horny and barren headland lies curled like a scorpion in a blinding sea and sky' (Ch. 1, p. 1). This startling beginning to the

⁸ Stead, in her article on Australian fiction, 'Admired acquaintance — a view of Australian fiction', *The National Times* 18, 23 October 1976, p. 59.

novel evokes the setting of the drama as harsh and unyielding, immediately dispelling any idea that life in that place is simple and easy. The importance of this image of nature as part of the city's background is overlooked in the critical preoccupation with the presentation of the city itself. Ron Geering rightly emphasises the city wasteland⁹; Dorothy Green praises Stead's achievement of describing realistically a depressed economic and social environment¹⁰; while Michael Wilding finds fault in Stead's 'unnecessary' and 'boring' use of Sydney street names claiming that it communicates nothing but a 'provincial lack of proportion'.¹¹ Grant McGregor supports Wilding's view and takes his criticism a step further in insisting that the characters' wanderings 'must be explained or else condemned as the novel's major flaw — a total inability to relate the characters to the landscape they inhabit'.¹²

Far from being a flaw in the novel, Stead's use of street names and occasional city landmarks is deliberately intended to focus identity on the city, contrasting the known delineations of the city that is familiar territory to the characters of the novel, with the unknown, mysterious countryside which lies outside the city. Stead's characters experience either terror, like Michael Baguenault, or the sense of being lost, when they are outside their familiar urban boundaries. However, even within these boundaries, her characters suffer an intellectual alienation or separation from the source of their ideas and this is conveyed by the pattern of aimless, physical wandering within the city. Joseph, untouched by the intellectual currents of his city and therefore saved from the torments experienced by his friends, typically sees identity in very simple

⁹ R. G. Geering, *Christina Stead*, Australian Writers and their Work Series (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 10.

¹⁰ Dorothy Green, 'Chaos or a Dancing Star? Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*', *Meanjin*, 27 (1968), 150-54.

¹¹ Michael Wilding, 'Christina Stead's Australian Novels', *Southerly*, 27 (1967), 21.

¹² Grant McGregor, 'Seven Poor Men of Sydney: The Historical Dimension', *Southerly*, 38 (1978), 381.

terms:

This is my city, here I was born and bred, I cannot be lost here, nothing can happen to me. I am Joseph Baguenault of Fisherman's Bay. I know the stones, the turnings; I know where the Markets are, there to the right and behind. (Ch. 4, pp. 121-22)

In her detailed descriptions of the city, Stead displays her own familiarity with the city where she was born and bred and demonstrates her capacity for accuracy in the presentation of that detail. She points out the features which stand out in the habitat of the obscure men and women who struggled for survival there. Her use of directional indicators, such as 'there to the right', reveals Joseph's limited perspective. Stead herself stands in the background observing character and setting, providing a wider perspective of places, people and events. Occasionally, as in the following exchange between Mendelssohn and Joseph, one becomes aware that Stead shared her characters' love of the city:

'The sight of a large city always stirs me almost to prayer,' said Baruch.

'I always feel most a man when in the city; in the country, I am almost afraid, there are no voices out there,' remarked Joseph. (Ch. 11, p. 313)

All Stead's novels deal with city life. She is far more at home in her observations of city life than she is in her occasional descriptions of country life. Like Michel Alphendéry in *House of All Nations*, who sojourns briefly in the French countryside and misses his urban creature comforts, Stead seems to be uncomfortable in the country. On the occasions when her characters move in a country setting — such as when Louisa stays with the Bakens (*The Man Who Loved Children*), when Teresa visits Harper's Ferry (*For Love Alone*), when Edward stays at Whitehouse (*The People With the Dogs*), or when Tom Cotter travels out into the English countryside (*Cotters' England*) — Stead's descriptions of these settings are intended to exploit the dramatic potential inherent in the contrast between city and country. Sometimes this involves giving only a generalised impression of life, as in *House of All Nations* where a

short paragraph describing Jean Frère's garden carries the burden of representing the French countryside. Her descriptions of country life are frequently written in utopian terms: they may depict a utopia from the first (shown, for example, in the account of Louisa's experience with the Bakens) or they may reveal the decline of a utopian dream (represented by Whitehouse in *The People With the Dogs*). When not shown in these terms, the countryside is presented as a mysterious, unfathomable, gothically-inspired setting, as it is presented in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *Cotters' England*. Such treatment is more appropriate to the fairytale or gothic romance than to the realistic novel.¹³ However, Stead deliberately uses it in both these novels as a dramatic device to reflect the hidden lives of her characters in sharp contrast to their ordinary, easily seen, workaday lives, the details of which are documented in the realistic narrative mode. Life in Sydney for the seven poor men is *meant* to seem boring for much of the time, as they tramp their tedious way to and from home and work, but their fantasy lives are a release from this.¹⁴

Stead's study is not of the natural world of plants and animals, but of the social world of people, their concerns and relationships, and the cities which bring these people together. Cities are the centres of intellectual life, and one of Stead's major concerns in writing the dramas of her characters is to show the effect upon them of the currents of ideas which flow there.

The *dramatis personae* of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* are like the jetsam cast up by the sea onto the beaches of Fisherman's Bay. They are like castaways on this 'desert island' (Ch. 1, p. 3). Since they are isolated from European culture, whence their forebears came, they are wanderers cut off from

¹³ Both city and country in *Cotters' England* are presented as bleak, cold, misty landscapes which fit Stead's conception of 'Cotters' England' as a fairyland. This type of landscape is traditionally a device of romance often used to symbolise suffering. The idea about fairyland in this novel is elaborated in Chapter Six.

¹⁴ *For Love Alone* demonstrates a similar contrast between Teresa's daytime pedestrian travels to and from work and her night-time flights of fancy.

the source of their cultural identity. The city of Sydney is presented as a provincial centre of transplanted European ideas. It supposedly represents a known entity with which the characters can identify themselves, but the ideas which seem to dominate their cultural life are alien to their direct personal experience. Alienation emerges as a strong theme in the novel. In his hymn to Australia, 'In Memoriam' (Ch. 11, pp. 305-09), Kol Blount voices a question that looms large in the lives of the seven poor men; that is, the question of finding meanings, direction and purpose in their lives:

Why are we here? Nothing floats down here,
this far in the south, but is worn out with wind,
tempest and weather; all is flotsam and jetsam. . . .
Eating these regurgitated ideas from the old
country makes us sick and die of sickness. (Ch. 11,
p. 309)

The intellectual lives of characters like Blount, Michael, Catherine and others, appear to be influenced by a Bohemianism which intensifies their feeling of isolation and sickness of spirit, rather than giving them the clear direction which might provide them with a 'cure'. Talking, presented as the fire of social life in this novel, is meant to cure loneliness and alienation. However, the talk indulged in by the members of this Australian Bohemian circle, obfuscates, rather than illuminates.¹⁵ Stead's treatment of the Bohemian circle in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* exposes the mostly trivial concerns of these effete characters as theatrical posturing against society. The portrait of the odd collection of pseudo-intellectuals in Chapter 6 shows them to be dabbling in a mixture of Bohemian interests of which 'Australian Nietzscheanism' is one.¹⁶ Catherine Baguenault refers to their alienation, ironically quoting Nietzsche:

¹⁵ The Jago circle in *Cotters' England* similarly cloaks the 'truths' of life with meaningless speculation.

¹⁶ Chapter One above mentioned the influence of what Jack Lindsay called 'Australian Nietzscheanism' on the Bohemian circle in Sydney in the 1920s. Stead's mention in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* of the figures at the 'Roman Café', which includes mention of 'Lindsays galore' (Ch. 6, p. 165), is clearly a reference to this circle.

"[t]hey are alien," said Nietzsche, "so alien that they cannot even speak their difference to each other" (Ch. 11, p. 311).

Despite the Romantic associations with Nature which held currency in Bohemian circles, this one finds little affinity with nature in Australia, further signifying the condition of being cut off from life. As a child, Michael Baguenault, for example, expresses the romantic dream of isolation in his yearning for the life of a Bedouin or member of a primitive tribe. When he tests his dream against the reality of the 'moonlit wastes' off the beaten track in his expedition with Chaunter, he is bewildered, disturbed and finally terrified as a storm rises and 'a thousand imagined terrors found form in sound and gloom' (Ch. 9, p. 269). The storm, though very real, assumes significance as a reflection of Michael's turbulent mental state. The grotesque phantoms he 'sees' on this occasion are hallucinations produced by the storm and stress he feels within. Michael's, Catherine's and Blount's romantic ideas are seen as exaggerated posturing which intensifies the impression we form of them as theatrical characters.

The expression 'age of storm and stress' is used by Michael Baguenault's father to describe the state of being governed by unruly passions during youth (Ch. 1, p. 32). Michael and his *alter ego* and sister, Catherine, are both 'ruled by . . . impulsive passions which ever strove with [their] intellect for mastery' (Ch. 5, p. 149). They are constantly at war with themselves and at odds with those around them. Their pose of rebellion and romantic isolation are rejections of conventional society, which, in turn, regards them as freaks or 'riff-raff' (Ch. 8, p. 219). Ironically their isolation removes them from the sphere of love and understanding which might alleviate their suffering. They are torn inside by their natural desire to be loved, a desire that is not fulfilled. Their unhappy, unrequited loves turn them even further in upon themselves.

The phrase 'age of storm and stress' recalls the historical period of German anti-Enlightenment known as 'Sturm und Drang'. In the antinomy of

classicism and romanticism, the Age of Reason (Aufklärung or Enlightenment) represents the health of the mind, whereas the Age of Storm and Stress represents its sickness. Goethe, in his schematic division of the ages of man, describes the Age of Storm and Stress as a disordered irruption of subjectivism marked by a sickness of spirit. In her treatment of youth in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Stead seems to be following Goethe's systematisation. His schema appears to operate in Stead's dramatic presentations of Michael and Catherine Baguenault, whose irrational, Dionysian tendencies and mental sickness contrast markedly with the presentation of the rational, mature Mendelssohn. The storm and stress of Michael's and Catherine's intense subjectivity is typically expressed in wild, uninhibited, poetic feeling.

An examination of the early chapters in which the background details of Michael's character are sketched, reveals that Stead may have had the dual concepts of romanticism and reason in mind. Very early in Michael's childhood, we are told, his Fancy ran away with him just at the time when his Reason was beginning to awake (Ch. 1, p. 7). A protracted childhood illness then forces a period of solitude on Michael which intensifies his tendency to brooding and introspection. He survives his illness but his reason does not. Thereafter Michael suffers the acute sensitivity of being like the maniac, 'too much awake', which makes ordinary life intolerable to him. Disappointment in love and his later war experiences leave him profoundly troubled, so that he remains, throughout the story of his life, a disturbed and unhappy character. He is trapped in his cell of romantic idealism and is hamstrung spiritually. Michael seems fated to suffer the age of storm and stress well into his later life, so that he never experiences the balance and harmony characteristic of the 'age of reason'. His creative potential is tragically wasted.

Catherine is also plagued by her over-sensitivity and her relationships are jeopardised by her tendency to fly into furious rages at imagined slights. Throughout the novel she is portrayed as a rebel without a cause, a woman who

does not know what she wants, while everything she does 'is to avoid the abyss' (Ch. 7, p. 201). The novel's complexity resists easy schematisation but the dualities of darkness and light and romanticism and reason appear as principal threads in the tangle of the narrative.

Seven Poor Men of Sydney introduces 'a family there named Baguenault, which had settled in the bay directly after its arrival from Ireland thirty years before' (Ch. 1, p. 2), and sets out to trace the story of the younger generation of that family until 'disaster' is brought upon it by the unfortunate lives of Michael and Catherine. That story becomes intertwined with the stories of others in the circle of relationships formed around the family. There are two branches of the family which have borne fruit so different in quality that they seem hardly related. Michael and Catherine are complete opposites of their cousin Joseph Baguenault. They are extraordinary characters, paradoxically unchanging in their instability, while, by contrast, Joseph is dull-witted and steady in his mediocrity. (It may be, as Mendelssohn points out, that Joseph is overshadowed and misunderstood by his more volatile and vocal cousins. A closer look at his character later in this chapter will examine whether Joseph has any 'hidden' depths.) The presentation of the stories of these quite dissimilar characters involves the use of dramatically contrasting modes as the narrative oscillates between them.

The characters seem to fall into two groups according to their association with either branch of the Baguenault family. Michael and Catherine are surrounded by a circle of pseudo-intellectual, dilettantish, and Bohemian friends, including Kol Blount, Tom Withers, Milt Dean, the Folliots and others (Winterbaum, Dacre and unnamed acquaintances). Joseph is closely associated, through his work as a printer, with Baruch Mendelssohn, and is introduced by Mendelssohn to Winter. These two men are marked by their strong sense of commitment while the group surrounding Joseph's cousins drifts in a sea of different opinions, with no real sense of commitment. Winterbaum's image of

Catherine as 'a raft, not a straw' (Ch. 5, p. 130) and Blount's dream image of Michael and himself drifting on a canal or turbulent river express this idea. Mendelssohn regards the Folliots' involvement with the socialist cause as a whim which will disappear when it gets too dangerous for them. Mendelssohn is a scholar with obvious Marxist sympathies who is committed to furthering his own ambition as well as to helping his fellows, men like Joseph, in their own struggles. Winter is a communist librarian whose commitment is obvious. He, too, helps Joseph. Tom Withers, one of Joseph's colleagues, is a mass of contradictions (Ch. 1, pp. 23-27), an asocial loner who moves between both groups and is an uncomfortable bed-fellow in both. The personal dramas of all these men become intertwined as they meet in work and friendship.

The drama's scheme of contrasts is suggested, as the novel opens, in images of darkness and light. The darkness over the land at night is pierced by the rays of searchlights, pilot-lights of ships on the harbour, the lighthouse ray and 'the yellow rim of the great sub-tropical moon'(Ch. 1, p. 1). Nothing breaks the long silence of the night until daytime, when the sounds of busy activity indicate life. The novel works on this contrast of hidden night life and revealed daytime life. The presentation of the night life or emotional life of the characters, in its vitality and spontaneity, is more dynamic than the presentation of the tedious toil engaged in during the day, with the night life representing an avenue of escape from daily work. Stead's presentation of the workers in Chamberlain's printing works emphasises that the passivity of their roles in the processes of production is due to their absolute dependence on their unreliable and inefficient boss, Gregory Chamberlain. The impression created is that these men are oppressed and are unable, either because of inertia or because of their obligations to family, to break the circle of work which binds them.

The Catholic Church is another institution which contributes to the darkness of oppression felt. It exhorts its congregation to model their lives on

humble creatures who bend their will to the will of God (Ch. 1, p. 34), contrary to the revolutionary doctrines, preached by the Marxists, which urge rebellion. 'Ecrasez l'infame' [sic] (Ch. 11, p. 314), the revolutionary catch-cry, is muttered ironically by Winter as he sits in the darkness of the cathedral with Mendelssohn and Joseph. The Church plays a significant part in the drama of the Baguenault family in conditioning the submissive roles of the older generation. Michael and Catherine reject the Church as part of their rebellion against family and conventional society. Mendelssohn launches a strong attack on the Church and the economic system (Ch. 3, pp. 87-90), both of which are part of the social system that oppresses its people and contributes to the obscurity-against which men must fight. In this sense, the old drama of the confrontation of the forces of darkness and light is played out in the struggles of the seven poor men. Since the novel is presented as a 'dream' or drama of youth, the main characters are engaged in the struggle at a time when they feel it most keenly.

Criticism of this novel often turns to the question of its focus: what is the centre of the novel? Dorothy Green, in her article 'Chaos or a Dancing Star', sees Catherine Baguenault as an autobiographically based character and thus central to the novel, with Michael and Joseph as her two principal 'temptations'.¹⁷ Catherine bears a superficial resemblance to the autobiographical Teresa Hawkins in *For Love Alone*, but, apart from some shared youthful similarities, these two characters are poles apart. Catherine neurotically dissipates her energies and avoids confronting her self by becoming submerged in various activities. She is

a woman of revolution without a barricade, with something of the politician in her, an organiser of Labour Branches, a marcher in strike processions, a person who got excited by caucus decisions, a woman who worked in holiday camps and workers'

¹⁷ Dorothy Green, 'Chaos or a Dancing Star?' Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, *Meanjin*, 27 (1968), 150-61.

education theatres, always passionately involved in something, always half-sick. (Ch. 6, p. 144)

Teresa, by contrast, is doggedly bent on a single cause, her own. Her story is shaped by the pattern of the quest for love and personal freedom, while the motif of Catherine's story is the circular, wandering route of the aimless life.

The idea of a single focus does not take into account the complexity of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and Green's 'answer' addresses the question 'who?' rather than 'what?' is the focus. There is no single character in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* whose drama is the basis for unity in the novel, for Stead presents many dramas within the whole. The idea that the narrative should focus on a single character contradicts Stead's intention to write of seven poor men. The element common to the portrayal of the obscure lives of all the characters is struggle, and it is Stead's treatment of the theme of struggle which gives unity and the semblance of drama to the novel.

One way of looking at the novel, which takes into account Stead's interest in character and her theme of struggling lives, is to see that there are two kinds of drama of the person. The unchanging lives of Michael and Catherine, with their aimlessness and thwarted potential, represent one kind of drama — a drama which records the static nature of unchanging lives, governed by fate. These characters are victims of the darkness of despair and loneliness from which they never escape, until they end their struggles in suicide and madness respectively. Theirs is the tragedy of wasted lives. The other kind of drama is self-directed towards a better life and necessarily involves change. An example of this is found in the character of Baruch Mendelssohn whose strong sense of purpose and capacity to love give meaning and vitality to his otherwise lonely life. Joseph Baguenault's drama shows that, through steady determination and with the help of a strong-willed character like Mendelssohn, even the most humble man can attempt to control his life. Perhaps the most notable characteristic which acts as a factor determining the difference between

the two kinds of drama, is the capacity to love others. In the Stead canon, unselfish love is given the highest value and is equated with a full and creative life, whereas the opposite, self-love, is shown to be sterile and destructive.

Catherine and her brother are 'unhinged' (Ch. 5, p. 132) by a 'disequilibrium of passion' (Ch. 5, p. 154). Their struggle may be said to be with the darkness within themselves, which, it eventually transpires, includes their incestuous love for each other. Although Joseph Baguenault is the most taciturn character in the novel, being referred to frequently by his cousins and himself as a dummy and a dunce, his drama reveals more potential for change than that of his cousins. A bond of friendship develops between Mendelssohn and Joseph which provides the catalyst for Joseph's gradual 'awakening'.

Mendelssohn observes Joseph without the prejudice that colours Catherine's dim view of her cousin's 'tranquil stupidity' (Ch. 5, p. 153). Mendelssohn declares that 'he [Joseph] can come to life. That strange, delicate, translucent mind, is a larva of a mind' (Ch. 5, p. 152). This statement reflects Mendelssohn's confident belief that '[t]he quietest and simplest man can develop endlessly: even the lifelong sleeper can be awakened' (Ch. 5, p. 153). In his assertion, Mendelssohn states the dynamic process involved in Stead's drama of the person. This is basically an expression of Nietzsche's doctrine that life is will-to-power, that a man may, if he *wills*, make something of himself.

The awakening process, a process of coming to consciousness, self-awareness or fulfilment, is creative. Baruch Mendelssohn *sounds* aphoristically like Nietzsche and Nietzsche's statements on creativity, which he calls the falsifying processes of consciousness (the will-to-illusion), come to mind in considering Mendelssohn's statement about the awakening process. The correspondence between art and life in Nietzschean thought includes his aphoristic statement that art in general consists of 'intentional transformation'

or falsification.¹⁸ The will-to-illusion, like the will-to-power, is essentially creative and both these doctrines operate in the creative process of shaping or transforming life. Mendelssohn appears to be subscribing to the Nietzschean view of creativity when he comments upon Joseph's potential for transformation. It is with this in mind that the drama of Joseph Baguenault needs to be observed and compared with that of his two cousins who, in Nietzschean terms, are already too much awake.

The presentation of the dream or drama of youth in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* rests on the idea that the life passing before us does so as if it were a play. Again, the connection with Nietzsche is surely more than coincidental. Vaihinger, in a footnote, quotes two Nietzschean aphorisms: "Not to measure the world by our personal feelings but as if it were a play and we were part of the play"; [and] "To regard our manner of living and acting as a part in a play, including therein our maxims and principles. . . ." ¹⁹

The metaphor of the play is manifested throughout the novel in different ways. The discontinuity of the narrative facilitates the frequent exits and entrances of different players in the drama. For example, after Michael Baguenault's first appearances in the earlier chapters, he disappears for several chapters and the narrative of Joseph's life takes over. Michael's disappearance is perhaps devised to reflect his divorcement from the mainstream of life. When he reappears he plays a minor role that again emphasises his feeling of alienation. One such brief appearance occurs in Chapter 7. He is one of a group including Mendelssohn, Withers, Joseph, Milt Dean and Catherine, who are returning from an outing. At the sight of a ship manned by scab labour putting out to sea, Michael is suddenly heard expressing his wish to be with them, as

¹⁸ For a full discussion of this doctrine, see Hans Vaihinger, 'Nietzsche and His Doctrine of Conscious Illusion' in *Nietzsche - A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Robert C. Solomon (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), pp. 83-104.

¹⁹ Vaihinger, pp. 97-98.

exiles together (Ch. 7, p. 198). Later he disrupts the conviviality of the friends with an overtly theatrical display of melancholy (Ch. 7, pp. 208–11). This scene ends abruptly in anti-climax as Michael goes straight home to bed (Ch. 7, p. 213), while Catherine, disturbed by her brother's ham acting and fearful of his intentions, wanders the streets, penniless and lost, until she comes to a shelter.²⁰

Michael's brief leave-taking from his friend Kol Blount and his sister Catherine, shown in Chapter 7, is followed in the next chapter by a longer scene in which Michael takes leave from his mother. This scene contains some important explanatory information about the nature of Michael's drama. Within it, he acknowledges the static, death-like quality of his life. Both he and Blount see themselves as 'the sons of Clovis, hamstrung' (Ch. 8, p. 207). Michael's failures and disappointments are, according to him, the 'fate of an idealist' (Ch. 8, p. 219). Cut off from ordinary life by his extraordinary perspective, he is trapped in a 'solitary cell' from which he watches life pass by (p. 219). Just as Blount is physically crippled, Michael is emotionally crippled, powerless to become engaged in life because of his fear of failure, a fear that is expressed in his use of the theatrical metaphor:

To act for me is to do something awry, to stop the
machinery, stick my heel through the scenery, gaff
in the acting, forget my lines. (Ch. 8, p. 220)

Ironically, for one who is too much awake, Michael describes himself as 'too delicate, quiescent . . . I prefer to sleep' (p. 220), but the gentle repose of sleep is denied him. He sees himself swinging 'like an empty bladder . . . between this world and the netherlands' (p. 220). This revelation is immediately followed by his description of a grotesque dream in which the idea of him being an onlooker,

²⁰ The pattern of night wandering which eventually ends in some kind of temporary shelter, is a motif of the aimless life. Edward Massine in *The People With the Dogs*, for example, wanders the streets of New York listlessly at night until he meets up with a friend who takes him to a city doss-house where he sees the lost and destitute men of the city. The shelter reached by Catherine is like this.

rather than an actor in life's play, is repeated (pp. 220–21). His dream is a metaphor for his life spent in a cocoon of aimlessness, loneliness and isolation which seems to him 'black, dusty, dry-mouthed, funereal' (Ch. 2, p. 40). The leave-taking scenes show that it is too late now for a metamorphosis: Michael's melancholic relinquishment of the will to live is dramatically proved in these, and the following, scenes.

After a final debauch with Withers, Michael seeks shelter at the Folliots' house. Drunkenness and fatigue bring on a series of hallucinations in which more of Michael's hidden life is revealed. The sounds of the storm outside reflect the wildness of his thoughts as

[h]is reason struggled over a vast battlefield, it seemed, advancing and falling back in front of the floods of pain. He visualised this battle as the one he had escaped from long ago. (Ch. 8, pp. 233–34)

This refers not only to the battle in France from which he deserted long ago, but also to his retreat from the metaphoric battle of life. He is characterised as one who is completely disengaged from the struggle of life and his personal tragedy is indicated by the self-destructiveness and aimlessness of his actions now. His last day is spent drinking and wandering in the night-world of brothels and public houses where he continues to be haunted by the spectres of his grotesque underworld existence. Lonely, hungry and tired, he walks to the 'Tank Stream Press' where he meets Mendelssohn and Joseph. Mendelssohn recognises Michael's suicidal intentions but fails in his attempt to cajole and cheer him. His advice, that Michael should marry and settle down, rings hollowly of that offered Michael by his mother and Mrs. Blount. In lightly offering conventional platitudes to an obviously unconventional character, Mendelssohn, who ought to know better, proves disappointing in this scene. The half-heartedness of his gesture of companionship here is inconsistent with the social aims of Marxism that he embraces. Left alone in his despair, Michael's wandering finally comes to an end at the Gap, the place of suicide.

The presentation of Catherine's drama, like Michael's, is scattered in disconnected scenes throughout the novel. The impression we gain of her from her brief appearances, especially in her scene with Mendelssohn (Ch. 5, pp. 144–54), is that she is given to theatrics verging on melodrama. She plays a tragic heroine, alternately raging and sighing, turning her pale face and furious eyes on Mendelssohn in 'her wild, romantic, exaggerated pose' (Ch. 5, p. 154). Her longest single appearance occurs when she tells Michael's story ('CATHERINE'S NARRATIVE') at her own leave-taking. After a preparatory silence, Catherine begins her performance: '[h]er powerful tragic sense changed the small room, even in their eyes, to a theatre' (Ch. 9, p. 264). Even though she begins her 'strange and long' (p. 263) tale during the day, as the tale proceeds, its telling creates an atmosphere of darkness. Michael's 'complete life-history' (Ch. 8, p. 242), is revealed in rhapsodic prose, offering another perspective on the events of his strange life. His statement concerning the ever present darkness in the world reinforces the theme, identified earlier in this chapter, that the drama of life consists of a battle to escape darkness:

Birth strikes the eyeball and says 'Let there be light!' I often wonder what makes a child come forth for something which he knows nothing of: does he see a sudden flash of light in pre-natal night, and hunger and desire it thereafter? Surely darkness is the condition of man, and light is all he thirsts after. . . . (Ch. 9, p. 273)

One of the 'nameless mysteries and darknesses' (Ch. 9, p. 274) spoken of by Michael, is incest. He feels himself condemned to darkness apparently because of his incestuous love for Catherine. His love is narcissistic, and, in his words, he is 'lost because part of me is sundered from me for ever' (Ch. 9, p. 274). This revelation offers quite another explanation of his unhappy, unfulfilled life. Whichever way one looks at it however, his love, his life, 'is a hunger and lust for death at root' (Ch. 9, p. 274).

There is no need to review Catherine's life (as the narrator points out at the end of Chapter 7) for her life is a mirror image of Michael's. They are both

fated never to awaken from their nightmares because they are already too much awake. Catherine sees the asylum as a haven where her vagaries of character will be tolerated and her departure for the asylum marks the conclusion of her tale.

Against the sombre tones of the stories of Michael and Catherine, Joseph Baguenault's drama presents an aspect of light comic relief. Outside his sphere of home and work, Joseph is a quiet, uncomprehending spectator to the theatrical incidents of his cousins' extraordinary lives. He lives in the obscurity of a very ordinary life.

Joseph's tale begins when Michael's is suspended, in Chapter 3, and like his cousins' tales, his begins with a picture of his family background. He is introduced as the product of Irish ancestors, a child born to his mother late in her life, a 'solitary woody pear that sprouted late on the old tree, but he was the very seed of that tree' (Ch. 3, p. 66). Just as Michael's mental imbalance is partly attributed to heredity (being the illegitimate son of the eccentric old Bassett) and Catherine is described as a freakish product of atavism (Ch. 2, p. 38), Joseph, too, is presented as 'a freak of generation' (Ch. 3, p. 67). He is described as being 'dwarfed' (Ch. 2, p. 41 and Ch. 3, p. 67) and also as 'that seedy dwarf' (Ch. 4, p. 118). The references to Joseph being a dwarf further indicate the strong Nietzschean, specifically Zarathustrian, influence in the novel. Zarathustra climbs his mountain only to find that what he is trying to escape is on his back in the form of a dwarf. The dwarf is an image of mediocrity that tries to pull him back down to the world of ordinary men. Zarathustra's 'devil' assumes many disguises, among them being the dwarf and the clown. Like Michael, who is noticed by children as a 'funny man' marked with the 'evil eye' (Ch. 9, p. 267), Joseph's physical appearance makes him the butt of children's laughter: 'The Clown of the Universe had produced a man in his image' (Ch. 4, p. 96). Stead's portrait of Joseph as a mediocre, down-to-earth man is intended to balance her portrait of Michael as the psychologically

crippled genius. Their first cousin relationship suggests the possible psychological incompleteness of the two characters. Joseph is lacking in passion, a quality which Michael (and Catherine) possesses in excess, while Michael lacks the ordinary vision that keeps Joseph in touch with the world. Joseph's steady faith and determination, qualities which are lacking in his cousins, give him the spiritual strength necessary to continue his struggle.

The presentation of the family background in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* establishes a pattern to be followed by Christina Stead in the subsequent novels. The first act in the drama of the person involves the effort to break away from the shaping influence of the family and create a pattern of the character's own. Both the Baguenault mothers seem to be foolish women, obsessively molly-coddling their sons and seeking consolation for the loneliness and tedium of their lives in religion. Their possessiveness is expressive of the generally stifling atmosphere within the family that has the potential for breeding warped personalities. One other family which is similar in this respect is the Cotter family in *Cotters' England*. The family is identifiable in this novel, and in many others by Christina Stead, as part of the general background of oppression from which the individual must struggle to free himself.

Joseph's life is bound by the circle of family and work. When he sets out from home, the narrator takes the reader on a short journey with Joseph across the harbour and into the city where he works. Compared to the unfamiliar and threatening quality of Michael's vision, wherein ordinary things vibrate with the impulse of life (Ch. 1, p. 10), suggestive of a Van Gogh or Munch, Joseph's vision of his world is painted in the familiar, soft but clear tones of the watercolours used by a landscape or still life painter (Ch. 3, pp. 70-71). The flowers he sees in the florist's window remind him of his mother's garden and the 'boxed luncheons' seem delicacies compared to the hunks of bread and meatpaste wrapped in newspaper in his pockets. The noticeable contrast between Joseph's and Michael's vision reveals that pragmatic fancy rules

Joseph's intellect in which imagination lies dormant waiting to be awakened, while Michael's imbalanced intellect is a result of a highly developed imagination not subject to the governing control of fancy. The two characters are as different from each other as the century plant (genus Aloe) is from the rose.

Baruch Mendelssohn uses the metaphors of the century plant and the rose to represent two contrasting types of development in people. Like the century plant, the mind of man grows slowly:

For years and years, four generations, he laps up sun, wind, rain, air, juices; grows a big stalk, looks important, and then puts out a flower once in a hundred years. What happens? A marvel: everyone runs to look at it. Whereas the rose that flowers four times a year gets no applause. When we get a bright idea once in a century, how we applaud ourselves. (Ch. 7, p. 189)

The century plant or Aloe is a succulent desert plant which flowers briefly and then only under the most favourable conditions. The madman, at the end of the novel, associates it with Reason which 'flowers as slowly from as dark a root and dies as suddenly' (Ch. 10, p. 303). Reason begins to flower in Michael's youth only to wither and die.

Christina Stead uses the image of the century plant in *House of All Nations* where the English are referred to as 'this race of century plants . . . waking from one of its cyclical sleeps'.²¹ In that novel the image signifies that England is a nation of sleepers under the spell of illusion. (The fairytale aspect of the image is developed in *Cotters' England*.)

The history of man, as Mendelssohn explains it in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, is a long sleep from which he awakens once every hundred years with a bright idea. In this context the seven poor men are seen to live the obscure lives of sleepers. The desert-like conditions of loneliness and poverty are assumed to

²¹ Christina Stead. *House of All Nations* (New York, 1938; rpt. London: Angus & Robertson, 1974), Scene Sixty-one 'A Sanitary Measure', p. 497.

be the environment in which reason takes so long to flower. (We also see the use of the phrase '[l]ives of obscure men' and the equation of obscurity with desert in *The People With the Dogs*.)²² Michael and Catherine are out of step with their time, being wakers, but too much awake, and their extreme natures make them like exotic plants in an uncultivated garden. Mendelssohn refers to types like Michael in his conversation with Catherine:

They all develop this prodigious flowering of the sensibility and aimless intellection. Don't admire it; wish, rather, that he were like Joseph.

When Catherine responds that Mendelssohn simply does not understand Michael's type, he continues:

it is the chronology of his own lifetime. A small intelligence wasted even in early youth by a disequilibrium of passion. There are such people, wretched, weak, who have no destiny, but are marked out for an eccentric life. (Ch. 5, p. 154)

His comments about Michael clearly indicate his belief that there are some people who are beyond help and hope, whose lives are predestined to an inglorious end, yet he contradicts himself later in Chapter 11 when, at the asylum, he likens insanity to a disease that can be cured. Michael's chief source of weakness lies in the fact that his passion is not balanced by an equally strong will. It is the 'disequilibrium' of passion that finally tips Michael into the abyss.

Baruch Mendelssohn's sympathies clearly lie with the ordinary man, as his friendship with Joseph Baguenault illustrates. He is the first example in Stead's novels of the recurring figure of the benevolent friend, ally or lover who assists others in their struggle. In *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* he is the pilot who guides Joseph carefully in the process of awakening his mind to the wonders of knowledge previously denied him. (The corresponding character in *For Love Alone* is James Quick who awakens Teresa as if from a long sleep.)

²² Christina Stead, *The People With the Dogs*, (Boston, 1952; rpt. with an introduction by Judith Kegan Gardiner, London: Virago, 1981; Part Five, 'New Configurations' p. 271, Part Six, 'Scratch Park' p. 331.

Mendelssohn's name is indicative of the role he plays in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Bruce Holmes suggests that Baruch Mendelssohn's name derives from Spinoza and either Felix Mendelssohn or the musician's grandfather.²³ If Stead was inspired by an historical figure in her naming of this character, it might be more appropriate to consider the leading Jewish thinker of the Age of Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), since Baruch is a Jewish scholar and rationalist, not a musician. Whatever the derivation of his name, he is presented as a man with 'a wide and wandering vision' (Ch. 5, p. 140) and one of his roles in the novel is to assist in Joseph's metamorphosis. He is the only one to see the potential in Joseph which can be developed.

After the dark storms and disorder of his cousins' scenes, the mood changes as Joseph is singled out. In the printing workshop

[t]he direct ray of sunlight separated him from the rest of the workshop. . . . It often happened to him in church too, when the light fell on him and he seemed to be alone and in a heavenly choir. (Ch. 3, p. 82)

While he works with his hands, his mind is free to weave 'invisible skeins in the invisible fine air' (p. 82). However, his dreams and fantasies about life seem to be in vain, for, we are told, his future is already laid out for him. Despite his real limitations, Joseph acts upon his desire for knowledge in his timid attempts at mathematics. He finds the task of learning difficult, but, with Mendelssohn's help, slowly he begins to understand:

Joseph, surprised, gay, much agitated by the oddities of the young man, stubbornly fought out each problem, confusing and disentangling in turn mathematical conventions, stumbling over the conjugation of an exact idea of multiplicity with an unknown, mystified, but suddenly breaking open the rock so that understanding gushed out and watered earth barren and virgin. For a moment his eyes opened, a pure stream broke through into the light, a new diagenetic principle began to work and he became aware of science, dimly, palely, because

²³ Bruce Holmes, 'Moral Dialectic of Christina Stead', Diss. University of Newcastle, N.S.W., 1984, p. 34

the light passed still through the clerestories of superstition. . . . (Ch. 3, p. 95)

The process of his 'enlightenment' has been announced unmistakably in prose heavily laced with religious symbolism. The language of this passage is quite foreign to the simple, straightforward mode of expression that we have become accustomed to in Joseph. Like D. H. Lawrence, Stead attempts to articulate Joseph's inarticulate emotions in prose which is redolent of myth. The technique has its limitations, especially when, as in this example, the histrionic style seems to caricature the character's simplicity. The complex and symbolic language is an example of the narrator's over-enthusiastic verbalism and it fails as an attempt at true dramatic representation of the character's feelings. The effect of the mathematics lesson would have been more convincingly and *dramatically* conveyed if language more appropriate to Joseph's character had been used.

Mendelssohn introduces Jo to Tom Winter whose advice is 'to read Marx, and study what's under yer nose' (Ch. 4, p. 125). Winter is a product of the Workers' Education Classes and through him Jo is introduced to another source of knowledge. He finds that the classes are attended by a crowd who speak a different language to him, and in this confusing environment Jo feels totally out of place. The classes are dominated by a group of faddish, artistic and pseudo-intellectual people whose concerns do not appear to reflect those of the ordinary worker at all. The conversation of these people is spattered with references to Dionysus, Ra, spring, corn, 'Art shadowed by ritual' and 'voyagers to Cytherea' (Ch. 6, pp. 165-66) — all of which is regarded by Joseph as incomprehensible 'exotic lingo' (Ch. 6, p. 167). There is ironic humour in the situation of the uncomplicated Joseph attempting to understand the esoteric café society gathered at the WEA clubrooms. Later, he goes to listen to Fulke Folliot's address at the Communist Hall where he is restless and bored. Afterwards he reviews his experiences:

'It is awfully complex,' he said to himself, sitting alone in the back compartment of the tram of which he was the only passenger. 'I wish I had been born a clever chap.' (Ch. 6, p. 176)

The simple honesty of Joseph can hardly be regarded as a weakness. Compared to the people with whom he has so far come in contact in his search for knowledge (Mendelssohn aside), Joseph stands out as being far less of a fool than those whose heads are filled with unintelligible and therefore, foolish ideas. Listening to these ideas being expressed gives him no new insights on life; however, he does not give up his search for knowledge. The next evening he accompanies Mendelssohn to hear a lecture on 'Light' at the university. In the almost vaudeville atmosphere of the light show performed by the professor-magician, Mueller, Jo is apparently awakened from his dream-like state:

Joseph perceived through a great door in his mind's eye, a sort of internal cathedral, in which the five senses were as five ogival windows; it was the slow and stable architecture of the universe, in which all was perceptible, computable. His heart throbbed: 'All can be seen, discovered: it is not chaos.' (Ch. 6, pp. 185-86)

The imagery of doors and windows in the passage above is intended to indicate that the light show has been an important event in Joseph's life. The symbol of the door is associated with Dionysus and thus with new beginnings to life in the awakening of the senses.²⁴ The emphasis in the cult of Dionysus is the free expression of emotion amounting to a catharsis, which is just the sort of uninhibited feeling we witness in Kol Blount, Michael and Catherine Baguenault, but it is impossible to imagine the same thing occurring in the taciturn and self-restrained Joseph. The language used to describe Joseph's

²⁴ D.H. Lawrence uses the symbols of windows and doors frequently throughout *The Rainbow* to indicate new beginnings. The core of the myth and ritual material used by Lawrence as sources of the symbolic language, is found in Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan, 1922) and Jane Ellen Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913); both of which are referred to in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. The reference to Dionysus as opener of doors comes from the Dithyramb of Euripides' *Bacchae* in which Dionysus is hailed as 'Thou of the Twofold Door'.

mental experience is, again, unsuitable to his character, particularly when the earlier incident at the WEA clubroom conclusively proved that such language (and, presumably, experience) is quite foreign to him. The Dionysian references are more applicable to his cousins than to Joseph. It is difficult to see what Stead is getting at, unless she is using these references ironically. Even if that were so, the inconsistency of these scenes is a very obvious flaw in her presentation of Joseph and the use of irony, here, would be a contradiction of her sympathetic presentation of Joseph elsewhere. Stead's sympathies for Joseph are revealed in her comment to Ann Whitehead:

he was the one I felt most deeply about, the man who had no beliefs, no position, no hope, but kept on bravely. He's the real hero of the book.²⁵

If the life of his senses is truly awakened, the narrative should, logically, offer some demonstrable proof of a change in Joseph's life, but this does not happen — yet. Clearly, the esoteric ideas of the crowd at the WEA clubrooms and the arguments of the Labour Movement's organisers have very little relevance to an ordinary man like Joseph, so that one conclusion which may be drawn from these scenes is that the odds are weighed heavily against a change taking place in Joseph's life. This is a bitter conclusion to reach, especially after Baruch Mendelssohn's earlier optimistic pronouncements concerning the potential for development in a person like him. Joseph's imagination may well have been ignited by the sparks of knowledge which he has gained with the help of Mendelssohn, but the narrative leaves it a matter of speculation. The only indication that Joseph is to find some fulfilment in his life, is his meeting with the young woman who is later to become his wife (Ch. 9, p. 251 and Ch. 10, p. 297).

The event that precipitates a true crisis in Joseph's spiritual life is Michael's death. A series of events marks the change which has taken place in

²⁵ Stead, Whitehead interview, p. 241.

Joseph. Shortly after hearing the bad news, Joseph enters a dream-like state wherein familiar objects take on a strange life of their own, confirming the transforming power of his awakened imagination at work (Ch. 9, p. 263). He spends the night sleeping outside, a rare event to be remembered as 'a night spent in another planet, so strange and unearthly it was' (Ch. 9, p. 255). He tells Catherine that he has changed and, perhaps in an attempt to convince her, he tells her of his decision not to attend another Mass (Ch. 9, p. 257). This does not mean that he has erased the influence of his religion entirely, for he will retain certain habits 'to the end of his life' (Ch. 11, p. 314). The change wrought in Joseph, though subtle, is audible in the later scenes. Even though his speeches are still brief, he speaks more confidently and with greater eloquence than he did before. Joseph's final speech at the end of Chapter 11 reveals that he has reached an understanding of himself and of others, and, further, he recognises the roles played by Mendelssohn and Winter in helping him to reach that understanding. He acknowledges his limitations, an event in fiction which, in the convention of the *Bildungsroman*, marks the achievement of self-knowledge.

The novel is based upon the principle of dramatic contrast which extends to all its elements including the pattern of imagery used by Christina Stead. The dynamics of the dramas of the seven poor men are governed by the duality of obscurity and light. The lives of the poor men are seen as struggles to escape the conditions of poverty, illness, ignorance and oppression, all of which constitute darkness in different forms, and move towards the polar extreme. Only one character, Mendelssohn, succeeds in the struggle; the others do not possess, in balance, the qualities of passion and will that would enable them to succeed. Michael's genius renders him too instable while Joseph's mediocrity never allows him to aspire to higher things.

The tales of Michael and Catherine are tales of passion that illustrate the pain and suffering of isolated, extraordinary lives. Joseph's tale, apart from the

interjection of the narrator's over-enthusiasm, reflects the ordinariness of his life. The separate dramas of the isolated characters come together as the characters meet in friendship and work.

In the barren plain of loneliness, friends are represented as oases or 'hitching-posts' (Ch. 5, p. 142). Talking seems to operate as a cure for loneliness and the sickness of alienation in the novel. Michael's brief friendship with Tom Withers introduces the first of many compulsive talkers. Baruch Mendelssohn, who refers to conversation as the 'fire of social life' (Ch. 5, p. 141), illustrates the curing power of words when he explains his view of life to Joseph. At the end of his very long speech,

Baruch had . . . gesticulated himself into a perfect good humour, had forgotten his sickness and empty stomach; he laughed lovingly at his audience, showing his white buck teeth. (Ch. 3, p. 92)

Words either bubble, tumble (Ch. 3, p. 87) and flow (Ch. 1, p. 26) from the mouths of Stead's characters to water the deserts of their loneliness or they fly like sparks to light up the darkness and alienation of the characters' isolated, hidden lives.

The personalities of the characters are, not surprisingly, reflected in their voices. Baruch Mendelssohn's is presented as the rational voice of the crusader against poverty, of one who suffers all the misery of being poor in order to come closer to solving the problem of poverty (Ch. 5, p. 140). He is an idealist who dreams of a future wherein the destructive passions and capacity for evil in men 'would be bred out' (Ch. 5, p. 146). However, his dream of a golden future in which philanthropy derives from the pens of erudite scholars such as himself is undercut by the sharply ironic narrative comment that:

It is true, of course, that they write them to enlighten the poor, but they are usually sold at prices ranging from 10s. 6d. to £2 2s., and the poor are too pig-headed to buy them. (Ch. 5, p. 141)

If Mendelssohn sings the 'threnody of capitalism' (Ch. 5, p. 155) then the working man's complaint is expressed in the jarring idiolect of Winter. Against

the voices of these idealists are heard the voices of the Baguenault mothers, Chamberlain and Williams, who bow to convention and prejudice. The utterances of Kol Blount and Tom Withers reflect their state of storm and stress or spiritual sickness, in Blount's romantic poetry of perversion (Ch. 2, pp. 60-62), and in Withers's 'diarrhoea of defamation' (Ch. 1, p. 25). Kol Blount's speeches, especially his 'In Memoriam', combine the elements of poetic and theatrical performance into something that has a chant quality, reminding us of Stead's ear for the Greeks and Zarathustra. (The lyrical dimension is present throughout *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and the dramatic form which probably best describes what this novel tends toward is opera, because of its combination of lyrical and-theatrical elements.) The voices of Michael and Catherine are the 'cries of the demented' referred to by the madman in his tale. Joseph listens to all these voices and when, finally, it is his turn to speak, he speaks with the quiet, measured tones of one whose sanity undoubtedly has been retained, but whose uninspiring words are the product of a mediocre mind. The survival of mediocrity and the self-destruction of genius are bitter conclusions reached by the novel, but they are true to the representation of the harsh life in 'this waste land [whose] heart is made of salt' (Ch. 11, p. 309). At the end of the novel, the disorderly romanticism of youth, the age of storm and stress, has given way to the sober reflections of old age, as a much older Joseph Baguenault begins his story.

CHAPTER THREE

'Family Power Play'

The Man Who Loved Children (1940)

'Perhaps there is no more important component of character than steadfast resolution. The boy who is going to make a great man or is going to count in any way in after life —'

'Or the woman,' Sam commented,

'That is not it', she countered, and finished

'— must make up his mind not merely to overcome a thousand obstacles, but to win in spite of a thousand repulses or defeats. — Theodore Roosevelt, The Strenuous Life.'

Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children*.¹

¹ *The Man Who Loved Children* (New York, 1940; rpt. with an introduction by Randall Jarrell, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), Ch. 2, 1, p. 78. All subsequent references are to this edition of the text.

The family was represented as an important factor in the background to the dramas of Michael, Catherine and Joseph Baguenault in Stead's first novel, but it remained firmly in the background. The early years of childhood were skimmed over rapidly with isolated incidents selected to represent the general nature of childhood rather than there being any close examination of family life. Although the older Baguenault women have the opportunity to outline their tales of youth and unhappy married life, neither does so with the passion, detail and freedom within the larger tale that is allowed the marriage of Sam and Henny Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children*, and with good reason since the focus of attention in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is neither marriage nor the life of the Baguenault family (despite the beginning of the novel which suggests that it is a family history) but the obscure lives of the seven poor men. In *The Man Who Loved Children* the family emerges from the background to occupy the whole of the drama in which oppression and the struggle to escape it are again major themes. The novel is, in Stead's words, a 'celebration of unhappy family life'.²

It is important not to misinterpret that statement. In response to Joan Lidoff's question about the destructive nature of families,³ Stead identifies R. D. Laing as a psychologist who attacked the family as the root of all personal problems, who had, in Robert Boyers's words:

a hostility to the family as perpetuating a certain kind of repression that leads inevitably to misery and anxiety.⁴

While admitting that family relationships do have lasting effects upon children (and not all negative) Stead stresses the influence of wider social relationships and the resilience of children. Stead sensibly points out the need for children to

² Stead, Wetherell interview, pp. 437-38.

³ Stead, Lidoff interview, p. 185.

⁴ Robert Boyers, 'The Family Novel', *Salmagundi*, 26 (1974), 6.

make the break from the family as the first act of growing up. Her intention is not to attack the family as an oppressive institution but to subject the family to her close scrutiny and dramatise the dynamics of family life, which inevitably reflect the processes of the wider society, as part of her lasting concern for examining the nature of relationships between people. It is also important to point out that Stead did not consider the Pollit family as being representative of all families, yet it is just this representative quality of her portrait of the Pollits that makes critics and readers recognise the truly familiar aspects of the novel.⁵ Stead says to Ann Whitehead, about *The Man Who Loved Children*: 'It's a strange comment on family life that so many people like it, isn't it? I only wrote about mine, but thousands of people seem to think it represents family life'.⁶

An important part of Stead's analysis of character is her revelation of the extent to which power is at the root of relationships between people, and the family, as a microcosm of the wider political, social, and economic world, is necessarily involved in the examination of power. The private dramas of the Pollit family, masked by the stable public face of the family, are intense struggles for domination, attention and individual expression within a well-defined power structure.

There has been so much critical attention given *The Man Who Loved Children* that it is difficult to avoid retracing some of the ground that other critics have explored. Most critics have either commented directly upon, or alluded to, the uses of power, as inevitably a discussion of this novel must. Some, like Shirley Walker, Pauline Nestor and Jennifer McDonnell, have concentrated upon the role of language in the struggle between the personalities

⁵ Randall Jarrell in his Introduction, 'An Unread Book' (1965), asks: 'What other book represents — tries to represent, even — a family in such conclusive detail?' He speaks of the 'pleasure of recognition' which allows us to assimilate the experiences of the Pollit family into our own (v, p. 21).

⁶ Stead, Whitehead interview, p. 243.

and the power expressed in the different languages used.⁷ Joan Lidoff identifies the importance of power and the abuse of it as omnipresent in Stead's fiction. She observes that Stead portrays the family as 'a paradigm and training ground for western culture, where patriarchal and imperialist assumptions are bred into it'.⁸ Family relationships are, according to Lidoff in a later article:

psychological struggles of domination, resistance and humiliation in which female and male, young and old, the powerless and the powerful are locked in relentless opposition.⁹

Stead portrays families, in this novel as well as in *For Love Alone*, *The People With the Dogs*, *Letty Fox: Her Luck* and *Cotters' England*, as force-fields of energy created by the clash of different personalities within them. Nowhere is this more evident than in *The Man Who Loved Children* where the whole family drama centres on the life and death struggle between the irreconcilably opposite personalities of Sam and Henny Pollit and the effects which this has on the children. Lidoff's description of family life in Stead's novels is true in a general sense but it is not entirely true to see these relationships in terms of 'the powerless and the powerful', since her novels demonstrate that each individual, regardless of sex or age, has the same *potential* to shape and control his own life through the will. Stead dramatises relationships in which some unscrupulous individuals misuse their own power to limit that of other people. The abusers of power, who may be regarded as being misdirected, seriously interfere in the efforts of others to direct their own lives.

It is a paramount concern in Stead's 'drama of the person' that each

⁷ Shirley Walker, 'Art and Ideas in *The Man Who Loved Children*', *Meridian*, 2 (1983), 11-19; Pauline Nestor, 'An Impulse to Self-Expression: *The Man Who Loved Children*', *The Critical Review*, No. 18 (1976), pp. 61-78; Jennifer McDonnell, 'Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*', *Southerly*, 44 (1984), 394-413.

⁸ Joan Lidoff, 'Home is Where the Heart is: The Fiction of Christina Stead', *Southerly* 38 (1978), 364.

⁹ Joan Lidoff, Chapter 6 'Domestic Gothic: The Imagery of Anger, Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*' in *The Female Gothic* edited by Julian E. Fleenor (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983), p. 111.

individual should be master of his or her own destiny as far as possible. The discussion of Stead's first novel introduced the idea of direction as it applies to the drama of the person. Finding direction and making meaning in the lives of the seven poor men involved a long struggle not only with external forces such as poverty, ignorance and disease, but, for some characters, it also involved a psychological struggle with potentially destructive forces within themselves. Energy, will, the desire to achieve a goal or make real a dream of life, all constitute forces which compel movement in the drama. Without exerting his will the character is paralysed, unable to free himself from the restrictive centripetal forces operating in his life. Michael, Catherine and Blount are examples of people who are emotionally trapped. Their will is undeveloped and they lack the sense of direction which would enable them to escape their situation. They finally succumb to the destructive forces within them. The characters' absence of progress or inability to change produces dramatic stasis in the novel, a condition which is a kind of living-death or state of suspended animation, signified in the narrative by nightmare or underworld imagery and constant, aimless, circular wandering.

If each character is indeed principal actor in his or her play of life, then the question of authorship inevitably arises. Are the characters authors of their own lives or are they helpless victims of an unsympathetic fate? Are they passively attendant on some destiny in store for them, or do they forge their own destiny?

In Henny's case, the constant references to luck, especially of the rotten kind (Ch. 5, 2, p. 194), superstition and the game of solitaire she constantly plays, seem to indicate that, in her game of life, Fate is the player who holds the trump card. Since her experience of life has taught her that there is nothing better to hope for, she gives up, quite understandably in the circumstances, but only after an exhausting, protracted struggle in which her will is slowly sapped by Sam's. When we first meet Henny, this process is already far advanced so

that she appears to us as a weakened, lost character, inhabiting a nightmare world. In her irrevocable decision to take the cup of poisoned tea, Henny acknowledges that she has no life left of her own to shape. Henny's fractured speech in her final scene (Ch. 10, 5, pp. 504–05) reflects the condition of her broken spirit and broken body – to compare her with a lifeless puppet here seems apt. Fate had already played her master card in sending the poison–pen letter, and Henny's worst fear of life, that Sam will take away her children (Ch. 4, 3, p. 165), seems about to be realised now that Sam has 'the whiphand' (Ch. 10, 4, p. 495). With a new source of power given him by the anonymous letter, Sam indeed can make Henny dance to his tune. It is unthinkable that Henny should prolong her misery any further.

Louie's part in the ending to the drama is one which she has been prepared for. Throughout the novel it has been her ambition to be a great actress. According to the fluctuating moods of adolescence, she sees herself either as a leading lady playing 'to a vast, shadowy audience stretching away into an opera house as large as the world' (Ch. 2, 3, p. 86) or, when oppressed by melancholy, she sees

a theatre large as the world, in which herself, a great coconut shy, was the butt of a hundred thousand shrieks, hoots and obscene jokes, a great vile blob of a fat girl covered with mud. (Ch. 9, 3, p. 440)

Significantly, the scale on which she envisages her theatre is large, almost limitless, reflecting the possibilities she sees open to her. Joan Lidoff comments:

Infinite in her expectations of either success or disaster, Louie casts the world in dramatic extremes, but she is more attracted to the role of hero than that of victim. More active than her stepmother, she can turn her internal stresses into a positive source of energy.¹⁰

Stead divides characters into 'sleepers' and 'wakers' according to the

¹⁰ Joan Lidoff, Ch. 6 'Domestic Gothic: The Imagery of Anger, Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*' p. 120.

strength of their will, and the distinction between them is based on the legendary tale of the sleeper.¹¹ In the fairytale of the enchanted sleeper, 'The Sleeping Beauty', the rider is the hero prince who gallops through the forest of thorns and thickets surrounding the enchanted palace of sleepers, spurred by courage and determination as well as generosity and curiosity, to rescue the sleeping princess. The rider-waker of the tale is characterised by positive, active, physical and moral attributes which make him (or her) a striving figure determined to shape his own life. By contrast, the sleeper is suspended in a kind of living death, entrapped by the webs of illusion woven of circumstances and aspects of character. Within the enchanted realm of the sleeper there is no change.

In *The Man Who Loved Children* a distinction is made between the 'quick' (i.e., passionate) and the 'dead' (Ch. 8, 2, p. 340). Louie is one of the 'quick' (according to Sam's definition of the word) because she has yet to be 'born' into her new life. She is lively, intelligent, ambitious, strong-willed, and bursting with passion to leave her present circumstances and enter the world of her fantasies and dreams where her destiny awaits her. These qualities are characteristic of the waker. We are told early in the novel that 'Louie and the rider on the red mare were wakers' (Ch. 1, 2, p. 61). (Later, of course, Louie realises that the galloping sound she hears is actually her heart-beat.)

Like her father, Louie is an idealist, much influenced by the literature she reads. Her dream of the future is shaped to a large extent by that literature and the knowledge that there are better 'worlds' and better people 'out there',

¹¹ Christina Stead, 'A Waker and Dreamer' in *Ocean Of Story*, pp. 481-93. Stead refers to Grimm, 'The Sleeper Awakes', but I could find no tale of that title by Grimm. Jennifer McDonell, in her *Southerly* article on *The Man Who Loved Children*, identifies one of the tales of *The Arabian Nights*, 'The Sleeper and the Waker' as the source of the distinction (pp. 394-95). This tale is based on a situation very similar to the Induction of Sly in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and, as McDonell points out, it highlights the complex relation between what is real, dreaming, delusion and illusion. 'The Sleeping Beauty' is an obvious and well-known tale of the sleeper and the elements of this tale are recognisable in Stead's novels.

beyond the sphere of the family. Her outward-looking tendency reveals the kind of wide vision which she is to develop and this has important implications later in the novel when she is engaged in her battle against Sam, for his vision, for all its purported universalism, is essentially narrow and restricted by his rigid prejudices. Louie's intimations of her destiny include her certain belief that she is the ugly duckling who would one day fly away as a swan, never to return, to live somewhere far away 'on the lily-rimmed oceans of the world' (Ch. 2, 3, p. 94). The transformation that does take place in Louie from being a clumsy, untidy, self-conscious adolescent, the constant butt of Sam's humiliating treatment, to the burning star who outshines him in sheer artistic genius, occurs not only as a result of the natural maturing process, but through the effort of her own will. The gradual growth of her self-awareness and desire for independence is expressed in terms which reveal her complete confidence in a great destiny, using the same duality of darkness and light that we saw in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*.

she felt a growling, sullen power in herself which
was merely darkness to the splendid sunrise that
she felt certain would flash in her in a few years.
(Ch. 2, 3, p. 93)

The use of the image of the sunrise and the 'flash' of light reveal the dynamics governing the process of her maturation as a brilliant rise to power.

She desires freedom to speak, act and think for herself away from Sam's constant prying and emotional hold over her. Her struggle with Sam is not simply a case of her stepping into the fray to assist Henny, nor is it an understudy's role played when Henny is absent. (That role is given instead to little Evie who is to become Sam's 'wife' and 'mother' to baby Charles-Franklin after Henny's death.) It is a natural reaction of Louie's intelligent and developing personality to resist any force which obstructs the fullest expression of her independent will.

Sam moulds his children according to the roles which he hopes they will

play in life. Ironically, Louie is living proof of the wisdom of Theodore Roosevelt, whose saying (which appears as an epigraph to this chapter) she is made to memorise and recite obediently for Sam. She is also an example of Sam's belief that early childhood experiences develop the strength of will necessary to overcome any adversity (Ch. 1, 2, pp. 59–60). Sam's attempts to interfere in Louie's life are a sure way to invite her automatic hostility and opposition. Consequently, the direction she chooses in literature and acting is in direct opposition to Sam's dreams of her pursuing a scientific career. The battle between Sam and Louie becomes more and more a conflict of wills, and the greater the conflict becomes the more Louie's resolve is strengthened. It is only while Louie is still a child that Sam is able to maintain the upper hand, but after the crucial period of Sam's absence in Malaya, he appears to have lost the advantage. 'Was this tall, powerful girl with stern, hangdog face really Louie, the child of love?' he asks himself (Ch. 7, 2, p. 291).

The character of Sam, a waker, is based on Stead's father. Stead writes of her father's belief in his own destiny:

[David] felt he was a favored son of Fate (which to him was progress and therefore good), that he was Good, and he could not do anything but good. Those who opposed him, a simple reasoning, were evil.¹²

Sam's dreams of snakes (Ch. 2, 1, p. 80 and Ch. 7, 3, p. 309) certainly reveal his awareness of evil and the dreams occur at those times when he feels opposed. The 'snakes of hate' (Ch. 1, 1, p. 45) encircle him from Henny, the Department, and Louie. It is part of Louie's genius that, when she mounts her direct challenge against him, she chooses to do so in a one act play called 'TRAGOS: HERPES ROM' meaning 'TRAGEDY: THE SNAKE-MAN' (Ch. 9, 2, pp. 406–09). She chooses the symbol of the snake, the thing Sam most fears, to represent the father in the play thus revealing Sam as she sees him, playing the role of

¹² Christina Stead, 'A Waker and Dreamer', p. 486.

tyrannical and evil life-denier. When Evie forgets her lines, Louie acts the part of Megara, the daughter, while Ernie plays Anteios, the father-king, with obvious gusto. Throughout the acting of the play Sam is flabbergasted.

Louie's play dramatically and symbolically states, in her own invented language, what is forbidden for her to say directly. It challenges Sam's tyranny openly and suggests that the father's love is suffocating and incestuous. The eloquence and dignity with which Megara expresses her passion works powerfully in the manner of ancient tragedy. In translation, she says, again using images of light:

(I am) an innocent girl that you have too much plagued. As mother says, I am rotten: but with innocence. If to breathe the sunlight is a sin, what can I do? I see you are determined to steal my breath, my sun, my daylight. The stranger will kill you. (Ch. 9, 2, pp. 408-09)

Megara's composure here contrasts with Louie's melodramatic, uncontrolled burst of passion when Sam insensitively and ignorantly dismisses her play.

In addition to literature, Louie finds another secret source of strength in the dark depths of Henny's 'brackish well of hate . . . that put iron in her soul and made her strong' (Ch. 7, 1, pp. 274-75). The grudging sympathy that develops between Louie and Henny, like that between Bonnie and Henny, results from their recognition of the unhappiness each other suffers. While Louie is developing, Sam nurses the hope that she will become a quiet, patient and presumably submissive woman, like her mother Rachel. Instead she becomes, from Sam's point of view, a monster, 'a creature of passion' (Ch. 8, 2, p. 340).

The test of Louie's preparedness for her entry into the world of adult power comes in the crucial tea scene. She justifies her plan of action first and foremost in terms of the effect which the constant quarrelling between husband and wife is having upon her and the children. In a humorous vein, she also considers how the sleepless nights are ruining her chances of becoming an

actress. To her surprise, the rest of the family seem to be quite oblivious to 'the obscene drama played daily in their eyes and ears' (Ch. 8, 2, p. 337) that, by this stage in the novel, is so vile as to be the blackest drama.

Henny loses all the battles now. Daily, in the worst, most degrading poverty the family had ever known, Sam grows in strength, while Henny sinks deeper in the mud. Poverty to Sam is 'beautiful' whereas to Henny it is something worse than death (Ch. 8, 2, p. 338). In Sam's schemes to embrace Roosevelt's state socialism in Spa House, Henny's natural order is overthrown and replaced by Sam's appalling anarchy and mess. This state of affairs is made worse by the growing intensity and frequency of the marital quarrels. To Louie's simple reasoning it is only a matter of time before either one of the parents kills the other, or Henny, in her desperation and utter misery, kills herself. Louie therefore determines that she must do something to stop this terrible war. Her will becomes the ultimate source of power to do what she rationalises as the only 'right thing' to do:

'their life will be a ruin even if they are allowed to go on living. There is no question of it: I have the will, I must have the firmness to get rid of the two parents.' She no longer thought of Sam as her father: she had not thought of him as anything but a mouthy jailer for months; as for Henny, she did not see how her fate would be better if she went on living. (Ch. 10, 4, p. 501)

The last sentence of the quote above reveals Louie's distancing of herself from her proposed parricide. Louie's habit of escaping the domestic clashes by entering 'into another world' (Ch. 2, 3, p. 94), the world of her imagination, has already given her an attitude of superiority and a feeling of separation from the rest of the family. She sees her parents from a perspective both outside and *above* them, a morally dangerous perspective since it puts her virtually in the realm of the gods. There appears to be little internal turmoil behind the making of her decision and this makes her resolve even more disturbing than one that she might have reached in the heat of passion. There is, of course, much talk of

suicide and murder in the novel which, in defence of Louie's extreme action, can be seen as planting the seed of the idea in her. But she has yet to demonstrate that she is capable of translating the idea into action. In the world of fantasy it is much easier to imagine the thing done without actually having to do it. In the complicated world of daytime reality, Louie finds it difficult to be the heroine. She is not acting in her play 'Herpes Rom' whose lines and cues she knows by heart, but in a drama where the unexpected can and does happen. Confronted by the suspicious Henny, Louie is shaken in her resolve to murder both parents and puts the cyanide into one cup only. Stage-struck by the enormity of her intentions, she neither offers nor denies the cup to Henny but stands silent, shaking her head, trying dumbly to warn Henny against the tea. Henny snatches the cup, and in doing so, absolves Louie from the final responsibility. Sam's immediate reaction is not unlike his reaction to Louie's play (Ch. 10, 4, p. 505).

Louie's intention to murder her parents continues to disturb readers of *The Man Who Loved Children*. There are no doubt many possible psychological 'explanations' that might be advanced to justify or excuse both her plan and her partial execution of it. The simplest, and the most attractive explanation of her action from the point of view of dramatic effect, is that Louie has gone mad. Her action is the product of intoxication with her growing power and desperation — two ingredients of madness. She has been driven out of her wits by the constant, morally destructive, inescapable marital war going on between her parents. (Similarly it might be said that Henny's desperate taking of the cup is an act of madness.) It is not until Henny's sudden appearance and suspicious, challenging question, that Louie is woken from her insane dream, but it is too late, for the cyanide is already in the cup. Louie is transfixed by the sudden realisation of the moral gravity of her intentions and she is paralysed at the critical moment.

Louie comes to see her parents, through her daily, soul-destroying

experience of witnessing their constant fights, less as humans and more as dehumanised hostile principles – principles which threaten her own moral integrity. Her vision of her parents is conditioned by the Greek tragedies she knows about in which the tyrannical agents of oppression, figures of authority like her parents, are overthrown violently by the victims of oppression.

Louie justifies her plan to murder her parents as a means to 'liberate the children . . . [and to] free herself' (Ch.10, 4, p. 301).¹³ Once free, she can make her entrance onto the wider stage outside the family. The notions of freedom and power are linked in the novel in such a way that the winning of freedom seems automatically to confer power and vice versa. The will-to-power is a means to obtaining personal liberation and this concept is endorsed by Stead in her presentation of Louie's rebellion and gradual growth of power. However, the will-to-power taken to extremes, that is, power used to limit the personal liberty of others, is anathema in Stead's novels. Sam uses his power to manipulate and direct the lives of others while Louie, until the tea scene, uses hers to direct only herself. Louie has witnessed Henny's slow destruction which has also meant the falling apart, both literally and metaphorically, of the house in which they live, but she is still very much a child with a limited understanding of the moral uses of the will-to-power and she has yet to learn the value of love as the greatest power to transform rather than to destroy. Her drama has yet to move away from her egocentric absorption to a place where she can see herself in the wider world of other people.

We saw in the discussion of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* that Baruch Mendelssohn assumed a benevolent role as friend and ally in assisting Joseph Baguenault. He is the first example of a recurring figure in Stead's novels whose principal function is to help others to achieve their goals in life. The direction

¹³ Louie's situation fits George Polti's dramatic situation 'To Be Obligated To Sacrifice One's Kin', a tragic struggle involving the hero, the kin and the object fought for, which, in this case, is Louie's freedom. (NLA MS 4967, Box 7, Folder 47.)

given by this figure is a careful, nurturing process which assists the protagonists without any threat to their autonomy or integrity. But according to Stead's dialectic there is a negative aspect to this figure. Sam Pollit is the opponent or antagonistic figure, a hinderer, whose power is exercised primarily to realise his own dreams of life to the complete disregard of the separate realities of the other members of his family.

As Sam makes his first entrance in Chapter One he experiences the elation of freedom that is conferred upon him by his feeling of growing power:

Sam began to wonder at himself; why did he feel free? He had always been free, a free man, a free mind, a free thinker. 'By Gemini', he thought, taking a great breath, 'this is how men feel who take advantage of their power.' (Ch. 1, 2, p. 54)

Although he felt free then, he becomes totally free when his patron and father-in-law, David Collyer, dies. 'Released from what he dimly saw had been a bondage to the Collyer idea of financial success' (Ch. 8, 1, p. 326), Sam begins to tread 'the path of fame' (Ch. 1, 2, p. 54) that leads to the fulfilment of his own dreams. The essential aspect of his character which allows this to occur is his will-to-power, for Sam's unbridled optimism and confidence in the future includes, of course, a strong faith in his personal future, despite the calamity that falls on him in the Department. His optimism is the basis of his belief in the adage: 'Everything comes to him who waits' (Ch. 8, 2, p. 345). His view of the drama of life is that Fate tries her favoured sons by putting obstacles in the way: 'Fate puts stones in the path of those she wants to try; she found I had stuffing in me and is satisfied' (Ch. 4, 2, p. 159).

Sam may be regarded in historical terms as the embodiment of the twentieth century American Progressive. His creed (outlined in the many speeches he makes on the subject of the future) is that of the 'Brave New World' and he is buoyed by utopian faith in the establishment of a New Society which that creed offers. A progressivist philosophy implies will-to-power in the belief that society can be changed and moulded according to certain

doctrines. Sam's attitudes to education (Ch. 4, 1, p. 142) clearly reflect such a philosophy. He substitutes men of science for religious beliefs in the blatant direction of his children's spiritual development. Sam has many of the attributes of a typical Progressive in his strong elitist values, his belief in efficiency and virtue, his confidence in the application of science to all levels of life, his patronisingly benevolent attitude towards the Malays and the liberal-authoritarian duality which characterises his personality. He harkens back to the old Progressives but he also has a strong streak of the New Dealers in his character.¹⁴

Stead's portrait of the Pollit family incorporates the social and political background of the Depression in America of the nineteen thirties. Sam's character is certainly invested with some of the qualities associated with the prevailing political temper of these years. He possesses the paternalism and 'ideological innocence' attributed to F. D. Roosevelt and his administration by its critics.

Sam is an example of the ultimate danger of will in the extreme in his use of power *over* other people. He tries all the time to shape and control his children according to *his* beliefs, constantly afraid that any outside influence may destroy the work he has already done. He even interrupts his children's dreams in case they are contrary to his.

The only area where Sam does not appear to act to take matters in his own hands, is in the affair of his dismissal from the Conservation Department. In this case, Sam's apparent indifference may be explained by his naive faith in the belief that virtue is rewarded. His indifference is a refusal to face facts, just

¹⁴ Professor Michael Roe of the History Department, University of Tasmania, wrote in a note to me that, 'I have told you I suppose that Christina Stead said to me of her father "Theodore Roosevelt was a God to him"'. During the Depression of the nineteen thirties in the United States there was renewed enthusiasm for Progressivism. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Theodore's nephew-in-law, began his political career as a Progressive and some of the New Deal programmes represented a throwback to the Progressivist ideas of 1912.

as his attitude towards his impossible relationship with Henny, even when Henny suggests a separation, is a refusal to face facts.

Henny belongs to an older, disappearing America (represented by the declining fortune of the Collyer family) whose values and power are rapidly becoming things of the past. The rebuilding spirit of America is demonstrated literally in the novel in the rows of 'apartment houses and new dark-brick, gabled bungalows' built on what was once part of the old Collyer estate (Ch. 5, 2, p. 187).¹⁵ The dramatic conflict between Henny and Sam may be seen in terms of an inevitable clash of values. Tired, 'decadent', old-fashioned Henny, has few weapons with which to fight against the zeal and rejuvenescence of Sam's strong idealistic spirit.

The time in which the drama begins is stated by Sam's pregnant use of the phrase, 'the year of our Ford 1936' (Ch. 3, 2, p. 114), which refers to Huxley's *Brave New World*. Sam's use of this phrase places him in a wider dramatic context than the immediate one of the family drama, creating disturbing ripples throughout the novel as we witness his alternately clownish and despotic behaviour. Further allusions to Huxley's distopia *Brave New World* in Sam's frequent monologues reveal the potential threat of his brand of idealism and ambition when carried to the extreme. The most frighteningly direct threat is voiced by Sam in his statement of what he would do if he were 'autocrat of all nations'. As autocrat, with the lives of all people in his hands, 'he might arrange the killing off of nine-tenths of mankind in order to make room for the fit' (Ch. 9, 1, p. 380). The reference he makes to gas chambers in concentration camps sounds a grim warning to the reader about the real danger (and madness) of letting an ideologically innocent man like him pursue his direction unopposed.

Bearing in mind that *The Man Who Loved Children* was first published

¹⁵ The new houses on the Collyers' estate may be part of the New Deal building programme.

in the United States in 1940, and that Christina Stead had been working on it prior to this, the mention of gas chambers in concentration camps is a problem of chronology in the novel which requires comment. Many readers of this novel have seized upon the mention of gas chambers and concentration camps and puzzled over the time frame encompassed by the novel; therefore some explanation is necessary. The time in which this novel is set precedes the outbreak of the second World War by three years. The existence of concentration camps in Poland, Rumania and Germany for minorities and 'enemies of the state' was well known in Europe and the U.S.A., even before the outbreak of the war, but it was not until 1942 when the Nazi policy of the systematic destruction of the Jews was made official, that people learnt of the real purpose of the camps. There had been pamphlets published by ex-inmates of the camps which exposed their real nature as early as 1933 but the majority of people in Europe still had no proof of what went on inside them. Christina Stead *may* have heard the rumours that had been circulating at that time or she may have learned of the existence of the gas chambers from Jewish refugees who arrived in New York.¹⁶ Her husband (himself a German-born American of Jewish origin) may have had some contact with refugees in the intellectual, artistic and business communities of New York, but this is entirely speculative. One thing is certain: by mentioning the camps and gas chambers in her novel, Stead demonstrates her skill in weaving historical processes into the background of her drama of the person.

Henny's and Louie's opposition to Sam are given greater dramatic power when these resonances are considered. Sam's egotism and desire for power are seen, in the political context of the novel, as dangerous threats to individual liberty. It becomes a paramount concern of the drama that Sam *should* be

¹⁶ According to Robert Dallek, in *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), the Roosevelt administration allowed only a handful of Jewish refugees from Germany to come to the United States in the period prior to 1942.

opposed and the reader inevitably must take a moral stance as spectator to the drama. When Sam becomes a radio broadcaster with a potential audience of millions, like F. D. Roosevelt, the extremity of the threat posed by him is brought home in the realisation that the Fascists also used such propagandist means to spread their message of a new world.

Stead frequently points to the dangers of power used in the extreme by ambitious people. She also employs the 'Brave New World' analogy in *House of All Nations* where Aristide Raccamond, posing as a 'Director', reorganises the accounts bureau of the bank. His work is described as being part of the 'New World' efficiency (*House of All Nations*, Sc. 66, 'Facade', p. 532). Something of this flavour is also detected in Nellie Cotter's response to the attempts to rebuild Britain after the second World War (*Cotters' England*, Chapter 1). These references form an important part of Stead's exploration of the theme of individual liberty throughout her work. They sum up her fear that too much control, exercised by egomaniacs, threatens personal liberty.

Sam is constantly working to repair or renovate the dilapidated old houses, Tohoga House, renamed 'Place' by him, and Spa House, which are his legacies from an older historical period. Perhaps this domestic activity should be seen as an analogy of national reconstruction to be undertaken. However, his constant activity does little more than put a thin layer of paint over the crumbling exteriors and does nothing to hide the very real poverty within. After all his speeches, reorganisation and directions for household efficiency and economy, the only visible changes are the rather primitive bathroom and back-porch, seen by the reader for the first time through the eyes of an outsider, Miss Aiden. Then of course there is the great stink from the boiled marlin which permeates everything. Despite his rhetoric, Sam does very little himself, preferring instead to direct the work of others. ' "I work with myed [my head], I got lieutenants to do the rest of the work", said he, and expatiated on the work he did with his head during the times he had his eyes closed' (Ch. 9, 1, p. 381).

Ironically, while he lies on his back in the orchard dreaming about the glorious future, Henny is out in the backstreets begging for money or selling her last treasure to feed him and their children. The family drama reflects in microcosm the national drama being enacted during the Depression in the United States of America and, through the ideological tenor of Sam's dominating part, it also relates to a much bigger drama going on in Europe at that time.

At the top of the family power structure in *The Man Who Loved Children* are the Olympian figures of Sam and Henny whose intense mutual animosity hangs like storm clouds ready to burst at any moment over the heads of their children. The central dramatic conflict of the novel is the struggle between these two unhappy characters whose only tie, it seems, is 'the infernal tie, the bond of carnality' (Ch. 10, 2, p. 482).

In *The Man Who Loved Children* Sam's rather Victorian role as authoritarian head of the family is supported and highlighted by a series of portraits of other men whose roles fit the patriarchal pattern. The account of the Baken family in Chapter Five, for example, provides a striking portrait of the cast-iron Israel Baken, Louisa's grandfather on her mother's side, whose stern remoteness is emphasised by the fact that he issues his commands to sons and daughters alike from the isolation of his upstairs room. Although David Collyer, Henny's father, does not appear in the novel, we learn from the women's conversation at Monocacy that he had abandoned his wife Ellen to live with his mistress before his death. Barry, Collyer's alcoholic son, '*like the old man, is a chip off the old block*' (Ch. 5, 2, p. 189). He, too, is a womaniser with no sense of responsibility. The pattern of abuse and neglect in Ellen Collyer's life is repeated in the short, but telling, references to the Pollit's neighbours, the Kydds. There, too, is a parallel story of neglect, loneliness, quarrels, beatings and financial deprivation (Ch. 3, 1, p. 110).

Bonnie's abandonment by her married lover and the abandoning of Henny by Bert Anderson are incidents in the novel which serve to illustrate the

general picture being created that, for women, 'life was a rotten deal, with men holding all the aces' (Ch. 1, 3, p. 72). There are other short scenes depicting Evie, Isabel and Little-Sam playing games which provide reflections of the roles played by Henny and Sam as mother and father of the children. They serve as commentary on the accepted sex roles within a family. All these small dramas within the novel function as plays within a play, mirroring the central drama being presented.

The pattern of unhappy married life is established in these repetitions of betrayal and suffering. In each case money is suggested as the chief source of problems as if somehow the miserly allocation of money for household expenses is responsible for the universal unhappiness. To be sure, Henny's misery is compounded by Sam's parsimony but the true cause of their unhappiness is their obvious incompatibility. To some extent also the minor dramas suggest comparisons between other characters and their situations and those of Henny and Sam. For instance, Henny might have been abandoned, as was her mother, with six children to support and no money, if Sam were to be as dishonourable as his father-in-law. (On the other hand, Ellen, probably a stronger character than Henny, is not pushed into suicide by David Collyer.) Or, if we attach any significance to the sketch of the dissolute brother Barry (as I think we are intended to do) then we can conclude that Henny can be thankful that, at least, Sam is not a drunkard. In fact Sam is at the other extreme, refusing to have alcohol in the house. The 'Badminton Cup' scene at Sam's homecoming party (Ch. 7, 1, p. 281) graphically reveals his teetotalism and authoritarianism in expecting everyone to obey his own strict principles.

In all these instances we see the dynamics of character creation through the presentation of similar and contrasting aspects of character and situations – a technique of reflections which was referred to in Chapter One, above, as 'prismatic'. Although Sam possesses his father's talent for acting and jiggling about, he does not share Charles Pollit's easy tolerance. Sam criticises Jo's lack

of humanitarian values while being guilty himself of judging others too harshly. This technique continues: while there are some aspects of Israel Baken's puritanical rigidity reflected in Sam, we see that Sam is also different in certain ways. Instead of isolating himself from the family as Baken does, Sam wants to be, and is, at the centre of his family life.

Whenever Sam is at home he dominates the stage. Henny retires to her room, refusing to be part of his audience, saying that he has enough audience already. Sam thinks up projects for his children to carry out, directing them in household chores arranged according to sex roles (Ch. 2, 2, p. 88). Henny and the children are noticeably much happier when Sam is absent in Malaya. Later, when he has lost his job and spends all his time at home, he overturns Henny's system of 'natural order' which allowed the children their freedom, and replaces it with his own repressive system of household economy and efficiency, making the children answer to his every beck and call.¹⁷ He pokes and pries into the lives of his children to the extent that he would even control their thoughts were he able to do so. In this way Sam exerts his will over his gang, moulding them according to his own personal designs.

The reference to Henny's 'natural order' reminds us that in the equation of power in marriage, there is a kind of power enjoyed by women. Christina Stead speaks of:

the woman in the home, so weak and ailing, often moneyless, powerless, often anxious, disturbed, wretched, with no status to speak of, no trades union, yet has the awful power of hunger and suck. .

..¹⁸

¹⁷ The pattern of the Pollit family life during Sam's period of unemployment reflects the general conditions being experienced during the years of the Depression which saw the breakdown of family life as a result of widespread unemployment. See Arthur M. Schlesinger's description of the times in Wallace E. Davies, *The New Deal: Interpretations* New Perspectives in American History Series, ed. Donald B. Cole (New York: The Macmillan Co., London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1964), pp. 7-9.

¹⁸ Christina Stead quoted by C. K. Stead, 'C.K. Stead writes about Christina Stead', *London Review of Books*, 8, No. 15 (1986), p. 13.

Henny has the 'dreadful power of wifehood' symbolised by the circle of the wedding ring:

If this plain ugly link meant an eyeless eternity of work and poverty and an early old age, it also meant that to her alone this potent breadwinner owed his money, name, and fidelity, to her, his kitchenmaid and body servant. (Ch. 4, 2, p. 173)

Sam, with his high moral ideas of honour and respectability, acknowledges this power. Stead explores the idea of fidelity in her comparative presentation of Sam and Henny. Sam's attraction to other, mostly younger, women is a weakness bred of personal vanity. We are alerted to his extra-marital attractions when he is first introduced (Ch. 1, 2, p. 55). However the puritanical aspect of his character proves the stronger in controlling his sensual side and he restricts his temptations to flirtations. Sam represses his desire for Gillian, for example, by visiting and bathing in the admiration of a respectable, rich, and presumably 'safe', widow:

Sam did not love her, but when his feeling for the nature-spelled girl, Gillian, became too strong, he went and talked to Virginia. He was unable to see Gillian because they both felt they were too conspicuous in either Baltimore or Washington, and Sam despised hole-in-the-corner meetings: it was not worthy of them. (Ch. 8, 5, p. 365)

He admits his temptation to Louie in one of his long discourses on love and the ideal relations between men and women:

'There is a wonderful young woman, Looloo, who seems to be — is — my perfect mate: it would be for me one of those marriages made in heaven. I cannot think of it because of your mother.' (Ch. 10, 2, p. 478)

(He also considers his first wife, Rachel, to have been a perfect wife.) At a time when both he and Henny are miserable in their marital life, he rejects his wife's plea for a separation, regarding it as a wicked stratagem on her part to gain control of the children. He thereby wilfully ignores the effects of the prolonged marital strife upon both Henny and the children.

In contrast to Sam's 'harmless' flirtations, Henny's affair with Bert

Anderson appears to be a desperate attempt to find some love and sympathy. Bert is a refuge for her in her troubles. Her bitterness and loneliness are openly revealed in the scene with Anderson (Ch. 3, 3, pp. 118–26). Seen in this light, it is unfair to condemn Henny's miserable affair outright. We also know that Sam followed Saul Pilgrim's advice to get Henny pregnant, (Ch. 4, 1, p. 150) making her 'safe' from other men while he was away in Malaya. The scene at the end of Chapter four shows Sam using a mixture of seduction and threat to accomplish his aim. As a consequence, Henny is shackled by an unwanted pregnancy while Sam remains 'free' to continue his innocent flirtations. However, to be fair to Sam, his personal freedom to find happiness in love is as much hindered by the conventions of marriage and parenthood as is Henny's freedom.

Stead's psychological drama subjects her main characters to an intense investigation of their states of mind and lays bare their emotions as they are expressed in forceful, idiosyncratic speech. *The Man Who Loved Children* begins with two separate sections in Chapter one of the novel devoted to establishing Henny and Sam as completely contrasting characters, thus creating the tension from which the drama of their lives flows. Each incident or event in the novel exposes a different aspect of their characters so that a composite picture is gradually built. Very rarely do we see either Henny or Sam outside the home and when we do, the change of scene allows us to see them in a new light.

Henny is the first to be introduced. She is represented as the quiet centre of the domestic scene in which children rush about, chattering, peering into her shopping bag, circling about her like a human whirlpool. With her cup of tea, Henny takes up her position in her straightbacked chair, the seat of natural order in the household:

When Henny sat there, . . . everything was in order and it was as if no one was in the house; it was like the presence of a sombre, friendly old picture that has hung on a wall for generations. Whenever Sam was out, particularly in the afternoon, Henny would sit there, near the kitchen where she could get her cups of tea hot, and

superintend the cooking. The children, rushing in from school or from the orchard, would find her there, quiet, thin, tired, with her veined, long olive hands clasped around the teacup for warmth, or gliding, skipping through wools and needles as she knitted *her* pattern into bonnets and bootees for infants who were always appearing in the remote world. (Ch. 1, 1, p. 43)

In the comparative quiet of the scenes between Henny and the children, Sam is a minor character. This is the Henny the children knew only 'when Daddy was out' (Ch. 1, 1, p. 43). The scene she played was her own, undirected by Sam. This tired, industrious, tender, good-natured Henny is known intimately by the children but is rarely, if ever, seen by Sam. It is important that we should be given this scene before Sam's entrance for it presents a side of her which is apt to be quickly forgotten in the ensuing battle. When Sam enters, Henny moves 'off-stage', refusing to participate in the dramas he directs, seeking instead the refuge of her room. Her chair, her room, her tea, her feverish games of cards, are all in the nature of refuges, places and times to dream and review her life. If Sam 'ever came home and found her still [playing cards]' (Ch. 1, 1, p. 50), he would announce his presence in 'some off-stage colloquy' remarking on Henny's appearance, effectively shattering her temporary calm.

Another aspect of Henny is shown in the beautiful image of her as a still, gracefully languid, dreamer:

She was like a tall crane in the reaches of the river, standing with one leg crooked and listening. She would look fixedly at her vision and suddenly close her eyes. The child watching (there was always one) would see nothing but the huge eyeball in its glove of flesh, deep-sunk in the wrinkled skullhole, the dark circle round it and the eyebrow far above, as it seemed, while all her skin, unrelieved by brilliant eye, came out in its real shade, burnt olive. (Ch. 1, 1, p. 44)

The description of Henny's face is continued but its effect is to deliberately destroy the serenity of the crane image with which it began. The look of hate or horror, passion or contempt, which she flashes toward the hapless watching child when she reopens her eyes, is an indication both of what her life has been

and her present state of mind. At such moments her eyes mirror the unhappiness and suffering she has experienced. Huge, black with hate or misery, blazing with rage or flashing with scorn, they form the window to her tortured soul.

We also catch a glimpse of an earlier Henny in Louie's vague, childhood memories of her as

a beautiful, dark, thin young lady in a ruffled silk dressing gown, mother of a very large red infant in a ruffled basinet, [sic] receiving in state a company of very beautiful young ladies, all in their best dresses. (Ch. 1, 3, p. 70)

This image is reinforced by the description of Henny's daughter Evie, a Henny look-alike and Sam's favourite. Evie has Henny's black hair and 'immense rabbit eyes' (Ch. 4, 1, p. 134) and those appealingly soft brown eyes create the impression of a timid, vulnerable and beautiful creature, quite unlike the Henny we come to know. On one occasion, exhausted by the passion of her latest quarrel with Sam, we momentarily see this soft, helpless creature inside Henny, appealing to Sam:

Henny, defenceless, in one of those absences of hatred, aimless lulls that all long wars must have, turned towards him, looking at him strangely with her great, brown eyes. These eyes, fringed with jet, long and well formed under the high, thin pencilled brows, had always stirred Sam deeply; and even when he came on her in a mood he detested, when she was sitting staring into space, communing with her disillusion, his heart would be wrung by their unloving beauty. (Ch. 4, 3, p. 176)

The portraits of Henny in this light are overshadowed by the later scenes in which she plays the role of a wholeheartedly vile virago in the marital conflict. The contrasting images of her as an elegant dreamer given to playing the piano in quiet moments or as a grubby, shrieking, hysterical woman, capture the fragmented nature of Henny's character and express powerfully the change wrought in her by a disastrous marriage. Henny is both immersed in,

and detached from, life.¹⁹ Her passionately uncontrolled invective expresses the rage and frustration she feels at relinquishing control of her life to a man she hates. But it is as well to take note of the softer and more attractive Henny, for in these contrasting images of Henny lies the effect of destroyed dreams, a transformation witnessed by Louie:

The dark lady of the ruffles had disappeared and in her place was a grubby, angry Henny, who, after screeching and crying at them all, would fall in a faint on the floor. (Ch. 1, 3, p. 70)

As the daughter of the wealthy David Collyer, Henny had been brought up with the dreams of any young, genteel, belle of Baltimore society. She had been taught only three things: 'water-colour painting, embroidery, and the playing of Chopin' (Ch. 10, 1, p. 458) in a world far removed from the slums inhabited by Sam as the son of a fish merchant. She had been eligible for marriage for five or six years before her father arranged her marriage to the ambitious young Sam who hitched his career as a bureaucrat to Collyer's influence in Washington. Henny came to Washington as a sheltered and refined young bride with high expectations of a glittering social life. But in the harsh reality of married life to Sam her dreams are shattered, her refinement is stripped and she finds herself in a nightmare existence of constant pregnancies and work. Instead of the great lady she imagined herself to play in the drama of her married life, she is reduced to the role of shrew, forced by the Pollits' expectations of her as an heiress 'to go into debt to keep the breed alive' (Ch. 2, 3, p. 94).

Henny had long since lost control over her own life and now, in the imprisonment which her marriage has become, her vision fixes itself upon the horrors of life. The house she lives in has become her cell: 'Cells are covered with the rhymes of the condemned, so was this house with Henny's life

¹⁹ Shirley Walker makes the same point in 'Art and Ideas in *The Man Who Loved Children*', *Meridian*, 2 (1983), 11.

sentence, invisible but thick as woven fabric' (Ch. 1, 1, p. 45). Her fate is spelled out. The truth of the world as Henny sees it from her new perspective, is that life is endless pain and toil where everything is grotesque and vile. She extends her sympathy generously to all tormented creatures, recognising their misery as her own: 'she belonged to the great race of human beings who regard life as a series of piracies of all powers' (Ch. 1, 1, p. 50).

There is a tragic element implicit in the collapse of Henny's dreams. Her background had not groomed her for the role she was forced to play in life as Sam's wife and mother to his children:

Henny was annoyed to see the tribe [of Pollits] bow before herself in the role of virago; she had not been brought up to think that she would succeed because of a mean disposition. She had been nurtured in the idea that she was to be a great lady, like the old-time beauties of the South. (Ch. 2, 3, p. 94)

Although at first she held herself aloof from the world of jiggling Pollitry, she is gradually sucked down by the maelstrom of circumstances until she is no longer recognisable as that youthful, optimistic, Baltimore girl. Her decline is slow, despite the effect of a rapid slide downhill created by the concentration of the drama on key incidents over a two year period. When we first meet her, Henny is a poor but genteel supervisor of a well-run household. We need to remember that Henny is, despite her lack of previous training and the poverty of the family situation, marvellous at making ends meet, feeding and clothing the children on little more than five dollars a month, making things for school fetes and bazaars, running the huge house and maintaining Sam's zoo and aquaria. There is therefore much more to Henny than meets the eye. It is because these aspects of her character are overshadowed by the prominence given to her as shrew that we tend to remember only the shrewish aspect.

Sam and Henny represent opposite poles of the magnet towards which the children gravitate. The children, as spectators to the drama played before them, witness the differences between them:

their father was the tables of the law, but their mother was natural law; Sam was household czar by divine right, but Henny was the czar's everlasting adversary, household anarchist by divine right. (Ch. 1, 3, pp. 70-71)

As each parent misrepresents and villifies the other, the performance they give has the quality either of an 'obscene drama played daily' (Ch. 8, 2, p. 337) before their children, or

a strange Punch-and-Judy show, unrecognisable Sams and Hennys moving in a closet of time, with a flapping curtain, up and down. (Ch. 1, 3, p. 71)

The reference to the puppet figures of Punch and Judy indicates the ludicrous and repetitive nature of their performances.²⁰ Both characters are transformed by the uncontrolled hatred each possesses for the other into mechanical, exaggerated caricatures of their real selves. Louie's later remark that they are slowly destroying their moral natures is perfectly true, for they are certainly dehumanising themselves in their constant battles. There is a melodramatic quality in the theatrical image Stead creates of them as they hiss their denunciations and draw aside Louie or Ernie to mutter their complaints.

As Susan Sheridan points out, what we witness between Henny and Sam is, to some extent, 'a battle of discourses'.²¹ This phrase really points out the obvious, that Sam and Henny think, and therefore talk, differently. Henny opposes Sam's romantic idealism and smug morality with her own extreme expression of Zolaesque determinism and abundant use of the grotesque, so that the battle of personalities becomes, to a very real extent, a battle of irreconcilable points of view.

²⁰ Susan Sheridan draws attention to the dramatic quality of *The Man Who Loved Children* in her article, 'The Man Who Loved Children and the Patriarchal Family Drama', in *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, edited by Carole Ferrier (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985), specifically referring to the endless repetition of the puppet-like performances of Sam and Henny. She subtitles this part of her article 'Punch and Judy: The Family Power Play', pp. 138-42. My choice of title for this chapter uses the same phrase as Sheridan.

²¹ Susan Sheridan, p. 139.

Throughout the novel Henny is determined to puncture the inflated dreams of life which Sam tries to impart to his children and she does so most convincingly by her example, countering Sam's sentimental visions of good men and women with her angry, disgusted outbursts. She speaks the truth as she sees it, in the language of one who is oppressed and trapped in a situation from which she sees no escape. Rage, discontent and frustration inform her vision and colour her language accordingly. Her language reflects the darkness of her particular 'world'. She shares 'this world of tragic faery' (Ch. 1, 1, p. 48) with other women, for every woman 'went through this inferno' (p. 47), like Mrs Kydd, Mrs Wilson, Bonnie, Ellen Collyer and other unnamed women whose dramas are played out every day and are recalled in the gossip exchanged by women when they feel free to speak of their troubles.

The parents have a more elevated status as gods at war on a plane removed from the ordinary level of reality enjoyed by the children who are lesser mortals in the drama. Only Louisa and Ernie see the human aspect of these Olympians. Ernie concludes that 'adults were irrational' (Ch. 1, 3, p. 71). Louie compares them and begins to see that Henny was 'not a half-mad tyrant' (p. 71) but 'a creature of flesh and blood' (p. 72) like herself who suffered misfortune, was rebellious and 'got chastised' by Sam. This recognition begins to form a bond between Henny and Louie, and

this irresistible call of sex seemed now to hang in the air of the house. It was like an invisible animal, which could be nosed, though, lying in wait in one of the corners of this house that was steeped in hidden as well as spoken drama. Sam adored Darwin but was no good at invisible animals. (Ch. 1, 3, p. 72)

Henny, a bystander to the public acts of punishment inflicted upon Louie by Sam, watches these scenes with interest. The sympathy which develops between Louie and Henny in their shared misfortune is to become a crucial factor in Louie's gradually unfolding drama of development as she determines not to be a bit player on the world stage of adult power, but a star in a drama

directed by herself. The drama between husband and wife is then extended to include Louie, creating a complex triangular battle of wills.

The contrast between the opposing personalities of Sam and Henny is borne out in the descriptions of their separate and quite different rooms. Henny's room, with its warmth of soft textures, careless disorder, musky smells and hidden treasures, appeals to the children's sensuality and love of mysteries. Sam's room contains no mystery for them. They knew everything that was kept there – the insurance policy and bankbook, for example. Henny's world was full of grotesque and ugly people – 'foul, loud-voiced, rude, uneducated, and insinuating, full of scandal, slander, and filth' – a complete contrast to the world which Sam inhabited where there were 'good citizens, married to good wives, with good children (though untaught)' (Ch. 1, 1, p. 48).

Sam never met anyone from the low-down regions so familiar to Henny, because:

'He lives', said Henny to herself, in her bed, 'in a golden cloud floating about over a lot of back alleys he never sees; and I'm a citizen of those back alleys, like a lot of other sick sheep.' (Ch. 4, 3, p. 165)

While Sam lives in his cloud-cuckoo-land, seeing everything from his high and mighty perspective, Henny lives in the muck. The effect of their two contrasting visions of the world is to provide their children with two different sources of wonder to arouse and feed their imagination since 'their influence on the boys and girls was equal' (Ch. 1, 1, p. 46). The children have their own independently formed images of the two adults and their consciousness will be shaped by both parents regardless of, or rather in spite of, their attempts to the contrary. Henny was to them, like her room, 'a refuge of delight, a cave of Aladdin, while Sam was more like a museum' (Ch. 1, 2, p. 69).

An interesting contribution to the subject of Sam's psychology is made by J. Sheinberg who relates Sam's wildly fluctuating behaviour to the

descriptions of the symptoms of hypomania and acute mania.²² Sam's mania relates him to the madman and the unbalanced Baguenaults in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* who are too much awake. His imbalance is apparent in the internal conflict between his extreme idealism, romanticism and puritanism on the one hand, and his suppressed sensuality on the other. Sam believes that external beauty in a person is a sign of moral goodness and it is most likely Henny's youthful beauty that first attracted him to her, and still does have an attraction for him even though her beauty is fading. The tragedy of their relationship is that Sam interprets her other sensual aspects as evidence of moral weakness. He sees himself as good, and Henny, as his opponent rather than partner in the mismatch of their marriage, is, according to his brand of logic, wicked.

Stead's characterisation of Sam and Henny is an ironic treatment of the fairytale stock figures of the good father and the evil stepmother. Only Sam sees Henny as a witch or a devil (Ch. 8, 2, p. 344); the children, whose innocence we can rely upon, see Henny simply as 'Mothering' ('Moth') or mother. As Louie grows older she comes increasingly to see Henny for what she really is, a miserable woman with an abundance of troubles. All Henny's attributes are turned against her: her human weaknesses, such as drinking claret, playing cards, or reading novels, become, in Sam's distorted vision, gross examples of wickedness. Sam is certainly innocent. He is completely innocent 'of all knowledge of men, business, and politics, [he is] a confiding and sheltered child strayed into public affairs' (Ch. 8, 2, p. 345). His belief in a simple fairytale morality of good and bad, right and wrong, always easily identifiable and therefore either rewarded or punished, equips him only for the world of very small children but not for the complex world of adults where he proposes to exercise his power.

An interval occurs after the earlier scenes of domestic violence, during

²² J. Sheinberg, 'Sam Pollit, A Psychological Case Study' in *Notes and Furphies* No. 1 (1976), p. 11.

which Sam goes to Malaya, Louie visits her grandparents at Harpers' Ferry, and Henny, with the children, returns briefly to the now dilapidated and neglected scene of her childhood, Monocacy. This creates a breathing space in the drama which is to recommence with even more intensity, building rapidly to its climax, after Sam returns. While Sam is acting the part of the patronising, American 'humanitarian' to his small audience of Malay civil servants, Henny and the children enjoy the luxurious freedom to simply be themselves for a while without the ever-watchful eye and direction of Sam. The interval is all too short. Chapters five and six occupy an important place in the overall dramatic composition of the novel. It is the last time we are to see Henny in relatively happy circumstances before she meets her fate.

Immediately upon Sam's return Fate deals the family a series of crushing blows. The birth of yet another child to feed represents a strain on an already stretched household economy. This is exacerbated by the death of David Collyer, the consequent loss of his financial support and the campaign against Sam which loses him his government position. The move to Spa House (Ch. 8, 1, p. 331), a neglected ramshackle house in the Baltimore slums where Sam had his beginnings, is more than a 'momentous event' [sic] (p. 332) as Sam calls it; it is the beginning of the end for Henny. The shock of her new surroundings woke Henny from a dazed trance induced by the recent events 'and [she] knew what was happening; her heart was breaking. That moment, it broke for good and all' (p. 334).

From this moment on, the scenes Henny plays are all of a kind. Her quarrels with Sam become more frequent and more violent and she is indeed playing the role of a 'Medea', a household witch, screaming her tirades and railing bitterly against Sam and her children. She is seen at her worst when Ernie discovers her betrayal of him:

With great hollow eyes she stood looking at him.
Her old red dressing gown, now tattered and dirty,
was wrapped round her. Henny's eyes travelled,

with a shocked expression, over the coins laid out on the floor. Ernie looked at them again and suddenly his eyes filled with tears; he began to choke, 'Mother, someone—' and broke down into miserable sobs. Henny looked at him, with hollow cheeks and desperate eyes, and in a moment sank to her knees, plunged her face into her hands and began to utter cries. 'Ugh—ugh.' (Ch. 9, 2, p. 418)

She is both to be pitied and to be blamed in this scene. At this stage we do not have the benefit of knowing that Henny had sacrificed everything she had — all her treasures — as well as borrowing extensively and using up her dividends, simply to keep the family. We are only to discover this after her death. Because we only see what is placed immediately before us, and we are not aware of Henny's secret transactions, our judgement of her character at this particular time is bound to be prejudiced. The stress of her struggle drives her into a 'murderous delirium' against her children as 'Henny felt she could not stand any of this life any longer, nor any of her children' (Ch. 9, 4, p. 443).

The final scenes of her drama of life occur during the episode of the marlin. Henny's tortured state of mind, her exhaustion and desperation, are reflected in the image of the marlin:

Its great eyes were sunken; it looked exhausted from its battle for life; there was a gaping wound in its deepest part. (Ch. 10, 1, p. 466)

The wound in Henny is hidden but it is obvious that she is slowly bleeding to death.

The final scenes in Henny's life are prepared for with all the machinery of impending doom. Sam has directed that the children should stay up all night to watch the boiling marlin in the mess and stink, while a dreadful storm brews overhead. Against this setting, Henny insists that Sam take his watch, an action that restores her lost dignity and sympathy. Sam, usually an onlooker of the activities he directs, is forced by Henny to participate. Meanwhile she retreats to her room to play Solitaire. For the first time it comes out, yet another sign that her drama is reaching its grand climax:

The game she had played all her life was finished; she had no more to do: she had no game. (Ch. 10, 2, p. 472)

But she still has two scenes to play before the final curtain is rung down. For the first time in the novel, Henny decides that she will take part in Sam's 'game' by sharing the watch. Sam misinterprets this as her wish to be one of his gang. Because Sam pretends for most of his life, in roles which he creates for his amusement, he assumes that Henny's decision is a manifestation of her womanly duplicity, saying: 'she pretends to sacrifice herself, when she really wants to be one of us!' (Ch. 10, 2, p. 473). The irony involved in this is unmistakable. Her own life ruined, Henny makes a last-ditch effort to protect her children. Her quiet remark, 'I wish he'd stop playing his silly monkey tricks with the children and let them grow up' (Ch. 10, 2, p. 474), echoes an earlier comment made by Sam's sister, Jo Pollit. The marlin scene dramatically reveals why Henny has returned to her intolerable married life after a brief absence. Her strong mothering instinct (we are reminded of the affectionately tagged name given her by her children) proves stronger than her desire for freedom.

We are also given an insight into Sam's private thoughts in this scene and we find that perhaps he is deserving of some sympathy after all:

Sam felt lonely suddenly in the washhouse, with only the bubbling of the fish stew to keep him company. It was a glorious, rich smell certainly, and Sam counted on getting a gallon of oil at the least, probably nearer two gallons, but what was the purpose of it all? Wasn't his life empty, always amusing the kids, thinking up projects for them, teaching them to be good men and women when they ran off upon their own bents and a woman was always twisting them, snatching them away from him? (Ch. 10, 2, pp. 474-75)

It is surprising that the public man has a private emotional life after all. There have been earlier indications of this, for example, in the change noticed in him upon his return from Malaya. We are also alerted at that time to his previously unacknowledged sensuality in his delight in the objects he brings home for the

family (Ch. 7, 2, p. 287), but the moment is swamped by the antics and din of the party which is then followed by 'the greatest drama on earth, the act of birth' (Ch. 7, 1, p. 298). The effect of this latest discovery of Sam's own agony is diminished, however, because his complaint about his children running off recalls an earlier scene in which he played 'parent-bird', siphoning chewed food into his children's mouths, a scene which is symbolic of his reluctance to allow his fledglings to leave the nest (Ch. 2, 3, p. 92).

Any sympathy which Sam's private thoughts may have aroused in the reader is quickly dispelled when he forces Little-Sam, against his will and his stomach, to carry the bucketful of marlin offal. This is the worst example of Sam's efforts at conditioning his children and reveals, in the extreme, the tyrannical side of his nature. When Henny tries to intervene, Sam's comic mask slips and the tyrant's mask is exposed:

'Get out of my way,' Sam growled. 'You get to the kitchen and mind your own business — don't you put your spoke in here, or I'll get rid of you, mind that: I'll have no more interfering with my children and putting them against me; now get out of here.'
(Ch. 10, 3, p. 490)

Then he commits the unforgivable act of throwing the fish offal over the boy, followed by a lecture on the benefits of overcoming abhorrence through aversion 'therapy'.

Throughout the family drama Sam's role as 'the man who loved children' has been like that of the 'Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning' in regard to the way in which he moulds his brood.²³ He is the child-catcher, rounding up the youngest children of the neighbourhood (Ch. 2, 2, p. 82) for his games. He prefers the youngest because they are the most receptive and form the most willing audience for his 'performances'. He always selects the roles — Evie, his 'Little Womey', the ideal submissive child-woman, plays his 'little

²³ See Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (London 1932; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), Chapter One.

mother'; 'Looloo' is his coffee-maker and confidante and is pressed by Sam to be more like her mother Rachel. The boys make his team of workers whom he goads into fighting in a display of manliness. It is almost as if the children are part of the collection of animals and other objects that Sam surrounds himself with for his own amusement, and that each child is brought up according to the niche he has in mind for it. Graham Burns, in his observations upon the roles of the children, also makes the point that when the prescribed role does not fit the child's personality, it results in 'a painful denial of identity'.²⁴

Sam takes care that his role is unchanged as that of Director whose word is law, but as the children grow up they oppose him by instinct. Ernie and Louie are shown resisting Sam as they reach the 'age of rebellion'. Other people outside the family provide alternative influences to help mould their development, and Louie's Miss Aiden is one of these, but the influence of the family is given greatest emphasis in the novel because it is a family drama exploring family relationships.

Having said that, it should also be pointed out that there are three spheres or theatres for Sam's drama — the family, the office, and Malaya. Outside the family Sam is a character with minor status. His failure in Malaya seems to be a consequence of his inability to play the part of white bureaucrat in Asia according to the expectations of this role. Even Wan Hoe wonders 'if Sam had been sent to Malaya to get him out of the way' (Ch. 6, 2, p. 249). Sam's natural ability to ruffle the feathers of the more powerful bureaucrats there leads to his demise in the Department. David Collyer's death signals his downfall in public affairs but Sam seems very happy that he is no longer a rich man's puppet and can concentrate upon his own schemes. Within his family he feels that his power and authority should be unchallenged but even here we witness a number of challenges to his authority, the most convincing occurring

²⁴ Graham Burns, 'The Moral Design of *The Man Who Loved Children*', in *The Critical Review*, No. 14 (1971), p. 41.

in the Home-Coming party.

His children adopt various strategies by which to resist him, the most common being their use of language. From both Sam and Henny they learn the power of language and use it to fight for and win their independence. Louie is drawn to Henny because she leaves her alone to pursue that which she most loves and which Sam typically scorns, literature, and it is from the books she reads that she gets the inspiration for her revolt. When it occurs, it has a dangerous snowball effect on the other children:

Following [Louie's] bad example, Ernest too was drawing away from Sam, and Sam felt that he must fight it out with Louie; it was now or never in the struggle for power. (Ch. 8, 3, p. 351)

Ernie possesses the character trait which Sam most lacks: pragmatic concern for the family's financial affairs. His symbolic suicide by hanging (Ch. 10, 5, p. 505) is the response of a much older or more worldly-wise person. The conflict Ernie is forced to witness between his parents has wrought an ageing effect on his young face just as it has made Louie's face a tragi-comic mask. This is not to suggest that Ernie is cast as a 'Little Father Time' but there are significant similarities between him and this tragic character. 'Little Father Time', Jude's son in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, is oppressed, like Ernie, by the difficulties of a large family struggling in adverse circumstances. The parallel which comes to mind particularly is that of Chapter eleven of *Jude* when Sue announces that there is to be another baby. 'Little Father Time's' reaction is despair. Ernie reacts in a similar fashion to Henny's announcement in *The Man Who Loved Children* but later, when oppressed with misery, he does not hang the children but hangs only an effigy of himself. Since *The Man Who Loved Children* is a novel about 'unhappy family life' this incident, coupled with Louie's poisoning of the tea, must be seen as the expression of the 'fearful unhappiness' shared by all members of the Pollit family.²⁵

²⁵ Stead, Wetherell interview, p. 438.

My discussion of *The Man Who Loved Children* has concentrated upon the notions of direction, power and the roles being enacted by the *dramatis personae*. The main focus of my discussion has deliberately been on the characters and relationship of Sam and Henny, for it is their marriage which has created the subject of the drama in the unhappy family. Louie's gradual rise to power in assuming the role of Sam's opponent and her development as an artist, which have been given much more detailed attention by other critics, are obviously important, though arguably not *the* most important, parts of the drama. Like *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, this later novel contains several dramas within the framework of the larger, more complex one, and no single character can be identified as the main protagonist.

The construction of *The Man Who Loved Children* is based on many scenes which dramatically highlight certain aspects of the characters' personalities. The principle of dualism is seen to operate in this novel to expose the extremes of difference that exist between the two warring parents. Certainly the most striking feature of Stead's revelation of character is in her use of what Clement Semmler calls, in his discussion of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, 'great slabs of talk' to reveal the psychologies of her characters.²⁶ Each scene in *The Man Who Loved Children* depends greatly for its dramatic quality upon the amount of dialogue spoken, shouted, growled or screamed between the characters. The repetitive nature of much of the dialogue exchanged, especially between Sam and Henny, has an effect of intensifying the drama. Each scene builds up gradually to a high pitch of intensity and contributes to the overall dramatic structure of the novel which, in Graham Burns's observation:

reveals not a straightforward chronological continuity, but the psychologist's instinct for the accumulative, definite moments of mental crisis.²⁷

²⁶ Clement Semmler, 'The Novels of Christina Stead' in *The Literature of Australia* edited by Geoffrey Dutton (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 494.

²⁷ Graham Burns, p. 40.

The novel dramatises a triangular relationship between Sam, Henny and Louie with the other children and members of the family as minor characters surrounding them. From Louie's perspective, as she sees herself at the apex of the triangle formed by these three characters, her drama takes prominence; but we do not view the novel from there, rather we see the whole from the viewpoint of the detached and dispassionate dramatist. We are spectators to the completed drama involving Henny and Sam and we witness the beginnings of Louie's as her dreams of life outside the family begin to take shape. Even Sam forges a new direction in public life after the death of Henny, confirming the ambitious nature of his push for power. Both Louie and Sam visualise themselves playing their future roles on a wider stage than that on which the family drama was played.

The model for Louie's developing drama is the Romantic, specifically Shelleyan, development of radical individuality, as she absorbs it through Shelley's *The Cenci*. Shelley's Beatrice provides the model for her rebellion against Sam's tyranny.²⁸ Her developing, individualistic view of the world is seen by Sam as a challenge to his notions of communal good. If we take Huxley's *Brave New World* as an extreme example of what happens when individual aims must be sacrificed to the communal good, then the Director of Hatcheries' words sound a warning which elucidates ironically the theme of *The Man Who Loved Children*:

the secret of happiness and virtue [is] liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny.²⁹

Henny's drama shows us the misery and unhappiness of being forced to play a role against one's will; Louie's drama, which will be further discussed in the next chapter, demonstrates the positive power of the will to challenge the social

²⁸ This point is also made by Susan Sheridan, p. 144.

²⁹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Ch. 1, p. 24.

forces that aim to condition the individual. Stead's novel portrays the 'tightly packed' emotional life of a family wherein we witness the 'suffocating intimacies, . . . [and] obscene relationships between the members of the family'.³⁰ In her drama of the Pollits, Stead celebrates fathers and mothers, and the misery, madness and messy muddle of family life. When people are alone in the 'Brave New World' they do what is natural to themselves, rather than what they have been conditioned to do. Like the 'Brave New World' wielders of power, Sam is afraid of leaving his children alone in case they should do what is 'natural'. Christina Stead's novel argues strongly for the passion, struggle, and even misery, of family life because, far from being inhuman, these are the qualities that distinguish the human species and confer the individual strength necessary for the wider quest for meaning outside the family.

³⁰ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Ch. 3, p. 40.

CHAPTER FOUR

'The Stuff of Dreams'

For Love Alone (1944)

She did not know where she was going; she was outward bound. This first train journey was only the first stride on a grand and perilous journey.

'What do you want to walk there for?'
'Just to see the world, as they say', Teresa answered, quite at her ease.

Christina Stead, *For Love Alone*.¹

¹ *For Love Alone*, (New York, 1944; rpt. Arkon Edition, London: Angus & Robertson, 1982), Ch. 12, pp. 137, 142. All subsequent references are to this edition of the text.

The discussions of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The Man Who Loved Children* in the preceding chapters have raised several points in relation to Stead's presentation of the dramas of her characters. The first is that the lives of her characters are dramatised as struggle and Stead notes that struggle is 'the musculature of every dramatic situation'.² Stead establishes the notion of struggle through her use of a pattern of contrasts and contradictions manifested in character, situation and imagery. These create a tension of opposing forces out of which drama is generated.

The relationship between dream and drama is also established in Stead's first novel. Life has the remote, illusory quality of a dream, and the narrator tells the dream in such a way that it bears a resemblance to a play being enacted. This relationship was reinforced, in the novel, through references to the veil of Maya and the huge stage—curtain that is drawn back to expose the swarm of struggling humanity behind it.

The use of contraries, already mentioned, is one means of reflecting the dynamic quality of drama in Stead's novels but there are other narrative devices which are used. For example, the movement of the psychological drama of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is perceptible in the mental processes of the characters as they struggle internally, telling their stories. This includes, in the case of some characters, telling their dreams, revealing aspects of their psychologies which otherwise would be concealed. The disconnectedness of these characters' stories is matched in the narrative by a repetitive pattern of lost and aimless wandering.

The motif of circuitous wandering signals that certain characters are lost in a world of fantasy and dreams which they are unable to realise. They are, in effect, trapped in a world of illusion — a world without meaning for them since they are unable to escape the destructive forces within themselves and use their

² Stead, NLA MS 4967, Box 7, Folder 47, 'The 36 Dramatic Situations'.

'waking dreams' or fantasies creatively to confer meaning on their lives. The psychological concerns of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* preclude the possibility of any close narrative cohesion so that it does approximate the telling of a dream. Stead attempts to avoid the structural problems which plague the disconnectedness of her dream narrative by dialectically positing examples of 'wasted', destructive, undirected and static lives (seen in the narratives of Michael and Catherine Baguenault) against examples of creative, directed and dynamic lives (seen in the narratives of Mendelssohn and to a lesser extent, Joseph Baguenault). Significantly, the characters whose lives are aimless and who live for the most part in a nightmare of thwarted personal fulfilment, seem never to be in control of their lives but, instead, are subject to a hopeless fate. The conditions which prevent them from realising their dreams or conferring shape and meaning on their lives are, notably, an absence of will and the inability to love unselfishly. On the other hand, the dreamers who struggle with similar external circumstances, but who do possess both a strong will and the capacity to love, are able to shape their lives actively according to their dreams. They are, in a theatrical sense, the directors of their own dramas.

Journeying is also used as a metaphor for Joseph Baguenault's search for knowledge and the process of his education until he comes to the moment of self-realisation. In this we recognise a conventional narrative device familiar to us from the *Bildungsroman*. 'Journey', 'struggle' and 'drama' are used analogously to denote the dynamic nature of the characters' efforts to escape obscurity. The stage of the journey from youth to maturity or from ignorance and obscurity to understanding, represents one 'act' in Stead's drama of the person. The form of the journey is determined by the relative strengths of the characters. Michael and Catherine Baguenault, who are spiritually weak, move erratically, alone and aimlessly in a dark 'world', being reminded of their loneliness by the grotesque images which confront them. Their final journeys take them to death and madness respectively. Baruch Mendelssohn,

intellectually and spiritually the strongest character, embarks on a journey at the end of the novel to return to the United States where a job in his chosen career awaits him after half a lifetime directed to this goal. The journey motif reappears in 'Endpiece', which, set apart from the other chapters, marks the passage of time. Joseph enters as an older traveller still struggling bravely, on his way home. From the distance he has traversed in time he is able to look back upon his life with the benefit of a wider perspective conferred by maturity, to attempt to find meaning in the events of his past.

The metaphor of the play operates in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* on two levels. It works on one level, through the allusions to *Macbeth*, to suggest that tragedy occurs among ordinary people in wasted, undirected lives. On a more theatrical level, the characters' speeches and actions are presented as though they are performances being given in a play. The most melodramatic performances are given by the extreme characters, Michael and Catherine Baguenault, whose lack of control over their lives raises the possibility that control or direction is what makes drama distinct from melodrama.

The discussion of *The Man Who Loved Children* concentrated upon the way in which the play metaphor was used as a paradigm for the lives of the members of the Pollit family. Again, though with more theatrical connotations, the concept of direction was seen to be important. While the philosophical background of Nietzschean alienation informed the aimlessness of some of the seven poor men, the antithesis of that, self-direction through Nietzschean will-to-power, and the dangers of the extreme use of power, were presented in *The Man Who Loved Children*.

Louisa Pollit's drama unfolded as the gradual but certain development of her will to resist the centripetal forces of her family, in particular to oppose her father's will and control the direction of her own life. The journey motif was made explicit at the beginning of the novel in reference to the road to power which both Sam and Louie travel. Sam had climbed the 'path to fame' from a

Baltimore fishmarket to Washington, the nation's 'Athens':

'Going to glory', said Sam: 'I've come a long way, a long, long way, Brother. . . . The old heart doesn't flutter: I must be careful not to rest on my laurels now — haste not, rest not! I feel free!' (*The Man Who Loved Children*, Ch. 1, 2, p. 54)

Sam, with his feelings of power and freedom, says this on his way home to Tohoga Place, but he envisages an even better 'home' in his schemes for improving the world. In Sam's idealistic vision of future greatness we recognise the terms familiar to us from Romantic philosophy. The typical literary form for the Romantic journey of life is the quest, the limits of which are defined dialectically.³ Stead's drama of the person relates to the quest through her use of dialectic and the notions of struggle and direction that are common to both. The quest confers shape and meaning on life; the character with a strong will and a sense of destiny is most frequently a quester. Thus the notions of life as dynamic process and struggle, which Stead consistently sees as drama, are connected to the Romantic idea of journey. The two contrasting journeys, one aimless and tending towards stasis; the other directed towards a chosen goal, represent, in Stead's novels, two contrasting types of drama.

The ending of *The Man Who Loved Children* sees one of the characters, Louisa Pollit, poised on the verge of new beginnings. Her situation suggests several dramatic possibilities and it is with those possibilities in mind that we approach the drama of Louisa's spiritual successor, Teresa Hawkins, in *For Love Alone*.

Towards the end of *The Man Who Loved Children* Louisa Pollit emerges from the conflict between her parents, strong and confident in the developed sense of her own worth. She is motivated to escape from her intolerable family circumstances which she has come to regard as a prison. Within her adolescent

³ See M.H.Abrams, in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1971), Chapter 3 'The Circuitous Journey'.

shell is a new self impatient to be born. Louisa is conscious of her responsibility for creating her new self, as she says: 'I'm my own mother . . . [and] I can look after myself' (*The Man Who Loved Children*, Ch. 10, 6, p. 521). Before the next stage of her drama may begin she must break free from the encircling constraints of her family. She does this by running away. As she crosses the bridge from her childhood past she experiences a feeling of buoyancy and release similar to the intoxication which Sam had felt earlier in his sensation of power and freedom. From this small distance already, Louisa sees more clearly both what she is leaving behind and what is immediately before her:

Things certainly looked different: they were no longer part of herself but objects that she could freely consider without prejudice. (*The Man Who Loved Children*, Ch. 10, 6, p. 522)

Her initial escape changes then into a desire to return to the scene of her greatest childhood happiness, Harper's Ferry. Then shortly afterwards her escape modulates into the vague idea of 'a walk around the world' (p. 523). In this pattern we recognise the Romantic circuitous journey.

Because Louisa has formulated no specific goal for her journey except to get away, it is initially an escape which should be regarded as being more symbolic than actual. Her action in breaking out, like her poisoning of the tea, is a demonstration of her will. Janis P. Stout, in *The Journey Narrative in American Literature*, explains the pattern of escape:

Structurally, the typical fiction of escape is a motivational build up toward the culminating act of breaking out. Therefore, the course and scope of the ensuing journey may embrace great distance or only a symbolic removal to an inward space of liberation.⁴

Louisa intends to get money for her journey to Harper's Ferry from her Aunt Jo. We know, and she probably realises too, that it is unlikely that Jo will pay for her and that after a brief stay with her aunt she will be returned to her

⁴ Janis P. Stout, *The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 32.

family. But in taking this decisive step outside the family she will have accomplished the space of freedom which she needs and this will be sufficient for her to be able to proceed on her own inner journey.

According to Stout:

after the decisive breaking-out, the escape often merges into the quest or the narrative of home-founding as the motive impulse of the hero is modified and defined through experience.⁵

It is not made entirely clear at the end of *The Man Who Loved Children* whether Louisa's escape is to modulate into a journey with a well-defined goal, that is, a quest, or whether she will become an aimless wanderer. However, there is enough evidence of Louisa's strong will and sense of destiny to allow us to presume that the journey she eventually takes will be to meet her destiny.

The next autobiographical novel, *For Love Alone*, presents us with some answers to the questions raised by the ending of *The Man Who Loved Children*. This chapter will discuss *For Love Alone* to examine how Christina Stead uses the journey motif and the metaphor of the play to construct her drama of the person in relation to the character of Teresa Hawkins.

For Love Alone opens with a prologue, 'Sea People', which, like the opening paragraphs of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, places special emphasis on the fact that Australia is an island continent, separated by vast distances across the open seas from 'the old world' whence its European inhabitants came. The general orientation of this island people is towards the sea. Having developed her idea of a nation of seafarers with wandering in their blood, Christina Stead puts the Homeric question:

Oh, Australian, have you just come from the harbour? Is your ship in the roadstead? Men of what nation put you down — for I am sure you did not get here on foot? ('Sea People', p. 2.)

In making this reference to the Homeric myth Stead is challenging a national

⁵ Stout, p. 33.

myth that concentrated not upon the sea, but upon the empty interior or 'outback'. In this national myth the exertions and suffering of the earliest settlers are portrayed in their efforts to tame the outback wilderness. The pioneers are elevated to folk-heroes, and the values celebrated in the literature portraying them are *social* values — those of a close-knit society, dominantly masculine, welded together by the need for co-operation in the face of hardship. No such values appear in *For Love Alone*. Rather, Stead emphasises values adhering to the individual.

This is not to say that Christina Stead wished to avoid Australian social concerns. On the contrary, she is concerned from the outset in *For Love Alone* to express certain ideas — ideas about women's place in Australian society, the effects of poverty, the 'questions' of marriage and sex and the problems that these social and ideological concerns pose for the individual struggling for self-expression. Ideology, as we have seen in *The Man Who Loved Children*, provides a diverse context or background of moral choices and directions to be selected by the individual in the drama of his or her development.

Through her presentation of Teresa Hawkins's life, Stead suggests that 'each Australian is an Ulysses' (Ch. 19, p. 222). This immediately raises the expectation of an outward-bound journey relating Teresa's drama to Louisa Pollit's whose destiny was imagined to await her somewhere on the other side of the ocean.

An examination of the early chapters of *For Love Alone* reveals Stead's techniques of creating character and developing the dramatic situation of the novel. Andrew Hawkins exerts a powerful dramatic presence at the beginning of Chapter one. He is part-naked, seeming to fill the 'stage' with his posture in the doorway. His appearance and behaviour suggest the archetypal Ulysses — laughing, shouting and boasting in an expansive manner — in an image which links the narrative to the initiating question of the prologue. Hawkins is

a tall man with powerful chest and thick hair of

burning gold and a skin still pale under many summers' tan. He seemed to thrust back the walls with his muscular arms; thick tufts of red hair stood out from his armpits. (Ch. 1, p. 5)

The strength and power conveyed by this heroic image collapse quickly into a more human portrait of a man 'with flaccid yellow-white flesh [and] waist and abdomen . . . too broad and full' (Ch. 1, p. 5). The hero, the family god, has gone to seed. His long, egotistic, dramatic monologue nostalgically recalls an earlier, younger man, who had been the object of women's admiration and love. Thus the theme of the novel, love, and its antithesis, self-love, are introduced through the dramatic medium of Hawkins's speech. His self-absorption is immediately recognisable. If he thinks he is the sun in their lives, the two girls, Teresa and Kitty, certainly do not seem to be basking in his radiance. They have obviously heard his discourse before and as he loudly pronounces his theories of Love and Beauty, his listeners, absorbed in their own tasks, speak their own quiet 'asides':

'Handy Andy', said Teresa, in her soft, unresonant voice. She did not glance up but went on sewing. (Ch. 1, p. 7.)

He appears not to notice these minor interruptions:

'I have suffered much through love and when you come to know human love, instead of self-love —'
'The beans are done,' called Kitty. Teresa gathered up her sewing. (Ch. 1, p. 9.)

A fundamental contradiction is revealed in this scene. While Hawkins's talk is all about love there are no visible signs of warmth or affection existing between the three family members. Instead of the family being 'peopled with our love, murmurous with all the undertones, unspoken understanding of united affection' (Ch. 1, p. 9), there are hostile silences followed by explosive outbursts of indignation and signs of wounded pride and resentment. The absence of love in the family situation is a polarity suggesting that Teresa Hawkins's drama may take the form of a quest for love. Her need for love is elaborated as the chapter proceeds.

Hawkins touches upon Teresa's source of sensitivity when he comments upon her lack of sexual attraction, cutting deeply into her fear of lovelessness: 'you have no attraction for a man as you are now, and it might be better if you knew how to lure men' (Ch. 1. pp. 11-12). Later he taunts her openly, naming the fear which is later to be elaborated:

'Look at her! Pale, haggard, a regular witch. She looks like a beggar. Who would want her! What pride! Pride in rags! Plain Jane on a high horse! *When she is an old maid*, she'll still be proud, and noble. No one else will count!' (Ch. 1. p. 14 [Emphasis added])

In this brilliant, dramatic, opening chapter, Christina Stead establishes her themes of love, marriage, the misery of loneliness and the fear of being unmarried.

Teresa's 'hysterias' in this opening chapter are caused by having to live within the close confines of family life from which marriage is the only conventional means of escape. She wants to escape and she is not alone in this desire. It emerges from the presentation of family life in the following chapters that the Hawkins children are starved of love and are obsessed with finding it. The situation of youthful sexuality being repressed within a milieu where love is a constant topic, helps explain the outbursts of violent passions, especially between Teresa and her brothers, whose behaviour is explained rather euphemistically by Teresa: '[her] opinion was that Leo [sleep-]walked because he wanted to marry, the same thing that made Lance stay up senselessly at night, and Kitty weep' (Ch. 7, p. 86).

Teresa's reaction to her situation is similar to Louisa's: 'She ought to run away. The only reason she did not run away was that she had not the courage' (Ch. 7, p. 80). She does have one means of escape and we discover this in the first chapter where her angry response to Hawkins's taunts is to flee to her room, 'an inviting cell, almost bare, neat, cool' (Ch. 1, pp. 12-13). Here she indulges in the free life of her imagination. Teresa's dreams are of the wish-

fulfilment kind, and it will be shown later in this chapter that they are important in formulating the direction she will pursue.

There are three broad structural divisions of the novel, each one indicated by the most important 'events' in the development of Teresa's spiritual quest for love. The long section of the novel to the end of Chapter sixteen comprises the first 'act' of Teresa's drama, the end of which is announced by Teresa's question: 'Do I love this strange man?' (Ch. 16, p. 193). Within this section, Stead concentrates, as is typical of her method, upon dramatically building character and creating the situation from which the rest of Teresa's drama develops. These chapters create an atmosphere that is thick with the tensions of repressed sexuality and desperate desire for love, each chapter dramatising, in a series of separate scenes, the passions of the young men and women of Teresa's circle of family and acquaintances. The tension, mounting like that which builds before a storm, suggests the inner tensions felt by Teresa. Constantly in the background is the sea, rising and falling with the moon, inviting bathers to cool their bodies and their passions, but concealing hidden dangers (represented by sharks, jellyfish and rays) within its glassy darkness. The sea at night is a motif for the psychological lives of all the young people, Teresa in particular. Swept by the tides of their emotions, they are like the 'moonstruck fish, restless, swarming' (Ch. 5, p. 61). Hysterical outbursts, fits of sobbing, groans, cries, or sudden shrieks, cut the long nights of desire. The atmosphere created is so intensely claustrophobic that the reader of the novel, like Teresa, feels the same urgent desire for release.

All the elements essential to the initiating of Teresa's drama are established in this section of the novel. The first is the conflict between father and daughter. Teresa's hostility towards her egotistic, loquacious father is barely suppressed and needs only the slightest pretext to erupt into open, angry opposition. She does not conform to the image of compliant, soft femininity praised by her father, and, in attempting to establish her own notions of

personal integrity, Teresa incurs the mocking scorn of her father *and* her brother Lance, while Leo and Kitty, who are more sympathetic to Teresa, are quiet spectators to the angry exchanges that occur.⁶ Teresa's conflict with her father is symptomatic of a deeper conflict felt within her. She is torn between the need not to appear a 'freak' — '[s]he did not want to be eccentric, but on the contrary, to be noble, loved, glorious, admired' (Ch. 5, p. 65) — and the urge to rebel, to express herself in ways which draw attention to her radical subjectivity.

Teresa cannot help being different. The early chapters are constructed primarily in dialogue between Teresa and other characters in order to establish dramatically that she is unconventional and that her desire to be free of her repressive circumstances is a paramount concern. The familial conflict is extended into a wider conflict between Teresa and the society around her. Her voice is distinguished from the voices of the resigned and conventional women on the ferry, at school or at the university evening classes, by the ring of idealism and determination which it contains. The arrangement of these scenes is also designed to expose Teresa's fears of what she may become, a 'dessicated virgin' or 'battling old maid' (Ch. 3, p. 28). Teresa feels keenly the pain of being one of the 'Great Unwanted' (Ch. 9, p. 109), one of the loveless and unloved women who are ridiculed and pitied, who form part of her acquaintance. Chapter two, 'The Countless Flaming Eyes of the Flesh' and Chapter three, 'Malfi's Wedding', explore in detail the themes of marriage and the painful alternative of being unmarried. The portraits of spinsters as outcast, pathetic, foolish and withered creatures deserving of scorn and pity reveal the very real fear which drives many women around Teresa to compromise in order to avoid the fate of spinsterhood. But 'Teresa would never endure the shame of being

⁶ Stead's choice of names for these characters should not go unnoticed. 'Lance', as Lancelot, continues the mythic association made in the portrait of Andrew Hawkins as Ulysses. The similarity of 'Leo', and its domestic version, 'Kitty', is also noteworthy.

unmarried; . . . she would never take what her cousins were taking either, some schoolfellow gone into long trousers' (Ch. 2, p. 17). Like other women, Teresa dreams of finding a husband (Ch. 6, p. 77) but she is singled out from her contemporaries by her determination never to compromise herself in order to win her goal. 'If you give up, make the faintest compromise, it's all over with you', said Teresa. 'I hate Bernard Shaw because he says that life is compromise. It isn't. I'll never give in' (Ch. 3, p. 29).

Marriage appears to be the only escape route for Teresa but the conventional approach to marriage, taken by her acquaintances and her cousin Malfi, has very little to do with Teresa's idea of love. Influenced by the literature she reads, Teresa dreams of love and a world of passion which she believes is real and therefore attainable. At this stage of the novel, Teresa's drama seems to be directed toward the discovery of that 'dream world', which, if it cannot be found in her present circumstances, she believes must be discoverable elsewhere. Christina Stead builds Teresa's character slowly and carefully in these early chapters, establishing dramatically, through Teresa's interaction with other characters and through the hidden world of her fantasy, three strong facets of her character: unconformity, passion and will. The first two have suggested to some readers that she bears a likeness to Catherine Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, but Teresa is not another Catherine because she possesses one vital aspect of character that Catherine singularly lacks: *will*. This particular facet of character motivates Teresa to direct her own drama of life and avoid the compromising feminine roles prescribed by her society. Instead, she will create her own role based on her own vision of what is right for *her* to do. She confidently believes that she can overcome opposition and transform her life according to her dream: 'She believed firmly in the power of will to alter things and force things to an end' (Ch. 7, p. 87). Her will is fixed upon three goals: 'Love, learning, bread — [she vows] myself — all three, I will get' (Ch. 7, p. 87).

The portraits of several young women in these early chapters illustrate Stead's technique of highlighting the character of her protagonist by revealing several possible ways in which Teresa might develop should she remain where she is. Gladys, who lives among the fishermen, has a sexual freedom which is attractive to Teresa but her obvious promiscuity makes her servile to the world of men and so 'this Venus was taboo' (Ch. 2, p. 21). Of the catalogue of aunts presented in Chapter three, Aunt Di, 'the family's only elderly spinster' (Ch. 3, p. 28) has the most disturbing effect upon Teresa, '[who] shrank from her rather more than the others, because she resembled her' (Ch. 3, pp. 28-29). Her cousin Anne's strange behaviour is explained away by Aunt Bea as a kind of sickness, a pain. Teresa recognises immediately that the nature of the pain is similar to her own. It is the pain of 'the rat gnawing at her, the fear of being on the shelf' (Ch. 5, p. 74). Poor Malfi, pregnant to a man she loves, marries another man whom she despises. Ellen, another cousin, is artistic and too 'educated' for a man; she is finally forced to marry 'beneath her'. For Teresa's sister Kitty, marriage is a business arrangement. She goes to live with an older man hoping to find love in exchange for housekeeping and child-minding, a situation which repeats her present situation as housekeeper for the Hawkins men. Kitty's decision is based upon her desire for independence from the family but she has to sacrifice any personal ideals she may have in order to achieve that limited independence. The examples of women's lives shown in this section of the novel reinforce the subsidiary theme of the 'woman's place'. The choices available to all those women portrayed, with the notable exception of Teresa, involve sacrifice or compromise or both. The portrait of Alice Haviland is designed to illustrate the difficulty for women to have both a career and marriage. Alice is constantly referred to as *Miss* to emphasise her unmarried status yet, ironically, she misses out on a scholarship to study because 'she's a woman and women marry' (Ch. 18, p. 205). Her choice of learning commits her to a desert of lonely, unfulfilled life because it means having to do without love. All around her,

Teresa sees examples of ways in which women are oppressed and this increases her strong urge to rebel. Even at work she is bound by an unjust system that forces women teachers to remain spinsters. If Teresa is to accomplish her three goals, she will have to reject the conventional woman's role and adopt instead the role of a man, or at least enact the part of a very powerful woman. The models for this role are not to be found in the society of which she is part, but as we shall discover, Teresa finds the models in literature.

I should mention at this point that Stead's treatment of her theme of oppression involves men as well as women. Her portraits of young men also reveal the extent to which they feel themselves repressed by society. Lance, Leo, and later, Jonathan Crow, are all miserable, frustrated and lonely without love, but they are equally afraid of being trapped into marriage, especially if the marriage is with an unsuitable partner. Even if they are fortunate enough to find a partner whom they want to marry, they must first be able to provide financially for a wife and family which involves, for most, a long struggle.

The scenes in these chapters set up the conditions of imprisonment from which Teresa must escape before her wider journey may begin. Her qualities of passion and will, emphasised throughout these scenes, suggest that she will not rest until she has found a way out.

The dullness of Teresa's quotidian existence is compensated for by the allure of her night-time 'world' of fantasy based on the literature she reads. Against the incidents portraying her painful daily experience that illustrate the unjust social conditions and biological pressures conspiring against her, is posited 'the splendour of [her] internal life' (Ch. 1, p. 12). While she chafes against the chains of her daily life at home and at work, at night she is free: 'her long waking nights were part of the life of profound pleasure she had made for herself, unknown to them' (Ch. 6, p. 73). Alone,

[i]n her bare room, ravished, trembling with
ecstasy, blooming with a profound joy in this true,
this hidden life, night after night, year after year,

she reasoned with herself about the sensual life for which she was fitted. (Ch. 6, p. 76)

Teresa's fantasy world of romantic lovers, tales of 'boundless love' and wildly imagined scenes of lust and gothic romance is elaborated in Chapters six and seven of the novel. This world is more real to Teresa than the burlesque of 'what went on round her' (Ch. 6, p. 75). She knew that '[t]his was the truth, not the daily simpering on the boat and putting away in hope chests; but where was one girl who thought so, besides herself?' (Ch. 6, p. 76). Teresa yearns for the quality of life represented in her fantasy world,

and it was to reach some circle, some understandings in touch with these pleasures that she felt she had to break the iron circle of the home and work; for she knew these things were not thin black shapes of fantasy, but were real. *It was a country from which she, a born citizen, was exiled. She struggled towards it.* (Ch. 7, p. 85 [Emphasis added])

Thus Stead's intention in these early chapters is to set up the conditions in which Teresa's choice, to take the night passage to her 'secret desires . . . [t]o Cytherea' (Ch. 16, p. 192), appears as the only acceptable choice available to her. By presenting Teresa as an exile from the country of love for which she yearns, Stead establishes the polarities of 'exile' and 'home' thus indicating the direction which Teresa's drama will take and establishing the nature of her outward-bound journey as a quest.

A strong feeling of destiny hangs over the form of the quest and as the narrative of *For Love Alone* proceeds, as Teresa approaches more closely to her goal, the feeling is created that she is about to meet her destiny. Teresa is not, like Catherine Baguenault, to be condemned to a hopeless fate, for her will is the controlling factor in directing and shaping her drama. In doing this, she acts out her fantasy. The key to the role which Teresa will play in her drama is therefore to be found in her fantasy life.

In the privacy of her room, Teresa lies on the floor and gazes up at the ceiling, waiting for the scenes of her secret drama to unfold:

It was too hot to lie on the bed. The ceiling was of the palest Nile green and to her obscured eyes, swimming in the maddening heat, it was curtained already; as she looked up, her head resting on her arms, the dark of the heat closed in round it. It was not sleep but the swift dropping curtains of the play. The play was about to begin. (Ch. 8, p. 101)

Her 'play' consists of a series of scenes flashing before her mind's eye, scenes of the passion 'of the shameless Greeks', visions of unlimited sensuality and freedom and of powerful women, taking the men's parts, active in their desire for love. Teresa sees herself as one of these women, establishing a utopian village for youth built on the principles of love, freedom and communality (Ch. 8, pp. 101-02). Her fantasy 'play' reveals that she is not a 'sleeper', a fairytale figure awaiting the lover who will unlock 'the iron circle of the home and work' (Ch. 7, p. 85) and set her free, but it reveals that she is a 'waker' who will free herself and pursue her own quest for love. When she is recalled to the painful reality of her stifling and uneventful daytime life, the need to escape, as the first step in realising her dream or play of life, becomes her obsession.

Teresa's escape occurs in Chapter twelve when she takes a night journey on the train to Narara. The storm which had been mounting earlier finally breaks. While the elements convulse in gothic, animistic release, Teresa, too, experiences the exhilaration and power of freedom:

She did not know where she was going; she was outward bound. This first train journey was only the first stride on a grand and perilous journey. All the other people in the train seemed to her now buried in strange debris, not really alive as she was, as her excitement increased. Alone, she found the way out, which alone does not lead to blindness, years of remorse and hungry obscurity. (Ch. 12, p. 137)

Like Louisa, Teresa has formulated no clear goal for her initial journey so that this stage is an escape, marking her decisive break from the constricting elements of her family and social background. She appears to be travelling backwards to the scene of her childhood, perhaps, like Louisa, seeking the love

which she remembers from that earlier period of her life. In making this break, Teresa does accomplish a space of time in which she can plan the next steps to be taken in realising her dream of life. Her action heralds the beginning of her 'new' life, that, with the passion and will she has already demonstrated, will be shaped according to the dictates of her dreams.

From Narara, the recalled scene of her happier summers, she will proceed to Harper's Ferry, a place which was unknown to her but which 'she imagined . . . as a lonely, dark, dread, endlessly solitary, inhuman place' (Ch. 12, p. 139). Instead of finding at Narara that warmth and love which she recalled from her youthful memories of the place, Teresa is upset by the parody of love-making in the Carlins' cottage. Then, passing through the wood on the way home, Teresa is terrified at the sound of a human yell, hearing it again and again. It seemed to come from her but filled the landscape as if it were 'the howl of empty Creation'. Then

[a] terrible thought went through her head like lightning, that she was mad, or had herself uttered the cry; that was why Ellen did not answer but pressed on. Was she asleep? Was this a nightmare? (Ch. 13, p. 159).

The first stage of Teresa's journey is marked by fear: fear of being unmarried, fear of going mad, and fear of unknown terrors in the darkness. It is significant that this stage of her quest should be undertaken at night. The world of her dreams suddenly becomes, in a very real sense to her, a nightmare. Her journey takes the form of the archetypal night journey as it is described by Joseph Campbell, in terms which are already familiar to us from Michael Baguenault's nightmare experience:

The usual pattern is, first of a break away or departure from the local social order and context; next, a long deep retreat inward and backward, backward as it were, in time, and inward, deep into the psyche; a chaotic series of encounters there, darkly terrifying experiences, and presently (if the victim is fortunate) encounters of a centering kind, fulfilling, harmonising, giving new courage; and then finally, in such fortunate cases, a return

journey of rebirth to life.⁷

Michael Baguenault is not one of the fortunate victims. His terrifying experiences are not followed by the strengthening or fulfilling experiences spoken of by Campbell; rather, he encounters further rejection and grotesque horrors before he takes his own life. Teresa's plunge into the unknown outside the familiar circle of home and work is invested with all the gothic and grotesque elements symbolic of a descent into the 'underworld'. The 'hidden life' (Ch. 14, p. 166) of the Narara valley, with its moonlit landscape, strange cries, wandering road and the grotesque old man, is symbolic of Teresa's romantic world of dreams. Teresa turns back on that particular night excursion, apparently not quite ready for the nightmare phase of suffering that this landscape represents, but she must travel that road if she is to fulfil her dream.

According to the Nietzschean doctrine of the will-to-power, suffering and destruction are necessarily involved in creation; therefore Teresa must pass through the stage of suffering, or, dialectically speaking, the nightmare phase represented by this landscape, before her dream is creatively realised. Teresa is, in a sense, in limbo between two worlds: the one she has left behind and the one that she is moving towards. That she decides to take this journey alone is testimony to her will and courage. When she does embark on it, the outside world all but disappears and we are trapped with Teresa in the psychological realm of fantasy and dream as we share with her the process of making them real.

The second 'act' of Teresa's drama begins with Chapter seventeen, 'This Embarkation for Life', and continues to the end of Chapter thirty-three, 'A Deserted Sawmill'. This section of the novel is the narrative of Teresa's long and arduous 'voyage to Cytherea' (Ch. 16, p. 193) or night passage to her

⁷ Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 202.

ultimate goal. The narrative of this section is intended to reflect Teresa's isolated consciousness as she struggles against the temptations that might hinder her progress. Her abstract goal of love is transformed, as she believes she is in love with Jonathan Crow, into the tangible goal of winning Jonathan's love. When he departs for London, Teresa melds the goals of her quest — love, learning and bread — into one: to get to London, where, she believes, all three goals will be achieved. In committing herself to Jonathan Crow, Teresa shuns all other possibilities of love. Teresa's commitment to a rigorous ascetic life of suffering seems at first sight to endanger her creativity and the achievement of her goals since it appears to threaten her self destruction. However, this is all part of the process of creation according to the Nietzschean doctrine of the will-to-power. Karl Jaspers's summary of Nietzsche's philosophy on the reconciliation of opposites and of how both suffering and destruction are involved in the essential activity of creation, is helpful in clarifying this point. He writes:

The *condition* of creation is great pain and lack of knowledge. 'Creation — that is the great deliverance from suffering.' . . . But if the creator is to exist, suffering itself is needed.⁸

Jonathan Crow, as the imagined ideal lover, assumes the role of antagonist in the drama, replacing Andrew Hawkins. Crow appears to be suited to the role of dream lover for he, too, 'lived in a dream' (Ch. 20, p. 231). The flaw in his character which makes him unsuitable for Teresa is detected in his vision of life that is coloured by perverse cynicism, quite the opposite to Teresa's youthful idealism. He sees life as 'a sideshow to get us in. Cheap melodrama' (Ch. 18, p. 214), in other words, a world devoid of the values Teresa seeks. In a letter to Teresa he writes: 'My ideal? To live without illusion; in brief, that means without love, doesn't it?' (Ch. 21, p. 237). His ability to love

⁸ Karl Jaspers, 'Man As His Own Creator', in *Nietzsche — A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by Robert C. Solomon (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p. 144.

is distorted by his ambition and self-love and Teresa is caught in the web as his victim. Equally, however, it may be said that Teresa is a victim of her own passion. Both characters are living an illusion or dream of life and their quite different visions of the world bring them naturally into a dramatic situation of opposing wills. The drama of the novel is clearly established in the working out of the relationship between these two contrasting characters, a relationship that can be interpreted in terms of a conflict between the romantic, idealistic protagonist and the cynical antagonist. However Teresa does not, at first, see Crow as we see him, so her drama takes on a different form when seen from her perspective.

Crow is portrayed as the incarnation of Teresa's romantically-inspired fantasy lover, a dark and cruel huntsman with 'hands, dark, passionate, *clawlike* but beautiful' (Ch. 8, p. 94 [Emphasis added]). Teresa sees him as handsome, poor, noble, heroic, a St. Antony to correspond to her St. Teresa. Though she may be blind to Crow's real nature we have other eyes through which we can see him. Kitty, for instance, sees him as a 'dark, axe-faced, starved young man, with spectacles and a black felt hat' (Ch. 2, p. 23); Erskine sees him as 'worthless, treacherous, unreliable, no good' (Ch. 23, p. 262); and Quick sees him later as 'a shrewd and unscrupulous-looking man in his thirties . . . swarthy, dark-complexioned, with a hammered-out distorted and evil face' (Ch. 35, p. 425). Of all of these views of Crow, Kitty's is probably the most objective.

Discussing her ideals of youth and love with Crow, Teresa ironically observes of people generally, that '[w]e prey on each other, but we don't want to' (Ch. 19, p. 219). Both Crow and Teresa are hungry for love and freedom and it becomes clear, as their relationship develops, that Crow feeds on Teresa's admiration and innocence, while she refuses food and companionship, starving herself of all sensual pleasures in her dedication to reach her ideal. However, Teresa does not see herself as a victim, either of Crow or of her own self-denial,

but as a powerful heroine, and this she becomes as her dream and drama are realised. Much later in the novel when Crow and Teresa 'confess', she declares that he gave her 'something to live for, a purpose;' (Ch. 31, p. 379) but his response illuminates an aspect of her quest unseen by her. The emptiness he refers to is not only the loneliness and suffering that she experiences but it also reflects ironically upon the fact that, in making Crow her ideal, Teresa has been in pursuit of an empty illusion, 'the illusion of a love-hungry girl' (Ch. 34, p. 424). Crow is the *false* lover, not at all the true ideal she seeks and his lack of values make him a hollow man unworthy of Teresa's selfless dedication. It is partly because Teresa invests in him far greater qualities and potential than he is capable of, that her dislike is so intense when the veils of illusion are finally lifted from her eyes (Ch. 33, p. 408). Nevertheless, during her quest, as Teresa says, her life of the imagination is full.

It is important to remember that Teresa's quest is not for love alone, but for love, learning and bread. The ambiguity of the novel's title invites discussion. While it is undeniable that Teresa is obsessed with finding love (which, to her, means a husband), it is also clear that she hungers for knowledge and that she must have money to enable her to travel to England where she hopes to find love and learning. Love, learning and bread comprise her primary emotional, intellectual and physical needs, which must be satisfied before she can become free. Teresa significantly places love before the others implying that without love, the achievement of the other two objectives would still leave a void in her emotional life. By contrast, Jonathan Crow reverses the order of these priorities and regards them all as shackles, rather than as the means of obtaining freedom. He says:

Bread and work and love, the poor man's trinity,
and by all three needs they chain him down. In the
need for one and three. (Ch. 16, p. 188)

Susan Higgins emphasises the 'necessary isolation' of Teresa's quest for

love.⁹ Although her quest for love does isolate her psychologically from those around her, Teresa does not desire complete solitude. It is important to Teresa's idea of freedom that she remain active in the social world of work and university evening classes. As her struggle intensifies, however, and she imposes a harsh regimen of self-discipline upon herself, her isolation from the world around her is increased. Spiritually, Teresa has already left the world of family and work and she chooses to emphasise this by also keeping herself free of any bonds which may prevent her from taking her physical journey.

This section of the novel is written to convey the atmosphere of dream experience. We have entered into the 'night world' of Teresa's senses and share the intensity of her world as she sinks deeper and deeper into it. Her 'night world' seems remote, dimly lit, peopled with figures whose shapes are vague and whose voices sound through layers of darkness, 'for people were beginning to seem to her strange things, creatures like parrots, that liked sweetmeats and baubles' (Ch. 24, p. 278). Weak and distracted by hunger and exhaustion, Teresa imagines that she flies along the streets:

It was a pleasure to walk, it was almost like flying. Things had a strange, friendly aspect, they were outlined with light, they had no human look and yet one would say they nodded. Evening closed in suddenly around the lamp-posts and the posts supporting awnings. She could not see! In fright, her legs trembled, her face seemed to float away, and she began to sleep. She felt a blow on the forehead. She opened her eyes and saw that she had walked into a telegraph pole that had not been there before. (Ch. 23, p. 264)

During her night passage Teresa's vision is turned inwards and she is 'blind' to the external world. Although she is not blind to the temptation presented by Erskine, her refusal of his offer of love is absolutely necessary if she is to go abroad. The arduous nature of her quest is written into the accumulating detail of her daily trudging back and forth. The effect of this long

⁹ Susan Higgins, 'Christina Stead's *For Love Alone: A Female Odyssey*', *Southerly*, 38 (1978), 434.

section of the novel is similar to the first, in trapping the reader unwillingly within Teresa's dream world. The tension thus created by the dull and repetitive narrative, again demands a release.

Time passes slowly in this dream life. Teresa's earlier life of the senses disappears entirely as she enters her martyrdom of suffering. She denies the world of pleasure for 'a life of extreme hardship' (Ch. 21, p. 245) and begins 'to love with a mystic love which no fleshly thought entered' (p. 248). Like her namesake, St. Teresa of Avila, she devotes herself with the extreme passion of monastic self-denial to the achievement of her goals. The incident of her begging for food recalls her hunger for love and sensual pleasures which she denies herself.

Teresa's wandering of the streets is different from the aimless wandering of Michael and Catherine Baguenault because there is a purpose in her suffering. Although she may appear 'lost' in her world of seemingly endless journeys undertaken by day and by night, Teresa knows where she is eventually headed. That she continues her struggle even in the face of illness and exhaustion, is evidence of the potent force of her will to shape the drama of her life according to her own goals. The strangeness of her experience confirms, in her own mind, that she has a destiny awaiting her at the end of her long struggle. As she approaches more closely the date of her embarkation for England, Jonathan Crow's importance as a goal is diminished and, instead, Teresa looks forward to 'a great destiny.' She tells the jealous, love-sick Erskine:

I have some kind of a great destiny, I know. All this can't be for nothing. Glory and catastrophe are not the fate of the common man. (Ch. 24, p. 285)

Ian Reid, in "The Woman Problem" in *some Australian and New Zealand Novels*, argues that: 'Personal liberation is her goal, her destiny; and love — which turns out to be something different from what she feels for

Jonathan — is encompassed by that larger destiny'.¹⁰ That larger destiny embraces Teresa's creativity. Her 'Testament' (Ch. 34, p. 419) entitled 'The Seven Houses of Love', written in expectation of her martyrdom, reveals the creative potential that Teresa may further develop. The autobiographical nature of *For Love Alone* is acknowledged by Stead and it is worth remembering that Stead herself, in reference to the composition of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, says:

I wrote my first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, in a London winter, when I got home from work and was in poor health, something I had to do 'before I died', but this was only an instinct.¹¹

Elsewhere, in an interview with Ann Whitehead, Stead's comments upon her writing of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* sound very similar to the circumstances in which Teresa wrote her last 'Testament'.¹²

The 'personal liberation' that Reid speaks of is linked very strongly in Teresa with the freedom to love, which, as the earlier discussion has pointed out, involves a freedom of choice. Teresa makes her choice by rejecting the passive roles assumed by other women and by 'escaping' into that world known to her from fantasy in which women are active, powerful heroines. She creates her own role from the many models of women known to her from literature, and she directs herself, in the drama which then develops, towards the great destiny she envisages.

The association between 'love', 'freedom' and 'creativity' requires explanation, especially as it relates to Stead's drama of the person. Despite the harrowing physical effects of Teresa's long period of suffering, her dedication to her goal of love remains unchanged as the active, creative aspect of her will to

¹⁰ Ian Reid, ' "The Woman Problem" in some Australian and New Zealand Novels', *Southern Review*, 7 (1974), 194.

¹¹ Christina Stead, 'A Writer's Friends', *Southerly*, 28 (1968), 166.

¹² Stead, Ann Whitehead interview, p. 235.

shape her life. Her quest for love is also a quest for freedom. Christina Stead defines her idea of freedom in her response to Ann Whitehead's question about 'sexual freedom':

[M]eeting a man who was my equal and liked me, admired me and taught me so much, kind of introduced me to life, was the great freedom for me. You can't live alone. Freedom is association with other people, and especially with a sexual partner, a companion, a mate.¹³

Stead's comment about her personal views of freedom and love help to illuminate the way in which she presents her characters. Michael and Catherine Baguenault are trapped and loveless; so too is Henny Pollit in her marriage without love, and all these characters are restricted in their capacity to find meaning and fulfilment. They are all portrayed, in the terms of Stead's drama, as victims of fate. We also see, especially in the example of Michael Baguenault, that the lack of association with other people does not confer freedom, but instead constitutes a lonely kind of imprisonment. Stead's concepts of love, freedom and creativity appear to embrace the Nietzschean interpretation of these terms. According to Jaspers, freedom, in Nietzsche, becomes 'creation' (*'Schaffen'*).¹⁴ This is particularly interesting in relation to Stead's novels because the ordinary meaning of the German word *'Schaffen'* is 'work' (either as noun or verb). Stead consistently accords a high creative value to work in her novels. Teresa includes it, as the metaphoric term 'bread', as one of her goals. It refers not just to the work she must do in order to raise the fare to travel to England, although this is extremely important to her, but also to other work she does in her tapestry, sewing, drawing and writing. Work, which includes travail and art, belongs in the all-embracing Nietzschean category of creation because it brings the individual into association with others, and association and communication (the purpose of every creative act?) are directly linked by

¹³ Stead, Ann Whitehead interview, p. 247.

¹⁴ Jaspers, p. 131.

Nietzsche to creation and creativity. Jaspers sums this up nicely by remarking that '[in] creation authentic being is attained. "Freedom appears only in creation".¹⁵ Love, either in Nietzschean or in traditional Humanist terms, can be transposed with creation, and in Teresa's quest for love, we see that she is in search of the highest, and most basic value which transcends all others. Therefore in pursuing her quest for love, Teresa is in search of that freedom which will release her from the cell of her loneliness and endow her life with the dynamism that her creative potential presupposes. With the achievement of her goals, the doors of her creativity are opened wide to her for a full and meaningful life, but the struggle must continue.

The issue of creativity in the drama of the person inevitably raises the question of Teresa's development as an artist. Even though it is not until Teresa reaches her 'Port of Registry' that her aspirations as an artist emerge, and then still in nascent form, the pattern of the struggling female artist has manifested itself from the beginning. It is evident in her difference from the other women and her will to shape and control her life, as well as in her absorption in the life of fantasy. The Nietzschean Apollonian-Dionysian duality is manifested in the duality which Teresa feels, caught between being 'a woman's woman' (Ch. 1, p. 12), the traditionally attractive, passive, 'lovable' female, and the assertive, independent artist. Here I must disagree with Diana Brydon who asserts that 'it is a mistake to view Teresa as an emerging artist'.¹⁶ In citing only Teresa's writing and drawing as 'outlets for a natural creativity', Brydon misses the most important aspect of Teresa's creativity, that is, her deliberate struggle to shape her life as art, and the suffering as well as ecstasy that it entails. Teresa's life of the imagination becomes for her, through her

¹⁵ Jaspers, p. 144.

¹⁶ Diana Lee Brydon, 'Themes and Preoccupations in the Novels of Australian Expatriates', Diss. Australian National University, 1982, Chapter 4, 'Christina Stead's *For Love Alone: The Voyage to Cytherea* as a Darwin's Voyage of Discovery', p. 125.

quest, the only reality to which she is determined, through her will, to commit herself. In doing this, she becomes, like the literary ideals she holds as role models, the passionate, romantic heroine in search of her ideal hero. Thus Teresa makes her own story, or to continue the analogy used previously to describe Louisa's active shaping of her life, Teresa 'writes' her own play, with herself as the protagonist. Her drama charts the course she takes on her night passage and highlights the dangers, unseen by her, of foundering on the shoals which lie at the extreme edges of mainstream, conventional life. This is the risk she must take if she is to rise above the common herd. Her extreme idealism does indeed almost result in her self-destruction as she faces the abyss within her and contemplates death when she believes she has failed. It is not until she is in sight of the safe harbour of her true destination – love – that a pilot appears to guide her.

Teresa is awakened from the nightmare phase of her dream by James Quick. With Quick she realises her dream of love, learning and bread, as he becomes her true lover, mentor and employer, although it doesn't happen in that order. This last section of the novel, set mostly in the darkened streets and rooms of London, quickly dispels the long winter of Teresa's suffering and brings her to the spring season of love, thus avoiding the tragic possibility of Teresa's contemplated suicide and providing the drama instead with a comic ending. Quick, as his name implies, is the sun and source of new life for Teresa. He rescues her opportunely from the fate of being trapped, like Michael and Catherine before her, in a solitary cell of loneliness. Quick's role in leading Teresa out of her dark world of suffering and restoring to her her will to live, makes him the fairytale rider who releases the heroine from the spell of illusion.¹⁷ However, Teresa is the one who has struggled to reach him, not vice versa. Teresa achieves her goals of love and freedom in her union with this man,

¹⁷ The fairytale motif was commented upon in relation to Louisa in Chapter 3 above.

and 'miraculously, an escape through rich quiet flowering country is opened; she fled away down the flowering lanes of Quick's life' (Ch. 38, p. 460). The pattern of the night journey is complete and Teresa is 'home', but even this proves to be only a stage on her wider journey.

Once she is settled into her new connubial life with Quick, Teresa again experiences the surge of power that she had felt at the beginning of her drama, the power that had made her feel that 'she had only to command and men would kneel at her feet' (Ch. 3, p. 40). So confident is she with Quick that she tells him about herself, and particularly, about her feelings of power. Quick reacts by appearing to withdraw into himself and instantly she realises her mistake. 'She resigned herself now to playing a part with him, because she loved him, and in order to give him happiness' (Ch. 38, p. 460). There are so many sides to her love and clearly Quick does not satisfy them all.

Teresa's new life with Quick reopens the doors to the sensual life which she had previously closed and she came to think of 'another breed of men who loved women who loved' (Ch. 38, p. 464). She is impatient to use that power which her new sense of freedom had granted her:

For the long and bitter time, the time of her imprisonment, she had steeled herself too much against misfortune; she had never dared to hope or be glad, in fear of failure; and it was only now that she was able slowly to relinquish her fierce grip on life, to relish the abandon of the senses. (Ch. 39, p. 468)

The imprisonment she refers to here is not of the same kind as her earlier familial and social imprisonment; rather, it is the prison cell of self-denial which she had entered voluntarily in order to pursue her quest. Teresa wishes now to explore her new 'country' of love. To do so means satisfying her curiosity to know other men and one man in particular, Harry Girton. Girton and Teresa bear an uncanny resemblance to each other, a resemblance noticed by others and by themselves. Teresa has met her 'other' self and to ignore him would be to reject a part of her destiny. Alone after her night with Girton,

Teresa feels the ecstasy of 'breaking out' again (Ch. 40, p. 490). She contemplates her future with James Quick in all the great cities and harbours of the world as an endless adventure which she would control.

Teresa's drama began with a train journey which led her into her longer inner journey to discover herself and realise her power; now the narrative is completed by another train journey, this time to London, to

the gates of the world of Girton and Quick and . . .
it was towards them she was only now journeying,
and in a direction unguessed by them; and it was
towards them and in this undreamed direction that
she had been travelling all her life, and would
travel, farther, without them. . . . (Ch. 41, p. 494)

Teresa knows in the life of her senses what it is that all the other struggling shapes beside her are striving for, she understands that there is something on the wide plain for all of them, if only they continue their struggle. Finally, we see, through Teresa's now clear-sighted vision, 'a peculiar, sliding fumbling figure go by, the typical self-pickled bachelor' (Ch. 40, p. 500) — Jonathan Crow.

The three 'acts' in Teresa's drama comprise escape, the long struggle through the nightmarish realm of winter suffering and finally the achievement of the goal. In deciding to pursue her own dream, Teresa constructs her own drama of life according to what *she* believes exists. The problem is that her dream-world of romantic lovers and heroines exists entirely within the framework of Teresa's fantasy, in the world of literature. What we see is unsurprisingly dictated by the exigencies of writing. So that even though we have occasional glimpses of the 'outer' social world of the family, university, office, the Sydney streets and London boarding houses, most of the drama takes place within the uncertain psychological realm. The journey that we take as readers is a journey through Teresa's mind and even when we arrive with her at the start of her new life, it is only to surface briefly before plunging again into the life of her 'awakened' mind. *For Love Alone* is therefore a more sustained

and intense psychological drama than either of the two novels discussed in the previous chapters, since it concentrates entirely upon the mental life of one character rather than several. The difficulty imposed on the narrative of reflecting the heroine's consciousness is overcome largely through the narrator's use of a language that employs the symbols of myth and dream together to articulate the passion and intensity of Teresa's experience. In this way, Teresa is at once the archetypal saint, goddess of love and death, *and* herself. Thus, in pursuing her dream, Teresa adopts and acts out the roles of the great lovers that she 'knows' with her emotions to exist.

The suffering experienced by Teresa in her drama is posited as a necessary condition of taking the long journey from idealistic youth to maturity — a process which Teresa recognises will go on being repeated forever. Earlier in the novel, Teresa debunks Nietzsche (Ch. 29, p. 359), underestimating the suffering that was involved in his struggle to accomplish his life's work. Now that she has achieved her goals, Teresa ought to retract her previous statement, for her success is attributable to the application of the Nietzschean idea of will-to-power, and like Nietzsche, she has suffered in the process of creatively shaping her life according to her dream.

CHAPTER FIVE

'The Comedians on the Hill'

The People With the Dogs (1952)

He loved New York, especially at this time of night. It was rich and tender with neon. There was a faint shine with big gobs of light in the duckpond at the end of Central Park. Edward loved all the town, even the broken parts of Sixth Avenue. He walked from block to block, store to store, recognising all the names, signs, kinds of wares: he was quite at home.

'Have we got a house then?' asked the bride smiling.

'Yes. This morning I made up my mind to take Solitude off their hands. We won't call it Solitude. You can write plays there all summer; and we'll have people up.'

When they were alone, Lydia said, 'But in summer we'll be in Cape Cod, or on the road. I'll have no time for Whitehouse.'

'Yeah — we'll have to cut that scene. That's out of an old play I used to be in.'

Christina Stead, *The People With the Dogs*.¹

¹*The People With the Dogs*, (Boston, 1952; rpt. London: Virago, 1981), Part One, p. 55; Part Six, p. 338. All subsequent references are to this edition of the text.

Stead's presentation of her drama of the person in the novels discussed so far demonstrates that the potential of the individual can only be fulfilled by breaking free from the conditions which curb his or her development. In *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone* this meant breaking free from the web of the family and moving into the larger community. The narrative impulse of these novels is from connectedness to dispersion and then, in *For Love Alone*, to connectedness again. As we have seen in Teresa's case, Stead's characters may not rest in the same situation for long since to do so would cause stasis, a condition which denies Stead's principle of life as dynamic movement. Motion itself is not enough to signify creative life; it has to be directed movement.

The concept of family is a broad one in Stead's novels. Many of her novels deal with actual families, but as a whole, her characters may be thought of as being like a large family of city-dwellers. People of all creeds, backgrounds and concerns come together to form loose communities living and working together, joined by bonds such as work, friendship, common interests or simply sharing an abode. The bond of love and the power that it involves exert the strongest hold and one which cannot be easily resisted. *The People with the Dogs* portrays an extended family that is held together by strong bonds of familial love and long-standing tradition.

Love implies freedom. Teresa Hawkins's quest for love is seen in the light of Stead's statement: 'Freedom is association with other people, and especially with a sexual partner, a companion, a mate'.² But love can be, and often is, exploited to the detriment of individual freedom as *For Love Alone* demonstrates through the relationship of Teresa Hawkins and Jonathon Crow. Teresa's experience is a 'voyage of discovery' (*For Love Alone*, Ch. 16, p. 193) directed towards her goals of love and freedom, and her final choice of a mate is

² Stead, Whitehead interview, p. 247.

based upon what she learns about love. There are obviously many kinds of love, and in exploring them, Stead critically exposes how the values of love and freedom can be perverted by misdirected and sometimes unscrupulous characters. In some novels, love degenerates into its opposite, self-love. The materialistic promiscuity of Letty Fox in *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946) foreshadows the demise of love in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (1948), where love is reduced to a commodity which can be bought or sold. Mutual rapacity holds people together in the city desert where dog eats dog.

The People With the Dogs, published later than the two American novels mentioned above, is, by contrast, full of love, doggie devotion and smothering familial love, as well as the brotherly love of the New York communities of theatre people, puppeteers, musicians, anarchists and working people who are all part of a large 'family' of relatives and friends surrounding Edward Massine.

In the equation of love and freedom it would appear to follow that where there is an abundance of love there should be a corresponding feeling of personal liberation. This is not necessarily the case. *The People with the Dogs* demonstrates that too much love can be just as restrictive and as much a cause of unhappiness as no love at all. In the struggle for fulfilment, which is frequently a struggle to find love and freedom, it appears that Stead's characters must find a balance between the two extremes of these values and learn to love unselfishly.

The People With the Dogs contains some of Stead's most endearing characters. Stead comes closest in this novel to creating characters who fit John Bayley's description of 'true' character discussed in Chapter One above. Edward is a generous, good-natured man who, probably because of his vacillation, is a distinctly likeable character and one with whom the reader can easily identify. In a family with dogs, Oneida Massine Solway, Edward's aunt, stands out as being the woman with the dogs. Oneida lavishes her affection upon her dogs, nursing them, kissing them passionately like children, weeping

and worrying over them, and commanding loyalty and love in return. While we may view Oneida with a certain amount of distaste for her obsessive cossetting of dogs, we are never indifferent to her, nor do we feel uncomfortable with her, as we might feel with the other-worldly Teresa or the grotesque Nellie Cotter. Oneida's warmth and generosity of spirit make her, in spite of her excesses, a very attractive character. Her name and physical appearance, with ample frame, long, dark, frequently braided hair, colourful clothing and rope sandals, suggest that she shares the spirit of the original inhabitants of New York, the Indian tribe 'Oneidas'. Her earthiness is matched by the description of her that contains

suggestions of old romantic operas and fairy tales,
rabid clan tales from wild woods and highlands
where the clan women are vixenish, strong,
careless, potent. (Part Two, 'Whitehouse', p. 174)

Oneida emerges as a powerful woman, endowed with the passion of a primitive, dominating the Arcadian landscape of Whitehouse. In the images of Oneida, we begin to see the attraction for Edward of the Whitehouse lifestyle. Her love for her dogs is symptomatic of the love shared by each member of the Massine tribe embraced by Oneida. There is a warm, loving atmosphere exuded by Whitehouse, especially as it is expressed by the larger-than-life matriarchal figures, Oneida and Ollie, Big Jenny and Little Jenny, Old Mary, Norah and Flora.

The focus of life at Whitehouse is the kitchen where these women are constantly busy preparing and cooking huge communal meals: breakfasts, lunches, wedding feasts, dinners — all fit to burst the arteries. The rituals of food, preparing it and sharing it, are indulged in frequently by the different groups of people with whom Edward associates, either with his family at Whitehouse or with his friends in New York, and these meals express the richness and indulgence of life lived to satiety. Compared to Teresa who nearly starves herself in her quest for love, Edward has a hearty appetite, eating well

and often and always in company. After the austerity of Teresa's life and the overwrought tension of *For Love Alone* and, indeed, all the novels discussed so far, it is a welcome relief to relax in the drowsy atmosphere suggestive of long, restful summer afternoons that emanates from Whitehouse and fills the whole of *The People With the Dogs*. At first there seems to be no possibility of tragedy occurring in this novel but Stead's ironic vision reveals that underlaying the comedy is the potential and actual tragedy of wasted lives.

When we are first introduced to Edward Massine he is sleeping in the middle of the day while the people around him are busy with the activities of life. A murder occurs in the street outside his house, Nate the Croat is painting, furniture is being unloaded and carried upstairs, dogs are barking, people are coming and going, but Edward sleeps.

The description of his room (Part One, 'Edward in Town', pp. 17-18) is intended to reflect his personality and current situation. The room is a mess: his father's dusty medicine bottles and jars cover the mantelpiece; everywhere there are books, papers and letters; the floor is littered with scattered clothes and old newspapers which he has not yet sorted. The street, the house, Edward's room, '[t]he whole scene was that of an unpretentious suburb and had an air of sunny quiet and no struggle, even though the trains ground and shrieked a few yards away' (Part One, p. 19). Edward's house has the quality of an oasis of calm in the midst of turmoil. The absence of struggle in the setting of *The People With the Dogs* alerts the reader to the probability of a drama different from Teresa's, the Pollits' and the seven poor men's. The details of Edward's room, like the details provided of Oneida and Whitehouse, suggest that we have entered the fairytale realm of the sleeper.

In the conversation between Edward, awoken finally but not yet dressed, and Laura Annichini, one of his tenants, it emerges that Edward has returned to New York at the end of the Second World War to live in one of the houses that his parents had left him. He has no plans and appears to be drifting in a

state of indecision and vague restlessness. Several times the refrain '[t]he difficulty of finding something to do' (Part One, p. 24), is repeated, indicating Edward's present lack of direction. He has a roof over his head and his army savings; it is obvious that he is surrounded by sympathetic and generous people; yet his voice betrays gloomy irritation as he reviews his situation. 'The question [as he puts it] is for me to get something to do that I want to do' (Part One, p. 25). Work, either in a regularly paid job or going into business, is no good for him, for, as he says, a job means 'not a creative moment to yourself. No integrity, no freedom' (Part One, p. 32). He similarly dismisses marriage for the inconvenience and expense it would involve:

So there it is, what am I to do with my life? At least it's all before me. Troubles! I want to do something worth while but I don't want to get balled up. (Part One, p. 33)

Edward is thirty-three. He is comfortable, well-off and 'quite at home' (Part One, p. 55) but unless he can find some new direction for his life now, it seems that he will be swallowed up by the mire of his passive existence.

Unlike Teresa he does not resist the family but goes along with his elderly aunts and their husbands in his inherited role as one of 'the Comedians on the Hill' (Part Six, 'New Configurations', pp. 342-43). The arrangement of the scenes in Part One gives the impression that Edward is a natural actor, exchanging one-line wisecracks, puns and the latest New York jokes with his family and friends. While theatricality is an essential aspect of Stead's drawing of his character, Edward is not portrayed as a professional actor, like Patrick White's Sir Basil Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm* who is a study in sham, nor is he a ham-actor like Michael and Catherine Baguenault; he is instead 'an utilitarian artisan' (Part One, p. 60) with solid, workmanlike attributes. Yet he does possess an attribute often seen in portraits of the seasoned actor — the world-weariness that comes from playing the same role all his life:

The glamour of stage and success surrounded Edward in his family and this only increased the

stiffness of his walk, his seedy way of talking through his teeth, the number of dry tags in his speech, the number of vaudeville dialects, the weariness of his skin and the deadly ennui he felt. (Part One, p. 56)

In the theatre 'he felt at home, both ordinary and active' (p. 60). There, he slips easily into his role in 'Big Ditch', delivering his lines naturally, using 'the tone of voice in which he told most of his jokes' (p. 59). Perhaps we should see Edward as a humorist, a facile gagsman, gregarious, even-tempered and thoroughly likeable. If we do, then the character who comes to mind as Edward's female counterpart is Emily Wilkes, in Stead's last novel, *I'm Dying Laughing*.⁸ A comparison of these two characters suggests that Edward may be concealing, beneath his outward display of jocularitas, an unhappiness or dispiritedness that stems from the uncertainty of his present situation. His acting in a comic role gives an impression of flippancy which has to be probed to reveal Edward's hidden drama.

Two incidents in Part One of the novel seem to indicate that Edward's casual approach to life constitutes a serious abdication of his responsibility to himself and to others. The first such incident occurs when Edward is summoned back to his house in the early hours of the morning by news of a fire. The fire-engine and police have been called by Edward's new tenants, the Barbours, who, on a very slim pretext, want to make their point that Edward evades his responsibility as a landlord. It is true that Edward has put off deciding about the fire escape that even Miss Waldemeyer urged was necessary, but the Barbours seem to come in for more condemnation than Edward since they are obviously portrayed as trouble-makers. Edward characteristically jokes his way out of the situation and appears to be unmoved by all the fuss. Only Margot Rossi, Edward's friend, has the ability to make him unhappy, for 'she had the dramatic attraction, the power of the unsuitable mate' (Part One,

⁸ Christina Stead, *I'm Dying Laughing: The Humourist* [sic] edited and with a Preface by R. G. Geering (London: Virago, 1986).

p. 81).

The second incident occurs in Margot's apartment. In direct contrast to Edward's room, Margot's apartment is meticulously neat and tidy, and each room 'had a single intention' (p. 82). Although this intention is described in functional terms it is not too difficult to extend the meaning, from Edward's point of view, to seeing the apartment as a trap in which Margot hopes to ensnare Edward, as the scene enacted there shows. Margot has suffered from Edward's long neglect and desperately tries to make him promise to marry her. His neglect of Margot is indefensible in the light of his dedication to Madame X and Musty, two of the Massine dogs. Even though Edward is fond of Margot, he is happy to bide his time:

He had no reason not to marry, but it hardly paid him and he felt that he would have been closing the door on someone else who had not come into his life yet. He often felt the stirring of a passionate attachment, of genuine love, of self-sacrifice. He kept waiting. (Part One, p. 81)

The picture of Edward's character that gradually emerges from these early scenes is that he is a procrastinator, apparently incapable of taking his life seriously. He is quite the opposite of Louisa Pollit and Teresa Hawkins who take themselves and their lives very seriously. Edward's relationship with Margot Rossi underlines his general philosophy of life that one should let sleeping dogs lie. Both characters are caught in their long-standing relationship; neither has the will to break it, but Margot has been brooding long enough to try to force a decision. Margot tells him, 'You're wasting your life and mine too' (Part One, p. 84). Years of waiting have bred a deep-seated discontent in Margot that now boils over into an acrimonious argument. Margot's bitterness distorts her view of Edward and, in telling her story to Walt, she incorporates her picture of Oneida and Edward as 'two persons suffocated with *dolce far niente*' (Part One, pp. 87-88), a statement which confirms the reader's impression. She continues:

I'd like to paint a picture of Edward the good; that's not the real man. I want to show you this morning the real man, Edward, the side-stepper, the double-crosser, the fourflusher, the cruel dull hard persistent profit-taking type underneath. (Part One, p. 88)

Margot's view is very similar to the Barbours' picture of Edward but, perhaps because we are won by his easy charm, it seems unwarranted to suppose him to be an oppressor. If he is acting the part of 'Edward the good . . . to fool everyone' (Part One, p. 89) then he is a very convincing actor. Walt certainly does not recognise his friend in Margot's description. Nothing has yet suggested that he is cruel, as Margot believes, or motivated by profit, as the Barbours would have it. In fact everything seems to point to the opposite. The only aspect of Edward's character which rates disapproval is his procrastination.

The point has been made in these scenes, however, that there is something wrong with Edward's life and it appears to lie in his wasting of talents and lack of will. Outside the apartment, he relieves the uncomfortable silence created by the seriousness of the earlier scene by telling jokes in easy familiarity with his friend Walt. There is some truth in what Margot says, for Edward is an actor and slips easily into the part of clown to cover up the pain inside. 'It seems to me something is gnawing to get out', he confides to Walt (Part One, p. 93). His confession recalls the image of the same gnawing pain that impelled Teresa to escape from the conditions that she saw as stifling her life.

The nature of Edward's problem is then glimpsed in Walt's image of the Massines' 'abundant multiple life . . . the perfect still life, . . . with grapes and rabbits dropping over the edges of an oak table on a woven cloth' (p. 94). The stillness and the sameness of this bucolic image suggest entrapment just as, earlier, the dust and mess of Edward's room suggested inertia. Walt does not see this. He regards Edward as being lucky to be born into the Massine 'Golden

Age' and cannot understand Edward's nagging worry. The question he then asks Edward — 'In God's name, what more do you want out of life than to be such a man?' (Part One, p. 94) — hangs over the subsequent narrative. Always the joker, Edward brightens with the thought: 'I am not as lost as I make out. My state of mind can be called undefined hesitant anticipation' (Part One, p. 95).

Edward's inability to resume his writing (Part One, p. 30) and his vague dissatisfaction with life stem from the stifling effect of the torpor into which he has sunk since his return from the War. His indecisiveness, lack of will and absence of passion are all factors contributing to the inertia of his present life. In this state of mind he drifts in New York, not wanting 'to go back to the idle gossip of family life' (Part One, p. 101).

The remainder of Part One shows Edward at the theatre, dining with friends and family, always sociable but characteristically committing himself to nothing in particular as his desultory search for something to do continues. The May Day parade presents him with an opportunity to join a cause, to transfer his allegiance from the Massine family utopia to a greater social loyalty. Ironically, for someone who has no ideals to uphold, he becomes a banner bearer in the parade, carried away by the emotion of the crowd and the conviviality of being with friends. Unlike Teresa, he is at home as one of the crowd and thoroughly enjoys his social life, but, left to his own devices, he has no fantasy or dream to direct him and he soon becomes bored, again drifting aimlessly until he finally leaves for Whitehouse in midsummer.

Stead succeeds well in capturing the atmosphere of drifting, desultory indecision, that state of mind which so far characterises Edward. There is no sense of urgency in his actions but time passes by quickly from Easter, when Edward's age is first mentioned, to July. Throughout Part One there are constant references to the time of day and night with the implication that Edward is letting his life slip away without making some use of it.

Life in New York, as Walt observes, is a rush to get somewhere for most people, but at Whitehouse the rush of city life is forgotten in the careless abandon of communal life. Superficially this life has its attractions. Compared to crowded New York with its problems of homelessness, unemployment and crime, the Massine family estate is an Arcadia. But it is Arcadia in decline. The Whitehouse dogs romp in anarchic freedom, attacking a car, strewing garbage along the road and upsetting milk cans, while the middle-aged and elderly occupants of the family house sleep. When the noise dies down, the only sounds to be heard in the peaceful valley are 'the sound of birds stripping fibers from the vine that strangled the pear trees, their remarks to each other and the water dripping into the empty trough by the barn' (Part Two, 'Whitehouse', p. 117).

The vine is first mentioned in the opening paragraph of this part of the novel and it seems to symbolise the Massine sloth and neglect which throttles life. As the theme of life at Whitehouse is developed, the notion of plenty or fruitfulness in abandon is gradually replaced by a more sinister idea of wild, untended growth, chaos and a rottenness and decay stemming from long neglect. The farmer, van Kill, is leaving the valley because there is no water for his cows. His action may be seen as taking away the milk from this land of milk and honey. What is left of the original humanitarian spirit of the 'Massine Republic' is an indolent, cloying love of dogs. The potential for a truly fruitful harvest here has been and gone as this carefree family would rather not work.

An outsider's point of view is put by Bart, a visitor to the farm, who talks about his scheme to preserve democracy in the United States:

Edward's family and Edward himself, listened to this wild and sanguinary scheme in a dreamy way. Brought up in peace, safety and openhandedness of a singular order, these words were for them only sparks flying out of the roaring fire of Bart's embittered, noble, still youthful mind. (Part Two, p. 126)

The narrative suggests that the Massines, in their laziness and indifference, are vulnerable to unknown threats and dangers which might assail them from

outside. Bart sees them as 'herded, mild, innocent civilians who would dream their lives away in this "aimless endless existence"' (Part Two, p. 126). He jokes that they may be 'the last people left alive. You would not be a bad crowd to start the human race with again' (p. 126). The joke is not lost on Ollie who laughs, 'We would be white-haired in the Garden of Eden' (p. 126). The hope for the rejuvenation of the Massine way of life lies in Edward and the young bridal couple, and the danger which may threaten them and their way of life is hinted at in Oneida's observation that '[f]ascism could come to the United States and Victor-Alexander would sit up there growing tulips' (Part Two, p. 127).

Life at Whitehouse is portrayed as a kind of escape to live a dream which was originally envisaged by Edward's grandfather. Significantly, Edward is content to live this dream rather than to formulate his own. Oneida's mention of Victor-Alexander at this point refers to another kind of escape where the solitary life is preferred. The irony in the two different situations at Whitehouse and Solitude is that Oneida puts dogs before people just as Victor-Alexander puts aesthetic considerations first. Victor-Alexander has adopted a position of complete detachment from the life in the valley below him, and in order to defend his oasis of order, he has surrounded himself and his hill-top house with a stockade to keep out the outside world. Edward is in the midst of valley life, yet that is an anachronistic, back-water kind of life, more suitable to his elderly relatives than to him, as still a relatively young man. Solitude and Whitehouse respectively represent the self-disciplined, solitary artistic life and the 'rough instinctive approach to the artist-communalism'.⁴ These extremes offer Edward a choice of directions to be taken in his drama, but neither alternative is entirely suitable for him. While Solitude may provide him with the opportunity for reflection, it does not suit his naturally gregarious nature,

⁴ NLA MS 4967, Box 2, Folder 9.

and Whitehouse, where everything is in languorous disarray and is loosely shaped by family tradition, holds no prospect of change to awaken Edward from his state of torpor.

The Massines emerge as 'sleepers' according to Stead's categorisation of characters into dormant sleepers and active, self-directed 'wakers'. Everything at Whitehouse seems to convey the impression that time has stood still there, and that the original, vital energy that began the Massines' communal life is now little more than a sluggish flow. The ideals of communal freedom and love appear to be upheld as the family continues to extend its generosity and hospitality freely, but the signs are that the original creative purpose of such a life is, in fact, obscured by the cobwebs of long neglect.

Edward strolls idly around the farm at Whitehouse surveying the evidence of neglect and decay all around him. The 'wild hops vine' (Part Two, p. 131) is taking over the farm, crushing, throttling and threatening to trap everything in its path. For a while Edward struggles with it, tearing at its stems and underground runners. However the extent and vigour of the vine requires an army of energetic people to control its rapid and extensive growth. Each branch and self-renewing root is a scout preparing the way for the encroachment of the spreading vine right across the Home Farm and into the countryside beyond. If the vine symbolises that sinister force which grows from neglect, causing the collapse of the old values and utopian ideals of America, then it is clear that the process of degeneration is far advanced here. Will Edward repair the damage done by the vine and rejuvenate the farm? It seems most unlikely:

'I'll never sink myself into this kind of stupid and useless work,' thought Edward, nodding his head across the cowpad at the old dark firs and elms which screened the Outcasts' house. (Part Two, p. 156)

Instead he immerses himself in the congenial life of his family, idling away his time in the company of elderly women. Not that there is anything

wrong with elderly women, but Edward's vitality is endangered by spending so much time listening to the reminiscences of his aunts and avoiding the question of his future. (It raises an idea also expressed in *Cotters' England* that the problem at Whitehouse, where the men are much weaker than the women, is that there are too many women.) When his aunts are not reminiscing or preparing food, they laugh at the antics of the dogs. Lou Solway separates himself from most of this idle talk by practising on the piano, since music, and not dogs, is his life and he takes a sardonic view of his wife's devotion to dogs:

He remarked, 'Don't you really think, Bart, life is for something else than to be spent over dogs? Don't you think there is something better to do?'

'I dare say.'

Lou answered mildly, 'Well, tell Oneida that. I don't see why a whole life should be devoted to dogs; it's the waste of a life, don't you think so?'

Oneida said, 'Every living thing needs love.'

(Part Two, p. 163)

Exchanges such as this one between Lou and Bart reveal a critical attitude towards the kind of commitment made by the Whitehouse community. In answer to Edward's earlier question: 'What's wrong with it?' (Part One, p. 88), the narrative examines life there and suggests that there is something wrong with Whitehouse and with Edward in spite of their charm. Margot's earlier claim that Edward cannot love becomes now the critical point of our close observation of life at Whitehouse.

The Massines' excessive love of dogs is revealed to be symptomatic of their moral debasement. So much creativity and love are, indeed, wasted when devoted to dogs. Victor-Alexander expresses it succinctly in his statement that Oneida 'substituted dogs for a moral and spiritual life, even a life of sensuality, talent: dogs were a deep-rooted and dangerous vice' (Part Two, p. 183). (The love of dogs, in its deep-rootedness, is here likened to the hops vine.) The values established by the original Whitehouse community have degenerated. Brotherly love seems to have become a selfish, possessive, familial love, which, rather than fostering creativity, has brought about stagnation. Work, highly

valued in socialist communities such as this once was, has also disappeared from the Whitehouse creed. If Edward is to live a full and creative life, he must break away from this stifling existence and discover the true values of freedom, love and work.

Victor-Alexander keeps alive the value of work. Constant vigilance is needed to preserve his garden from the assaults of the outside world:

He waged wars with green fly, Colorado beetle,
snail and caterpillar; from its mysterious paradise
he brought out glorious blossoms for festivals and
color compositions in vegetables for Harvest Home.
(Part Two, p. 158)

There seems to be nothing wrong with Victor-Alexander's activities, but the implication is that the effort involved in his work is out of proportion to his achievements. There is also a sense that he could be using his talents to contribute more than flowers and vegetables to the Whitehouse still life.

Edward is in a position to be able to see both ways of life and make his own choice. Both have their attraction. The communal life is friendly, open and chaotically eventful but it leaves little room for the private life. The alternative chosen by Victor-Alexander with his 'miracles' of flowers and vegetables in carefully cultivated acres is also tempting but it is a lonely, loveless existence and Victor-Alexander is regarded, even by the Massines, as an eccentric. Although the narrative does not state this directly, it implies that the 'true' direction for Edward is to find a harmonious combination of both ways of life, combining work, play, individuality and social life.

Both Whitehouse and Solitude are examples of wasted lives. The characters involved are creative, interesting people but they are not using their creativity to actively shape their lives towards an end. The reader may well ask why they should not simply enjoy the pleasures of their life without being pressured to change. After all, most of the characters are old and deserve a life of repose. However it seems that the humanitarian message of Stead's novels is being made here too in the references to the fact that these people could be

doing much more with the resources at their disposal. The waste and space at Whitehouse contrast with the poverty, homelessness and unhappiness in New York. The important aspect for Edward to consider though, is that he is taking part in a 'play' that really belongs to his elderly relatives. By joining them, he turns his back on his own life. Like Victor-Alexander's, Edward's life and talents appear to be wasted. Even Miss Waldemeyer, in talking of the use he could make of his assets (his houses) might easily have been referring to personal qualities that he is not realising. Unless Edward quickly makes up his mind what to do to direct his life to a new, invigorating purpose, it seems likely that he will become a permanent member of the cast of 'The Comedians on the Hill' and stay fixed in his role there as wistful joker.

Edward's lack of purpose is reflected in his repeated journeys from New York to Whitehouse and back again. This pattern conforms to that of the aimless wandering which, as we have seen in the discussion of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, signifies the condition of being trapped in an existence without love or meaning, governed by a fate over which the character has no control.

The narrative continues to oscillate between New York and Whitehouse as summer slowly changes to autumn and then to winter. The passage of the seasons marks the passage of Edward's life with still no answer to his original question of what to do. In New York, Edward's undecided state of mind is reflected in his tendency to drift, staying with friends, strolling the streets which he knows so well, or wandering at night with Al Burrows to observe the seamy side of life. The visit to the flophouse dormitories and Turkish bath-house is intended to show Edward what happens to the aimless, lonely and old people in the city. Al is Edward's guide to this grotesque, underworld existence:

They looked in and saw a long dormitory with men sleeping on cots. Some of the men had brought their pyjamas, some wore towels, and some were in Adam's costume, sleeping heavily, snoring away, turning and nightmaring in the heat.

'Jesus, a lot of dead men,' said Edward, turning away. He walked into one of the assembly

rooms which was brilliantly lighted.

Deck chairs and lounges stood around the walls and in the center were several large tables at which sat enormously fat women playing cards. . . .

The women chewed and laughed and fought holding up their cards in their fat ringed hands, chuckling, roaring with laughter, shaking their huge fallen bellies and breasts, circling on their immense bottoms, wet and pink through the damp wrappers or drawers; and telling, in a language partly American and partly a composite of many foreign languages, the most horribly indecent and ordurous tales that Edward had ever heard. He laughed, blushed, his hair prickled, and sweat ran down his back.

'How do you like these Minnies?' said Al, standing behind him and laughing softly.

'Let's get out of here; we'll go to my place,' said Edward.

(Part Three, 'A Night in Town', pp. 239-40).

This passage reveals the kind of life that Edward may be drifting into. His reference to the 'dead men' is ironic since they are sleeping, but in a sense Edward is one of them, for he is a 'sleeper' too. From the hot, darkened room wherein the sleeping figures of destitute tramps lie, Edward turns to the well-lit assembly room where the grotesque spectacle of the fat women greets him. An analogy may be drawn between these unknown women playing cards and Edward's elderly, fat aunts, who, like the Fates, spend their time discussing other people's lives. The scene operates as a warning to Edward that he must escape the dominating influence of Oneida and his other relatives and assume control of his life. By taking Edward to this place, Al Burrows seems to be showing him the kind of nightmare world toward which Edward is headed. The centripetal forces of the Massine family network of strong, possessive love and Edward's absence of will and general lethargy combine to produce his static drama.

While Edward remains in his state of limbo, his friends Margot and Al make their own plans for the future. When Margot marries, Edward feels the pang of loneliness that comes from not having a mate. With nothing else to do, Edward returns to Whitehouse. Part Three concludes with Edward's arrival at

Whitehouse and his joyful welcome by the dogs.

Change is as inevitable, however, as the change in seasons. The beautiful cat, Westfourth, is dying of a gangrenous foot, the result of his earlier injury not being attended to by the careless Massine family. Solo, to Oneida's disgust, has decided to leave the United States. The greatest change to occur is in the life of Victor-Alexander, who decides to give up Solitude and as 'tenant overlord' (Part Four, 'Whitehouse in Autumn', p. 252), he will run Whitehouse as a farm. Edward appears unruffled by the evidence of change all around him:

He felt only a pleasant boredom, the ability to stretch each day out endlessly, and enjoy its fat and empty hours, like an invalid in hospital; and he luxuriated in the thought that this life could go on like this for a long, long, time 'centuries of Massine time.' He often lay in the grass and felt only an ecstasy, no thought, no form, no sound: a wave of night, a sea of living sleep. (Part Four, p. 253)

This somnambulistic state of mind and body is quite the opposite to the thrill of ecstasy experienced by Teresa as she feels the rush of power conferred by her strong will. Edward has no will and therefore no feeling of power, only a lethargic dream-like feeling which is neither life nor, yet, death. His life has reached a critical stage. There remains plenty that needs to be done by Edward and his family to prepare for the coming autumn and winter but there is little sign that anything is to be done. The change of the season from summer to autumn and then winter heralds the hard times that are in store for Edward.

With the arrival of winter the Massine family removes to New York. Victor-Alexander is to live in Edward's old apartment after redecorating it; meanwhile where is Edward to go? This question, coming at the conclusion of Part Four of the novel, is the same question of direction which has governed the movement of the narrative, and Edward's drama, throughout. The vague gnawing that he had felt earlier now becomes a constant ache which little seems to alleviate. 'Since he had been left alone without Musty, a perpetual daily ache in his heart had come to reinforce the irregular pain of Margot's indifference'

(Part Four, p. 258). To cover the 'hunger in his heart' (p. 258) Edward wanted only to sleep.

Part Five, 'Scratch Park', begins with the cleaning out of all the past for Edward as he rearranges his room, symbolically marking a new start to his life. The plaster mask of the family's optician, Philip Christy, introduces a new character and a new way of life into the story. Philip Christy and his sister Nell had been anarchists in their youth and their household is all that remains of the anarchist communities that had once been established in New York. Among these people, sharing their hardships and suffering, Edward feels free and his search for something to do begins in earnest. 'A new life began for Edward' (Part Five, 'Scratch Park', p. 277).

The process of awakening is usually announced in Stead's dramas by the quickening of dormant imagination, passion or will in a character. Edward begins to feel a passion stirring within him as he listens to Vera Sarine perform at a concert. Enraptured by the music and the stage presence of the singer, Edward falls in love (Part Five, p. 282), but this love is a temporary intoxication of the senses just as his earlier participation in the May Day celebrations moved him to emotion. These separate scenes of the drama suggest that social activity, whether it be joining a political demonstration or enjoying music, certainly arouses the quiescent passion and dormant imagination, and it enables the individual to overcome the loneliness and emptiness of the still life.

His acquaintance with Vera brings Edward into contact with a new group of people that includes Lydia who does not, at this stage, impress him. Despite his new surroundings he still feels vaguely dissatisfied. The lives of his friends, Dr. Sam, Nell and Philip were as empty as his own: 'What was the use of staying here? He was getting nowhere. He had shaken off the family, but nothing had replaced it' (Part Five, p. 285). He begins to think more of filling his emptiness with a woman, but in all the women he knows, he recognises 'the old Whitehouse style of love' (Part Five, p. 286) from which he wants to get

away.

Philip Christy takes a hand now in directing the frustrated Edward, by taking him to meet a bookseller, Arnold Brown, whose woman friend (a gun moll) wanted to write her memoirs. The suggestion made at the beginning of the novel that Edward might become a writer is now about to be realised in his project to write the life-story of Myra, the gun moll. The project is the 'idea' he had been searching for previously and it comes fortuitously for Edward, as though, at long last, his destiny calls him.

The death of Philip Christy marks another turning point in the narrative of Edward's process of development. Christy dies a futile death trying to save his dying dog 'Lady' and Nell, having devoted all her life up to now to Philip, decides to lie down and die too. The whole question of having some purpose in life is then explored as this extraordinary old woman simply lies on the couch waiting for death, quietly observed by Edward:

Her eyes were large, her face pale. She said hesitatingly, doubtfully, 'Do you think my life was wasted, Edward?'

He came and embraced her as before. 'Nell, don't think along those lines: that leads nowhere. We mustn't ask too many questions.'

'Have you anything to live for, Ned?' she said, looking his face over carefully, when he went back to his chair.

'No'. He laughed. (Part Five, p. 306)

This is not quite true because he does have his writing to occupy him now and he feels a new vitality beginning to grow within. The missing element is a partner with whom he can share this new creative life. This passage reveals that Edward's life up until this point *has* been wasted since he has no real commitment. He learns from his association with Philip and Nell Christy that to love unselfishly and to devote your life to others is a noble and worthy aim. However, Edward recognises that it would be foolish of Nell to die and so he tenderly nurses her back to life. Part Five of the novel ends with his decision that he must get married to end his lone drifting.

Part Six, 'New Configurations', is the concluding act in Edward's drama. Sudden departures occur as various characters leave their familiar surroundings, while the deaths of Big Jenny and Madame X (the dog) mark the beginning of another new order of things and Edward's past life slowly recedes. Edward has completed his book and realises that he is in love with Lydia. New Year's Eve arrives but he has not yet made his decision:

Edward said gloomily, 'New Year's — and I'm thirty-three and a bit. The age of reason or vision or getting religion or whatever you have in you. And I'm living like eighty-three. Fifty years in the desert before me. Am I going to end up like Victor-Alexander? I'm not an aesthete — or Suttinlay?' (Part Six, p. 331.)

Having made good use of his talents as a writer, Edward has also decided to try his talent as an actor in Lydia's theatre company. When his new occupations as writer and actor are mentioned, a change comes over him, dispelling the gloom of the previous moment:

Edward's face flashed into life, it became rosy and his eyes shone with youth. Oneida said with envious affection, 'What has happened to you Edward? You don't often look like that.' 'He's happy, Oneida,' said Lou. (Part Six, p. 332.)

Edward's happiness comes from his decision to give up the Whitehouse way of life and live for himself. Yet old habits die hard and when he finally proposes to Lydia, he is again clowning in the manner of the Whitehouse comedians, but this time his serious intentions are clear.

At the critical moment of Edward's proposal, both characters recognise their likeness to each other. It is a very similar situation to that which occurs in Stead's short story, 'A Harmless Affair', where the woman, also called Lydia, realises that her lover is a reflection of herself, a situation which also explains Teresa's attraction to Harry Girton. One of the constants in Stead's portraits of character is this fatal attraction of 'twin souls' or anima and animus. This is the nature of the attraction between Edward and Lydia, but happily for them there are no complications as there are in some of the other fatal attractions, for

example the incestuous love between Michael and Catherine Baguenault and between Tom and Nellie Cotter. Appropriately the novel, which has averted the tragedy of a wasted life, concludes with a wedding, a comic ending to Edward's 'play'. It means the end of the old play of Edward's life as Lydia indicates that the life of Whitehouse is not for them. Edward realises, 'Yeah – we'll have to cut that scene. That's out of an old play I used to be in' (Part Six, p. 338). Whitehouse is seen then as 'just a backdrop' (p. 339), like a still life painting, or a set waiting for the play to begin. Edward offers to free Whitehouse from the spell of long standing neglect by offering Oneida an axe to cut down the vine. It has meaning for Edward now as a symbol of 'creative sloth' (p. 343) but it might also mean the strong, sinewy tentacles of love that keep the family together, and he has no wish to see their life destroyed.

The newly married couple plan to go away, to live on the road, fulfilling their dreams 'in the Never-Never' (Part Six, p. 342). Stead's novels celebrate the positive values inherent in the life of wandering, and the conclusion to *The People With the Dogs* is no exception to this. Edward and Lydia rejoice in the act of journeying as liberation but they do have a home to return to, if they wish, since the Massine estate will be there for Edward in his old age. Their intention to travel the road together, working in the theatre world which they both love, marks the end of Edward's aimless, static drama and points to his new dynamic drama of life. By asserting their need for a creative, independent life together, Lydia and Edward endorse Stead's values of freedom and love.

The drama of Edward Massine's life has oscillated between the poles of Whitehouse and New York. Within both places he has been 'free' to come and go as he wished, but this 'freedom' is inverted by the constant, nagging dissatisfaction and loneliness which he could not explain or find the cure for, until he found Lydia. With Lydia, Edward finds the true freedom from the perpetual merry-go-round of New York and Whitehouse. According to the role she plays in awakening Edward's passion, will and creative energies, she is

an example of the friend-lover figure seen in many of Christina Stead's dramas, and she represents Edward's other self. In his association with her, Edward finds what is missing and fulfils his destiny.

Edward's destiny is in the theatre. He is a born actor and the 'worlds' of music and theatre are in his blood. The wandering motif of the narrative throughout the novel has suggested that Edward has been lost and has been searching for his true 'home'. Even though he has felt comfortable both at Whitehouse and in New York, he has not been happy in either place. The theatre is his true 'home' and Lydia leads him there after much wandering and indecision on his part. His drama, like Teresa's, has also been a quest for love and freedom, and although these quite different characters have chosen different routes, they have both arrived at the same destination.

In both *For Love Alone* and *The People With the Dogs* Christina Stead employs the passage of seasons as a metaphor for the inevitability of change occurring in her characters' lives. *For Love Alone* begins in summer. The heat of this season becomes a metaphor for the stifling atmosphere of Teresa's entrapment as well as indicating her passions and ripeness for love. When she departs from her teaching job and decides to pursue her ideals, 'all her previous life had disappeared. A small cool sun, the first sun of autumn, shone' (*For Love Alone*, Ch. 14, p. 168). Her long suffering occurs in winter from which she awakens to the spring season of love with James Quick. *The People With the Dogs* begins at Easter, a time which, with Edward's portentous age of thirty-three, seems to suggest both death and the possibility of new life. Edward's summer is spent at Whitehouse which is associated with images of full-blown ripeness and untended growth to convey satiety and decay, implying that this direction is not the right one. The drowsiness of sleep hangs over Edward during this time. Winter in New York brings struggle for him, that constant which appears as a positive value in Stead's dramas, meaning that without struggle the dynamic processes of life cannot continue. Winter brings death to

some of the old members of Edward's family and friends and may also have brought with it Edward's spiritual death had he not been galvanised into life by Philip Christy's untimely death and the fear of wasting his own life. The implication of this part of the narrative is that a lonely life, without a mate, is not life at all, but a kind of living death. Finally, Edward's marriage takes place at the beginning of the new year and his new life begins appropriately (for the lovers) on St. Valentine's day.

Throughout the novel, the theatrical metaphor has been used to demonstrate the effect of an empty life lived as if in a dream. The character of Edward Massine is presented at first as a sleeper content to while away his time in lazy dream: his will, like the still life around him, lying quiescent, awaits the event that will awaken it. When this finally happens, Edward's 'new' life takes on a sense of urgency and invigorating purpose that are absent in his 'old play'. The awakening process is governed by the dynamics of change, represented by the use of the seasons, deaths, departures, marriages and new beginnings to other people's lives, and the polarities established in the novel which represent different directions to be taken or choices to be made.

Edward's drama is not marked by the same intense struggle experienced by the Baguenaults, the Pollits or Teresa Hawkins, yet struggle is presented dramatically in Edward's indecisive oscillation between the polar extremes of New York and Whitehouse. The latter symbolically represents his past life from which he must break free in order to write the play of his own life. New York, with its variety and also, importantly, its hardness, offers a range of possible causes and stimulating activities from which Edward can choose. The hardness of the city is mentioned as an important factor because it provides resistance and pain (Christy's death) from which the creative, forward movement of his drama finally gets its impetus. By rejecting Whitehouse and opting for a romantic, Whitmanesque life 'on the road' with Lydia, Edward commits

himself to the principles of love and freedom which will govern the direction of his life from then on.

CHAPTER SIX

'Come into My Parlour . . .'

A Little Tea, A Little Chat (1948)
Cotters' England (1966)

'It's the case of the snake and the fascinated rabbit. . . . She's woven him into her web. She's taken the poor helpless fly and made him her parcel. She's carrying him away to death and beyond! That's the type, that preys upon men.'

And she went out again to drum up friends for him, telling them all the sadness, the lonely deceived man, the great illusion, 'the black widow spider'.

'I like to see you get into a flap. You're so transparent, Nell. You've got just a little twisted spittling spider thread of sympathy and you try to dangle a whole human being on it.'

Christina Stead, *Cotters' England*.¹

¹ *Cotters' England*, (London, 1967; rpt. with an introduction by Margaret Walters, London: Virago, 1980), pp. 18, 132, 175.

The forward rush of the narrative typical of Stead's earlier dramas, *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone*, had lost much of its impetus in *The People With the Dogs*. Edward Massine's restless oscillations between Whitehouse and New York signify the indecisiveness and lack of direction that threatened to bring his drama of life to a dead end. His successful struggle to escape the centripetal forces exerted by these two places finally restored dynamism to his drama and he was able to pursue a new, creative direction and find the love and companionship which assured his personal fulfilment.

I have chosen to deal next with two novels far apart in time, *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* (1948) and *Cotters' England* (1966), in which Christina Stead presents characters whose dramas are static rather than dynamic, reflecting the idea that they have reached a dead end in their lives. In Stead's terms, there seems to be two possible explanations for such lack of dynamism: either the characters themselves lack the will and creative energy to drive their own dramas and make real their imagined play of life; or the centripetal forces operating upon the characters are irresistible, thwarting or distorting their will and producing a condition close to stasis in their lives. It has been argued so far that struggle, an essential dramatic aspect of Stead's novels, is seen in the interplay of opposing forces, characters and situations, and that, caught in the struggle, the characters have had to exert their will in order to shape their lives. With *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *Cotters' England* the struggle seems to take a different form and the result is a different kind of drama.

A Little Tea, *A Little Chat* is discussed first, to introduce the idea of a drama that stands still, as it were, as it centres on the destructive solipsism of an egotist in the last act of his play of life. This idea is further developed in a much fuller discussion of *Cotters' England* which dramatises with greater power the deathly forces of stasis as they operate in the life of Nellie Cook. There are also surprising similarities between the two egotistic protagonists of these novels, which, in addition to the static nature of their dramas, is another reason

for discussing these two novels in the same chapter. Robert Grant (*A Little Tea, A Little Chat*) and Nellie Cook (*Cotters' England*) are represented as predators who meddle with other people's lives and they are examples of the will-to-power in its extreme form. In an uncanny way these two characters seem to personify the destructive forces of oppression that other characters have struggled to escape. Stead emphasises the theatricality of these two characters in order to stress the unreality or falseness of their emotional and moral stance towards other people. Both Robert Grant and Nellie Cook cherish an ambition to write the play of their lives, an ambition that is never fulfilled because their creative potential is distorted, making them destructive of themselves and others.

A Little Tea, A Little Chat is set in wartime New York.² The background conditions of hypocrisy and corruption pervading economic and social life suggest a moral impasse. Individual lives are subject to forces over which people seem to have very little control and their struggles take place in a web of intrigue, deception and savage self-interest. The drama of this novel resides in the intense study of an obsessive will in action, through the character of Robert Grant, middle-aged philanderer and war profiteer, who is at the centre of the web. The reader watches the presentation of numerous short scenes (fifty-six altogether) which disclose mounting evidence of Grant's inability to break out of the crippling mould of his egotism. Grant's long and frequent speeches concerning himself and his problems, as he sees the entanglements he creates, reveal the psychology of a tedious man with a grossly inflated ego.

He presents two contradictory images. When he tells his constantly varied version of his life story, Grant seems to be the stuff of a romantic, striving hero, a character quite different from the 'average man' (Sc. 6, p. 44)

² *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (New York, 1948; rpt. with an introduction by Hilary Bailey London: Virago, 1981), Sc. 6, p. 44. All subsequent references are to this edition of the text. The short structural divisions of the novel are referred to in this chapter as Scene numbers.

whom we have before us. The discrepancy between the two different views of Grant is explained by the passage of time from the earlier, youthful Grant portrayed in his stories, to the older Grant who recalls and tries to relive his past. The concern of the novel is with the present Grant and the impression we form of him is of a selfish, materialistic, ruthless man whose conduct isolates him, making him finally a pathetically old man.

His life is characterised by constant 'mischievous play-acting' (Sc. 41, p. 279) as he meddles with the lives of the people around him, trying to tamper with their individual fates. Despite the warnings of those closest to him that he will 'tread on a banana peel' (Sc. 4, p. 26), Grant continues to 'play with people ... taking people's lives for a joke.'

He went on preying now, as all his life, upon most of his connections. And he could not help it, it was his nature, they uncovered their weaknesses to him, it was too tempting; and it was his nature to put his hand into the pockets of others, to take up a spoiled business and try to make a profit out of it. He even misled many people, on the off chance, out of instinct. He did it even to keep his hand in when he expected no profit. He loved his game of life. He could 'never resist temptation'. (Sc. 14, p. 102)

Part of the reason for the success of his ventures in love and business (and to him they are one and the same game) is the way he is able to fool people. His bogus socialism, for example, is a mask Grant wears to better prey on those people he deceives, many of whom are Leftists. The characterisation of Grant fluctuates between two contradictory views of him, in keeping with the idea that he is a deceiver. On the one hand he appears as 'a lonely old bastard' (Sc. 6, p. 43), an amiable old fool at the mercy of the 'bloodsuckers' (Sc. 7, p. 50), the view put forward by his loyal friend David Flack; and on the other hand he appears as a treacherous, unscrupulous, selfish, double-dealer who is himself a 'bloodsucker'. He plays these duplicitous roles convincingly, suggesting that both are to be regarded as equally valid aspects of his character. It also suggests

that in adopting these conflicting roles, his is a fragmented personality marked by internal struggle.

Compared to the pervading spring-like vitality of *For Love Alone* and the drowsy, summer tone of *The People With the Dogs*, *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* is autumnal, with the threat of winter fast approaching. The will-to-power is a life force in the drama of the person but when that power is abused, as it is by Robert Grant, it becomes a death force, tending to produce stasis in the drama. Grant is a much older character than any we have met so far (with the exception of Edward Massine's elderly aunts) and his flagging zest for life, like his sallowing complexion, needs to be revived by whatever means his money can buy. With his life in the doldrums, Grant pathetically and vainly tries to repeat the pattern of his lost youth.

Repetition in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* is the keynote of Grant's life involving exploitation, shady deals and shady characters, rapacity and finally death. The device of repetition contributes to an overall effect of monotony, which, while it dramatises the state of Grant's mind well, has the effect of boring the reader. Grant's life is marked by a pattern of endless deceptions and betrayals while he attempts to create drama and intrigue using other people and ruining their lives, for his own selfish satisfaction. In the general atmosphere of deceit it is not surprising that the novel should place so much emphasis on the metaphor of the game. International war games form the general background of the novel, while in New York, business cronies meet weekly to plan their strategies in the games they play which have repercussions for players and non-players alike; alimony is a game played in the severed business relations of marriage; prostitution of every sort is 'the' game; and Fate is a player holding the ace in Grant's game. In singling out the character of Robert Grant for attention, Christina Stead exposes vicious self-interest as the prime motive of all these games as they are played in the capitalist jungle of New York, showing how the egotistic protagonist is ultimately the loser.

Robert Grant may be regarded as an older, more destructive, version of a character in *House of All Nations*, Henri Léon. Léon's two passions are money and women. Characterised as a gay, pleasure-loving libertine, Léon directs his energy and business acumen to the deals he makes with his colleagues and his women. His name signifies the courage and big-heartedness that give him his moral as well as dramatic stature in an atmosphere singularly lacking in high moral principles. (Léon's 'wheat scheme', for example, is based on humanitarian as well as capitalist principles.) His robust vitality rivals the nervous energy of the patrician of business, Jules Bertillon, and distinguishes him from other players in that drama, like Bomba and Raccamond. His energy, passion for women, and ruthlessness, identify Henri Léon as a Don Juan figure.

Whatever Robert Grant may once have been, when we meet him, he is an ageing Don Juan whose earlier potency has been reduced to such an extent that he has sunk to mean affairs in melancholic quest of a youthful grand passion which he wants to re-experience. The emptiness of his life is expressed in his repeated use of the desert image, as he drones in a monotone that is to become characteristic of most of his speech: 'My life is a blasted heath. I'm a parched and thirsty man. I want an oasis' (Sc. 2, pp. 11-12); or 'My life's a desert' (Sc. 18, p.132). No-one takes his cry seriously though, or takes much notice of his analyses of the scandals in which he seems to be involved, since his life is also a 'wilderness of lies' (Sc. 25, p. 173) and his words echo hollowly.

As we saw in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, images of aridity are used to convey dormant or shrivelled creative potential and they are linked with lovelessness, loneliness and aimlessness. For example, in *The People With the Dogs* Edward Massine recognises his incomplete life in the expression '[f]ifty years in the desert before me' (*The People With the Dogs*, Part 6, p. 331). Desert imagery and images of hunger and thirst consistently signify a polar extreme at one end of the continuum of the drama of the person. The individual needs to

escape from that extreme and move towards the opposite pole where his or her needs will be satisfied in the blossoming of fertile or creative life. The failure of the character to escape seriously impedes the dynamic movement of the narrative. The absence of personal fulfilment is marked by an anti-quest or anti-romance pattern: a concentration inwards and downwards into the underworld *without* a corresponding pattern of return in upwards and outwards movement. Stead uses legendary and romance elements ironically in her dramatisation of the characters who fail to break free from the centripetal forces that hold them back. The narrative of Robert Grant's life shows this pattern of failure and tendency towards stasis in his gradual descent into his fearful 'underworld' where nightmares replace his dreams and fantasies. Lost in the desert of his declining years, Stead's Robert Grant represents Don Juan in decline.

Don Juan of early legend — as in Tirso's *El Burlador de Sevilla* — died in his prime before the onset of old age could erase the vitality and virility that are his hallmarks. Stead's portrait of Grant, which shows us a ridiculously vain figure desperately trying to ward off the effects of time and finally being humiliated, relates to a mid-nineteenth century anti-Romantic view of Don Juan.

According to Leo Weinstein, the anti-Romantic Don Juan was an old man, variously treated as a pitiful figure, a ruthless tyrant, a puppet-like figure manipulated by the women he believed he had seduced, a straight-forward liar, an effeminate coward and finally, in the ultimate attack on Don Juan's integrity, a homosexual.⁸ Most of these anti-Romantic portraits were products of different attempts at investigating the psychology of Don Juan and resulted in what Weinstein regarded as 'a betrayal of the artistic intent of the legend' in

⁸ Leo Weinstein, *The Metamorphoses of Don Juan* Stanford Studies in Language and Literature, XVII (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959), pp. 137-41.

ignoring the essential physical attributes of the legendary figure.⁴

Stead's treatment of Robert Grant as Don Juan employs a complex mixture of elements taken from the earlier seventeenth century Spanish versions of the legend, Molière's eighteenth century *Dom Juan*, and the later nineteenth century versions. Molière was responsible for the first intensive psychological treatment of the Don Juan figure in his play, *Dom Juan ou le Festin de Pierre*. His Dom Juan is a calculating figure who indulges in long, self-analytical and self-justifying tirades.

Henri Léon, having a greater vitality than Robert Grant, may be said to represent the earlier, Spanish Don Juan before the onset of old age. Glimpses of the younger man are seen in Grant's stories, although these need to be considered in light of the fact that Grant is a liar. Ironically Grant claims Spanish ancestry (Sc. 20, p. 141) as a way of explaining what he refers to as his hot-blooded temperament. This may be regarded as evidence of the delusion under which he suffers. His 'hot-bloodedness' really consists of outbursts of bad temper that punctuate the deadly ennui he feels as he is trapped in a pattern of endless and apparently meaningless assignations. He hungers for love and uses his wealth to buy it as just another commodity available for sale. Despite Grant's repeated transactions, he remains unsatisfied and frustrated, increasing his sense of loss: 'He had little pleasure out of his own real hobby, libertinage; and he gave none' (Sc. 4, p. 25).

Grant's long, introspective speeches show the influence of Molière in Stead's psychological interpretation of the legend and they reveal how feeble is his struggle to escape the ennui in which he is entrenched. Words have taken the place of action in his colourless seductions as he invites women to come for 'a little tea, a little *chat*' (Sc. 2, p. 11 [emphasis added]). Other aspects of Grant's character, such as his tyranny, lying and cowardice, reflect the anti-

⁴ Weinstein, p. 136.

Romantic interpretations of the elderly Don Juan. The legendary element in Stead's characterisation of Grant works most successfully as an ironic device to highlight his failure to emulate the romantic figure on whose life he bases his own.

Grant's egotism is the trait emphasised in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. Although he may once have been a questing character in search of his ideal love (the 'Laura' of his stories)⁵, his motive now seems to be possession of women for the sake of it. His constantly expressed wish to find an oasis in his desert of unfulfilled love is difficult to take seriously. There is no indication that his women make him feel youthful again or help to allay the pain of his loneliness, and his constant conquests appear meaningless. The question: 'What should he do with his life?' (Sc. 18, p. 133) indicates his aimlessness. Restless and dissatisfied, Grant toys with other people's lives, tampering with the free play of will and fate that is the essence of the human drama, and his arrogance in doing so compares with the hubris that has brought far greater characters to their downfall, including the legendary Don Juan. It is not surprising that his drama should trace his inevitable downfall.

He finally thinks he finds the object of his search in the character of Mrs Barbara Kent, the 'Blondine'. But with an ironic twist, she draws Grant into a complex intrigue apparently designed to bring about his ultimate ruin. In Mrs Kent Grant meets his match. Their affair follows quite a different course from the wholesome plots for plays and stories which Grant dreams up. She is a gambler in the alimony stakes and an expert in the 'honey' trade.⁶ Grant, who has all his life manipulated other people, directing the little dramas around him,

⁵ Laura is also the name given to one of Don Juan's former mistresses by Alexander Pushkin in his dramatic poem, *The Stone Guest*. (Weinstein, p. 91.)

⁶ 'Honey' is a colloquialism used by Grant to refer to sexual favours (Sc. 24, p.168) and, as a commodities trader, it is interesting that his youthful counterpart, Henri Léon, is called a 'bear' in the language of the stock market. Even trivial details such as these show the consistency with which Stead sketches her characters.

treating his women, his friends and his employees like puppets, now finds himself in turn being manipulated by the strings of both his heart and his purse and he dances to the Blondine's tune. He retaliates with equal venality but again and again Barbara Kent is able to subject him to her wilful caprices and charm, being alternately elusive and attainable, drawing him more deeply into the morass which their affair becomes. As his *femme fatale*, Kent is the counterpart to Laura, the 'pure love' of his youth. Grant's distracting involvement with her makes him ready prey to his business enemies.

This brings us to Peter Hoag, a character unmentioned in the cast, but a player who appears at the very beginning of the novel as a somewhat shadowy figure on the periphery of Grant's circle. Through his mysterious and wealthy connections, Hoag seems to have access to a power greater than Grant's. Hoag's friends are giants in the world of finance and government agencies and his position among them is assured as an indispensable repository of secrets, as a fixer and a friend (Sc. 1, p. 4). Hoag plays a part that should not be underestimated in the course of Grant's drama.⁷ While Grant preys upon people, playing with women, singing them his song with the refrain 'all I want is a woman' (the title of his story [Sc. 6, p. 44]), his antics are being observed by a far more dangerous breed of predator. These powerful magnates look down on the small stage where Grant's drama is being played out just as Hoag, unseen, gazes out of his eighteenth floor window at the tiny 'two-legged fleas' below (Sc. 1, p. 3). Hoag is the go-between or 'Mercury' for these powerful men whose wealth, position and networks enable them to control many lives, and

while they played golf or drank Scotch, they meddled with the same lives, tinkered with the plots of the preceding week, and laughed over new tricks to play on some newcomer or old crony. They not only were birds of prey, but loved to think of themselves as eagles in their flights and vultures in their hovering. (Sc. 1, p. 5)

⁷ Cf. Hilary Bailey, in the introduction to the Virago edition of the text, who says that Hoag is 'a figure almost irrelevant to the main part of the book' (Intro. p. 1).

It must not be forgotten that Hoag introduces Barbara Kent to Grant. Grant's meeting with Kent is the catalyst that sets in motion a wider design which may have been, if not devised, at least wittingly foreseen by Hoag's cronies. The involvement of the shadowy circle of Hoag's powerful friends in Grant's downfall is not as far-fetched as it would at first seem to be. The character and associations of Peter Hoag are presented in detail at the beginning of the novel not only to give us an overview of the kind of 'world' in which this novel is set, but for another purpose — that of alerting the reader to the possible stage-management of Grant's subsequent drama. In every other novel considered so far Christina Stead has carefully constructed her opening scenes with direct relevance to the ensuing drama. They help to create the background of the novels which is always important in the establishment of the dramatic situation and subsequent development of the novel. It would be most unusual for Stead to introduce a character and situation which have no bearing on the drama to follow. In this case, the focus of attention moves cinematically from the city location to Peter Hoag.

Hoag is presented in great detail for one and a half scenes as a shrewd man with an eye for the weaknesses of the masters he serves. He knows each has 'a fatal woman and a fatal day' (Sc. 1, p. 4), and he knows that his survival in the city depends upon his ability to procure whatever his friends want. When he picks up Barbara Kent he appraises her as a potential business proposition. He appears to have nothing to gain by introducing her to Grant but perhaps we should see the business in terms of what Grant may have to lose. The opening scenes contain the outline of a plan concocted by Saul Udall to take over a business corporation (Sc. 2, pp. 6-7), a plan that sounds in retrospect very similar in style to the 'plot' that follows after Grant becomes entangled with Barbara Kent. Within the established context of game playing and trickery, the story of Robert Grant emerges as the working out of a plot to outwit him as a self-styled legendary deceiver. He steps into a trap baited with the blonde

woman and thus enmeshed, there is no escape. It appears that his fatal flaw, his passion for women, causes him to relinquish control of his life.

In the complexity and density of the novel, it is easy to overlook the fact that March, Pantalona and Udall, some members of Hoag's circle, benefit financially from the divorce and spying intrigue involving Kent. According to the relationships established between people in terms of predator and prey, both Grant and the Blondine appear to be the victims of the powerful vultures served by Hoag. When seen from the perspective of characters like Hoag and his associates, Grant's predilection for play acting and game playing makes him a prime target and he becomes a pawn of the 'gods' in the games they play with people's lives. Further, Grant is a victim of his own predatorial lust and self-deception.

Hoag's business instinct concerning Kent is correct (Sc. 1, p. 9). She knows the game Grant plays and plays it better than him. Her dealings with Grant reverse the roles of manipulator and manipulated, making a fool of him and creating havoc in his life. Ultimately she helps in bringing about his downfall.

Grant's will and power are sapped in the long-drawn-out battle between him and Kent over a period of years. The campaigns each player mounts against the other constitute a drama of action and counter-action to the amusement of Hoag's friends and the consternation of Grant's friends, the Flacks. Compared to the fantasy life he creates in the scenarios he dreams up, his real life follows the pattern of the destroyer destroyed or the deceiver deceived.

According to the Don Juan legend on which his life is ironically moulded, Grant's life is subject to an inescapable fate. However, he differs from the legendary figure in being fearful of his looming fate. Two fears consume him: fear of old age and fear of a mysterious figure, Hilbertson, who reappears from his past to haunt him. Hilbertson corresponds to Léon's friend turned enemy,

Julius Kratz, and his appearance in this novel takes on superstitious significance for Grant. Grant's fear of old age makes him a ridiculously vain figure, obsessive in his toilet to fend off the effects of time. His desire for perpetual youth (an aspect of his character which links him to the figure of Faust as well as Don Juan) leads him to indulge in the magic of make-up and a sun lamp in order to disguise his ageing appearance. His commitment to appearance reinforces the idea that he is a deceiver. His talk is also a pretence as he constantly embroiders the ugly reality of his actions with romantic falsehoods and clichés. These aspects of his character reveal Grant to be an actor pretending to be Don Juan but he has neither the physical presence, youth nor aspirations suited to the role as he romantically envisages it. Yet ironically, as a consequence of shaping his life according to the legend, he must suffer the same fate as his legendary precursor.

His bathroom, where he spends an inordinate amount of time, becomes a dressing room from which he emerges as a suitably costumed, well-rehearsed, self-confident actor, used to dominating the stage. While this is the image we usually have of Grant, his estranged wife shows us a completely different person. The portrait she paints is not flattering: 'her' Grant eats raw onions, does not wash and uses the laundry bag to hide from his enemy (Sc. 47, pp. 330-31). Mrs Grant also explodes the myth of his sexual prowess by alluding to an accident that supposedly left him unable to fulfil his role as a husband (Sc. 47, p. 331). It is difficult to tell whether this is true or not since Gilbert Grant regards his mother as one who suffers from 'sleeping sickness'. Nevertheless, Gilbert is shocked enough by his mother's revelations to confront his father and accuse him of being 'a man who puts on greasepaint to show better under the street lamp with whores' (Sc. 48, p. 333). In this scene Grant is exposed as a dotard made up to play the role of Don Juan.

Towards the end of the novel Grant is plagued by nightmares of sinking in the mud (Sc. 52, p. 375). These nightmares reveal that he has reached a dead

end since mud, in Stead's symbolic presentation of the psychology of character, signifies the emotional morass into which he has sunk. His state of mind and body are reflected in the spiritless image he sees in the mirror. Without his actor's make-up he is revealed as 'a hang-dog, ash-gray, baldheaded man with *vacant* eyes: he was old at last' (Sc. 55, p. 385 [emphasis added]). He gives up his game of life and becomes a recluse hiding in his apartment, afraid even of shadows.

Grant's inglorious end is the logical conclusion to a life modelled ironically on the legendary Don Juan. The 'oasis' he thinks he may have found with the Blondine, proves instead to be a trap from which he cannot escape. Rather than being his protector in the hideaway apartment, Kent takes on the aspect of gaoler who is lured away by the charm of Hilbertson when he finally catches up with Grant (Sc. 56, pp. 392-93). Grant's superstitious fear of Azrael, the Angel of Death and agent of retribution for his past misdeeds, is realised when Hilbertson arrives unexpectedly at the door. The Blondine proves her worthlessness by betraying Grant and leaving him to face his fate alone.

Stead consistently treats egotism as a mania, a psychological sickness from which recovery is uncertain. The process by which Grant is 'cured' is the humiliation to which the Blondine subjects him. In keeping with the chronic mythomania that he suffers, Grant persists in telling his life story as a 'best-seller', a popular romance that would sell like hot cakes (Sc. 5, p. 36) and his search, if it can be regarded as one, is for a 'good ending' (Sc. 6, p. 42).

His life, as we see it enacted rather than told by him, is the opposite of what Grant wants it to be. Instead of being a quester who shapes his life according to his romantic aspirations and dreams, he is an aimless wanderer whose life is moulded ironically as anti-romance by the delusions he suffers. The ugliness of the selfish principles by which his actions are motivated is reflected in the ugliness and falseness of his life, so that the play he would like to write himself is never written.

The worst aspect of Grant's play acting and meddling is that he has no respect for other people and their creative right to control their own lives. His extreme abuse of power is seen in the way he manipulates people's affections and betrays their trust, and in doing these things, he perverts the values of love and friendship. He interferes with their freedom and responsibility in the same way that he ruins the script written by the playwright, Karel Karolyi. What makes the situation worse is that he feels absolutely no remorse when those whom he ruins then take their own lives. The novel is littered with the fragments of other people's dreams that have been broken by Robert Grant; therefore his dishonourable end is a most fitting conclusion to a dishonourable and dishonest life.

The elements of dramatic conflict in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* are present in the matching of Kent and Grant, two very similar but opposed characters. Grant believes her to be another Laura, the object of his youthful romantic passion, but he is deceived. Throughout the novel the reader is involved in sifting through the repetitive details of each event, each scene, which minutely analyse the one-track mind of an egotist going nowhere except to meet his death. Each scene is exploited dramatically to portray all the moods and aspects of Grant's character so that we are constantly watching the drama of his unfolding personality. We are subjected to his long confessional monologues delivered in staccato voice alternating with lapses into a Scottish burr as he takes his stance on centre stage. His idea of a drama is that it should contain plenty of words (Sc. 41, p. 282) and his drama is marked by a plethora of words spoken by and about himself. (The wordiness of his drama is also an unavoidable effect of the dramatic method used to concentrate on the mind of an egotistical character.) The effect of his 'drivel' is to drive his close friend, David Flack, to weep 'out of pity and boredom' (Sc. 18, p. 132). That Grant bores us is indisputable, but it is less clear that he is an object worthy of pity.

From our point of view, seeing him only as he stands before us, Grant gets what he deserves.

Grant is finally a mediocre character, predictable in his repetitive assignments for '— a little tea, a little chat' (Sc. 2, p. 11). As a consequence, the novel lacks the tension which has been the hallmark of Stead's earlier forward-moving dramas. It slowly traces the endless circle of Grant's destructive disposition in which the beginning of the story predicts the ending. It offers the antithesis to those earlier dramas in which the struggle to break free of constraints creates dramatic interest.

The novel's principal character might well provoke dissatisfaction in the reader; but Christina Stead maintains interest in the novel through the way in which she brings together the theatrical metaphor and the metaphor of the game in portraying the character of Grant as a self-deceiver who deceives others. Through the character of Robert Grant, Stead dramatises the situation of a mythomaniac who, try as he might, cannot escape the consequences of his past actions. Pursued relentlessly by his old enemy, Hilbertson, Grant is a hunted character with no place to hide.

Grant's will, no matter how obsessive and strong, does not work to shape his life according to his desire for personal fulfilment because of the way in which he abuses his power by manipulating others. The crippling and dehumanising effects of his egotism corrupt the values of love and freedom that are the aims of Stead's drama of the person, and make him a puppet-like figure, subject to Fate the puppeteer. His superstitious fear, passion for women and destructive egotism are obvious weaknesses which are recognised and exploited by more powerful men who set in motion the plot which eventually ruins him. However, even their parts in the drama of Grant's downfall are predetermined by the pattern of the Don Juan legend from which his life is cut out.

The much later published novel, *Cotters' England* (1966), displays a female predator in the character of Nellie Cook (nee Cotter) who has much in common with Grant.⁸ Just as we have to decide whether to pity Grant for being a victim of his own distorted will or not, we are unsure whether we should, like Tom Cotter and Eliza Cook, feel sorry for Nellie. While Robbie Grant is pathetic in his attempts to live out his own illusions and fantasies, Nellie Cook is terrible in living *on* other people's cherished illusions. Her mode of operation is superficially similar to Grant's in her invitation to her hapless victims to '[come] on down to me boudoir; we'll have a drink and a chat and get to know each other,' (p. 48) and from such an apparently innocent invitation the process of her gradual sapping of the life-blood of others begins. However Nellie Cook's seductive power over other people is based on her eerie, fascinating personality and the mesmeric quality of her voice, not, as in Grant's case, on wealth. True, Robbie Grant is a talker too, but for the most part his voice grates and bores rather than enchants. He lacks the subtlety and skill displayed by Nellie, and Sam Pollit before her, in using speech as a weapon through which to control other people. Like Sam, Nellie masters that 'art'. In her melodic Northern voice Nellie croons and lulls her captive audience, weaving her great web like a spider until her victims are completely entangled and subject to her will. Her voice, 'like a chant . . . with its unexpected cry, its eloquence' (p. 17), has the power of enchantment. Like a vampire, Nellie draws out the inner life of her friends as she urges them to introspect and confess; then she leaves them as drained, lifeless shadows of what they had been. She pursues her prey single-mindedly even into their sleep, roaming the darkness of the house, 'singing' the same song like a nightingale, until all resistance to her is worn down.

The world in which we are trapped when we come under Nellie's influence in *Cotters' England* seems to be thoroughly deterministic. Oppressive

⁸ *Cotters' England* (London, 1967; rpt. with an introduction by Margaret Walters London: Virago, 1980). All subsequent references are to this edition of the text.

darkness, dreariness and aimlessness form the background of Nellie's predisposition to brood and look inwardly. Her creed is expressed in her constant Kafkaesque propagandising to introspect and confess:

'if you don't confess, you must commit suicide and suicide itself is a confession; and not to commit suicide is a terrible confession.' (p. 52)

Her philosophy of life suggests a universe without apparent meaning, yet in Nellie herself we encounter a terrible Will in action. These contradictory notions and their working out make *Cotters' England* a more dramatic novel than *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*. In Stead's gallery of destroyers, Nellie Cook ranks as the most fascinating and the most duplicitous. If Teresa Hawkins's drama represents the positive and creative aspects of aspiration and will applied to the quest for love, then Nellie Cook may be regarded, at the opposite end of the spectrum to Teresa, as representing the negative and destructive aspects. Nellie Cook embodies the crippling and distorting power of uncontrolled egotism that presides over Stead's 'static' dramas.

Cotters' England, like *The Man Who Loved Children*, is Strindbergian in the way it exposes the 'stark staring reality' (p. 38) of the Cotters' frustrated lives, especially as the effects of frustration are reflected in the characters of Nellie Cook and her brother Tom Cotter. *The Man Who Loved Children* is a drama 'celebrating unhappy family life', confirming Stead's thesis that in general children are 'pretty hard to twist'.⁹ What stands out in that drama is the tenacity with which the Pollit family members, except for Henny, hold fast to life under the most awful of situations. From her stormy family background, Louisa emerges apparently unscathed and bursting with genius. In the dialectic of Stead's ongoing drama, *Cotters' England* is the antithesis of *The Man Who Loved Children*. Although there is much to wonder at in *Cotters' England*, there is little cause to wonder why Nellie and Tom — the strange, mannish woman

⁹ Stead, Lidoff interview, p. 185.

and the emasculated child-man — are the way they are. As Peggy, the crazy sister, says in a lucid moment:

‘Aye, I know, you’re a twisted crowd, you’d make a hairpin look straight: the Cotters and the Pikes are a twisted crowd, honeying and hinnying, but I see what they’ve got in their minds, why it’s as clear as day, man, it’s selfishness; there’s nothing but it.’ (p. 329)

Stead has provided an enormous amount of evidence, including the documentation of social and physical factors, to account for the twisted personalities of Tom and Nellie. These determinants suggest that the characters are trapped by forces beyond their control and further, that they are possessed by an uncontrollable, neurotic compulsion to possess others. The situation of trapped characters is familiar. In the novels discussed so far, the focus has been upon the struggle of characters to shape their lives according to their dreams and fantasies. They have had to break free from entrapment and use their will-to-power creatively, rather than destructively, to direct their dramas towards personal fulfilment. Nellie and Tom seem unable to escape the overwhelming inertia produced by the conditions in which they live, and they become, themselves, agents of corruption leading to death. Nellie embodies this corruption. As Tom says to her in a comment which suggests that Nellie is not in control of her own actions, but is controlled by some external agent, ‘it’s just as if some evil spirit, some demon, were speaking out of your mouth’ (p. 175). The spirit by which Nellie is possessed is the deadly spirit of Cotters’ England.

Life, as Christina Stead presents it in this novel, is bleak and horrible. The stage on which the drama is set is darkened by poverty, disease and sudden death. The cast listed at the beginning of the novel is restricted to the Cotters and their friends but the privations, miseries and distorted personal lives of the Cotters are repeated on a wide scale, as the title suggests, throughout national life, making the private dramas unhappy, black reflections of the public drama being played out in England in the period after the second World War. The

impression conveyed by the grim details of the setting, the strange, fey characters and the supporting imagery of mirrors, ghosts, predatory creatures, allusions to witchery and the mysterious, ancient history of Britain, is that life in this black drama is a nightmare from which death, for many of the characters, is the only awakening. In the words of Nellie Cook:

‘You know, in your heart of hearts, we all know, aye, where we stand, in the eye of the great judge, Life; you know you’re struggling in a nightmare and you’re crying out for the hand that will wake you up. But unable to respond, in a catalepsis of unreality.’ (p. 264)

Stead’s unpublished papers reveal considerable research in her preparation of this novel. This research included painstakingly detailed notes on climate, details of the early settlement and history of Britain, Celtic place names, and geography. It seems that Stead originally conceived of this novel as having a male protagonist called Cotter, who told the stories collected under the title ‘The Northern Engineer’.¹⁰ In the fragments entitled ‘Branch Line’, there are numerous passages written in the first person, representing the voice of a character called Martin Cotter, which contain many references to the ancient past of England. There are also short sketches of a brother and sister called Nellie and Tom, with Nellie being described as ‘a back-street Machiavelli’ and Tom as ‘a strange young man.’ There is a report of the ‘Blackdahlia (possibly Lesbian) Murder’, which may have provided the idea for Caroline Wooller’s strange death, and a passage of dramatic dialogue entitled ‘The Golden Dishes’, written in dialect which captures the Durham idiom. In another place there are copious notes written by Stead, summarised from many sources, on ritual, folklore and old customs of England.¹¹ This information reveals Stead’s care in preparing the background of her novel about the obscure lives of English people in the nineteen fifties.

¹⁰ Stead, NLA, MS 4967, Box 2, ‘*Cotters’ England* – Early Versions’, Folder 10.

¹¹ Stead, NLA, MS 4967, Box 2, Folder 11.

The dramatic principle of contrasts operates on two distinct levels of reality which have equal importance in this novel – the level of social realism which exposes the sociological and political reality of post-war England and a psychological level that incorporates elements of the fairytale, folklore, myth and supernatural, which are used to convey the idea of illusion and the dark or unseen side of life.

The sociological level is the most immediately identifiable and approachable level of the novel. It is indicated by the author's preferred title, *Cotters' England*, under which the novel was published in Britain. The title under which it was published in the United States, *Dark Places of the Heart*, stresses the psychological drama. According to W. J. Toop, Christina Stead had considered 'Dance in a Hall of Mirrors' as a title for this novel.¹² The phrase 'dance in a hall of mirrors' expresses the feeling of entrapment throughout the novel and it indicates that the characters' nightmarish lives have an unreal quality, a quality suggested by fairground imagery associated with the 'sideshow of life' (p. 81) and its hall of mirrors. Looking into the mirror suggests inward looking, a habit which seems to apply generally to the people of Cotters' England but most particularly to Nellie Cook. Cotters' England is presented as a dilapidated 'Vanity Fair' (p. 154) and it is within this context that the fairground imagery works, alongside the other elements, to convey the idea that some characters are like marionettes moving mechanically and spiritlessly through that sideshow of life. The total impression conveyed is that Cotters' England is a spell-bound place where people lack the energy or will to creatively control their lives.

The discussion of the century plant imagery in Chapter Two of this thesis pointed out the reference made to English people as 'a race of century

¹² W. J. Toop, 'The Operation of Myth and Imagery in the Major Novels of Christina Stead, Patrick White and Thomas Keneally', Diss. Macquarie University, N.S.W., 1974, p. 144.

plants' in *House of All Nations* (Sc. 61, p. 497) which was extended in *For Love Alone* to the assertion that English people were 'dead' (*For Love Alone*, Ch. 32, p. 390). The period referred to in both these earlier novels was pre-war England and now, in this drama of life in post-war England, the people are shown to be asleep again in a state of suspended animation or 'a kind of life in death' (p. 135). The problem of how to dramatise the effect of this somnambulistic state on the characters is answered by writing a fairytale and investing the chief characters with a ghostly, lifeless quality. This is exactly what Stead does in weaving together the folkloric, mythic, fairytale and supernatural elements of the narrative. The research carried out by Stead into the ancient folklore and beliefs of Britain is used evocatively to create a general atmosphere of darkness and bewitchment, reflecting the strangeness of her characters' lives. Nellie Cook, as the spirit of this life, is the focus of the supernatural elements and she is the bewitcher personified.

There exists a constant tension between the two levels of reality that contributes strongly to the dramatic power of the novel. What is said about the character of Nellie Cook at the level of social realism, that she is an ordinary working woman, is contradicted by the imagery that relates to her. This technique shows up the internal contradictions of her character and reveals the essential dualism or 'day' and 'night' aspects of Nellie Cook. By day she is the familiar, though eccentric, figure of an English journalist struggling to keep her job and make a living, but by night she is a demoniacal figure struggling for the lives of her victims. The oscillations between these two contrasting aspects of Nellie constitute her psychological drama. The impression of drama is also created in the novel by the theatrical way in which Nellie appears before us, revealing the process by which she spell-binds her immediate audience.

The novel's great dramatic power rests in its exploration of Nellie's life as an 'endless cycle of struggle and pain' (p. 248). Nellie's remarks to Tom here about 'the real world' of struggle confirm that she would like to find a way out

of her entrapment, indeed she spends most of her time searching for one, refusing to submit. But, as a consequence of her constant digging below the surface to find the way, she dwells in the uncertainties and obscurity of an 'underworld' realm which serves only to increase her entrapment rather than giving her the means of escape and allowing her to find the object of her search. The idea of the fairytale, specifically the notion that Nellie is a 'sleeper', enters into the presentation of her entrapment and is linked thematically with the imagery of the fairground since both the sleeper and the puppet figures of the fairground booth are trapped. Nellie herself makes references to her brother Tom as a puppet and hollow person, without seeing the truth of her own situation. The patterns of fairground, fairytale and supernatural imagery reach their climaxes in two scenes in which the truth is revealed – the first takes place at a deserted fairground somewhere along the dark road between the Vale of Aylesbury and London; the second, which will be discussed later, occurs in Nellie's Islington house on the night of a full moon.

In the fairground scene Nellie and Tom Cotter are confronted by images of themselves in the 'Palace of Mirrors' as 'playing-card king' and 'spindling hatchet witch' (p. 189). Ironically for them both it is a 'Hall of Truth' (p. 189). The images reflected in the distorting mirrors are true reflections of their chimerical characters – the image of Tom, cut off from the waist down, reflects his emasculation, while Nellie is truthfully reflected as a wicked spell-binder.¹⁸ The hall of mirrors captures the unreal or supernatural quality of the leading actress of the drama, Nellie Cook, as she is reflected in her various distortions. She assumes the shapes of harpy, bad fairy, vampire, imp of Satan, witch,

¹⁸ Elizabeth MacAndrew in her chapter on 'The Victorian Hall of Mirrors' in *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia Press, 1979), writes: 'The world of dreams is a hall of mirrors. The devices of reflection, the mainstay of Gothic fiction from the beginning, continue to be its central feature. . . . It is an ingeniously arranged hall. Sometimes a true reflection is thrown back at the viewer, but more often the mirrors are set so that a part of the self suddenly becomes the entire reflection or the mirror image appears at an odd angle that affords a new perspective.' (Ch. 5, p. 155)

hobbledehoy, predatorial creature (as a bird of prey or spider), and monster. The hall of mirrors image also reminds us that the illusion being presented on the darkened stage of Cotters' England is intended to represent the tragedy of trapped or 'frustrated lives' (p. 45).

Diana Brydon, in her recently published work on Christina Stead, also identifies the hall of mirrors in Stead's work as a recurrent image expressing 'the dead end'.¹⁴ We have seen its use in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* when Robert Grant sees himself, undisguised, in his reflection as an old man with vacant eyes, and he realises that his life has reached a dead end. In Nellie Cook's case, the mirror images seen in the hall of mirrors and in her *alter ego* Tom, are used to reflect her self-destructiveness and incompleteness as an egotist.

It was remarked in Chapter One, with reference to Nietzsche, that egotism has a distorting and crippling effect on personality. While it is certainly true to say that Nellie's egotism is, to a large degree, responsible for her monstrously twisted personality, she is also a victim of the twisting power of Cotters' England. She is the product of the shaping influences of heredity and the impoverished conditions of the working class in the industrial north of England. Her childhood and youth have been spent in an environment which stunts physical and spiritual development, making men and women only half of what they should be.

The desire to escape this background and hunger for personal fulfilment leads people to whatever palliative is offered. The Nellie we meet is a brainwashed victim of a charlatan who convinced her that the search for love and happiness is the sorry stuff of illusion — in Nellie's words: '[a] wild dancing in a hall of mirrors' (p. 186). Nellie's original vitality is sapped by her

¹⁴ Diana Brydon, *Christina Stead*. Women's Writers Series, eds. Eva Figes and Adele King. (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 42. For Brydon's discussion of the hall of mirrors image see her Ch. 7, 'In The Hall of Mirrors', which refers to *Cotters' England* in pp. 128–38.

involvement with a questionable circle and, automaton-like, she becomes the agent of spiritual and physical death to others. The will-to-power that is a life-force becomes in her a death-force as she abuses it through her mischievous meddling in the lives of others – '[dabbling] in their lives as if their lives were puddles . . . just to get an audience' (p. 176).

Cotters' England is certainly 'spectral' (p. 147). There are many references to things other than daytime reality, including references to Roman roads, huge, ancient stone figures, a barrow, (p. 278) and Stonehenge (p. 147) which are all intended as reminders of the ancient pagan past of England. This past has a way of exerting itself in an uncanny fashion upon its present inhabitants. Tom's strange experience of hearing voices and discovering that the hearthstones in his room are headstones (p. 317) suggests that the ghosts of this ancient past are presences to be considered as part of the 'other' reality of England. Tom's weird horror stories and songs and the climactic witch-like dance of naked women under the full moon are also part of this other reality (p. 291). The folkloric elements are interwoven with the more realistic elements in the narrative, providing a constant tension between appearance and reality in the characterisation of Nellie and Tom. The effect is to reinforce the feeling of dread and evil in the novel which is then concentrated in the character of Nellie Cook.

In her relations with other characters Nellie is destructive and death-dealing in possessing or attempting to possess others, just as she herself seems to be possessed by the spirit of Cotters' England. When she speaks, she casts a glamour over her listeners. The outside world slips away and the controlling point of view of Nellie's vision of life takes over. Her words to Caroline Wooller of 'her' England are also addressed to us:

'I'd like to take ye with me, show you a bit of England with the lid off, no Roseland, the furnace beneath the green moor that'll blow up into a blistering volcano one of these days. aye, it's a bit

different from your green and pleasant fields. But it's a very normal tragedy.' (p. 46)

Nellie proposes to expose the problems that exist beneath the veil of illusion that holds the 'sleepers' of England in thrall. The characters of the novel are indeed struggling under a spell woven by the oppressive social and political forces of England after the second World War, but Nellie, as the spirit of this England, together with her accomplice and *alter ego* Tom, in turn weaves a spell around people, cutting off their connections 'with real things and real people' (p. 179).

The novel falls into the category of Georges Polti's dramatic situation 'number 7: To be a prey to'. According to this situation there are two elements, 'the Dominator' and 'the Weak One'. Stead describes this as an '[extremely] tragic situation, [being] "the gradual and ferocious tearing apart of the heart" and often the mind'.¹⁵ Nellie is the obvious dominator, preying upon the weak characters in the novel, but what emerges from this intense study of her character is the irony that Nellie herself, jerked by the strings of her confused beliefs, is a victim of her own deluded self-deception.

Nellie Cook is such a powerful protagonist that the novel may be regarded as the realisation of her unwritten 'great play' (pp. 48, 71) in the same ironic way that *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* is the realisation of Grant's. She comes from a family of actors and mummers. Her father, before his death, was a crooner who loved to hog the limelight. Her brother Tom is a 'minnesinger who goes around playing with things that are so deep' (p. 254). His piteous game is designed to appeal to women's maternal affections by making a show of tenderness toward them before leaving them cold. He is constantly referred to by Nellie as hollow, and the comment she makes about her brother Tom applies

¹⁵ Georges Polti, *Les Situations Dramatiques*, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1924), summarised by Christina Stead in her notes on the novel: NLA, MS 4967, Box 7, Folder 47.

equally to her:

'life is not for him. The booth with the puppets is for him; he's good at voices, aye. Let him go through the world with his songs and games if he doesn't hurt anyone. But he does. He doesn't say, This is my Punch and Judy show: he says, This is real, this is love, this is what you want.' (p. 260)

Nellie's mother Mary Cotter, who is as mad as a hatter and can't tell the difference between the living and the dead, is addicted to 'play-actin' (p. 99). In one brief incident in the novel she makes a gesture of knifing Uncle Sime in the back (p. 68), an action typical of melodrama. (But then much of what happens in the Cotters' house, where there are ghosts in the attic and mad people below, is melodramatic.)

Nellie too is a melodramatic actress, playing the role of villain so convincingly that she sometimes even startles herself. She is proficient in adopting theatrical poses, posturing against the fireplace, one arm on her hip, the other waving a cigarette, or accentuating her words and feelings with actions such as drumming her fingers (p. 11), casting dark or reptilian looks, smiling triumphantly, laughing horribly, or crying on cue (p. 16). Her extraordinary behaviour when she grovels on the floor and begs George to take her with him to Europe (p. 224) proves her virtuosity. She possesses star quality. When she smiles, 'an old fashioned expression came into her face, like the charm of the delicate-faced, crop-headed stage stars of the early twentieth century' (p. 20). Her speech is characterised by the use of sentimentalised, dramatic phrases and clichés, punctuated with 'chicks', 'pets', 'sweethearts' and 'darlings'. She rants and raves, coughs, whistles, restlessly pacing the nights from one room to another, trailing a wreath of cigarette smoke behind her.

Nellie's performances captivate her audience. For instance, in the scene with Estelle and Tom where Nellie comes under attack for being a marriage-breaker, Nellie acts the part of charmer for all she is worth, while 'the two

concerned listened as if they were using up unwanted tickets at a play' (p. 83). At times she glories in her part, glowing with the attention that it gets her. Her sister Peggy sees through Nellie's act: 'Nellie always was an exhibitionist: there's nothing she won't do to be cock o' the walk.' Summed up, '[she's] unscrupulous, man, . . . wanting to be the star performer' (p. 328).

As always with Stead's dramas the background details in *Cotters' England* are important in helping to disclose character. Stead follows the example of Balzac in making the places where people live reflections of her characters' states of mind and social situations. In Stead's symbolically loaded descriptions of the houses of bombed-out Islington, where Nellie lives, and the family home in Bridgehead near Newcastle, the Balzacian influence can be seen. The details of Nellie's three storey house in Lamb Street emphasise darkness (absence of windows, houses blocking the light), oppression (in sweated labour), imprisonment (in enclosed, narrow spaces and houses closely huddled together) and the explicit poverty of these raw living conditions. The stark realism of these descriptions gives the lie to Nellie's picture of the British with 'their fireplaces and cosy back rooms' (p. 15). Even the abandoned rebuilding project ironically called 'Roseland Estate Development', is prison-like in its 'great blocks of flats with angles and courtyards' (pp. 14-15). In the obvious housing shortage people are forced to live in wretched rented rooms, subjected to the filth of their surroundings and the preying of landladies like Ma Hatchard (p. 167).

The description of the Cotter family's home at Number 23, Hadrian's Grove, Bridgehead, completes the picture of living conditions. Here the filthy air is heavy with coal-dust, making its inhabitants 'coughing black smudges which had been born to be men and women' (p. 96). Within the Cotters' typically small house there is superficial evidence of middle-class comforts but they are surface comforts masking the nature of their real poverty that is psychological as well as financial. Stead provides details to suggest that their

financial poverty, at least, might be avoidable but for a weakness of character in Thomas Cotter senior who spent his earnings in the pubs of Bridgehead, presumably in his attempt to 'escape' the circle of family and work (pp. 30 and 55). Uncle Simon's savings had saved the family from eviction on at least two occasions (p. 28). The foolish old mother and the unbalanced Peggy are too proud to apply for the pensions which are their entitlement. In keeping with the psychology of dependence symbolised by the vampire and harpy imagery applied to the Cotters, Mary and Peggy live off the meagre earnings of Nellie and Tom after Thomas Cotter's death.

Poverty has its lasting effects. The Cotters are victims of hunger in every respect since there is not only a lack of bread in the household but there is also a more serious shortage — of love. In the absence of love, a condition symbolised by Stead's use of desert imagery in the other novels, nothing grows. The Cotters are presented as starvelings, small and undernourished, their mouths agape to devour whatever comes their way. They are trapped in a situation which stifles their creative potential and makes them shrivelled, distorted and destructive caricatures. In consequence of their lifetime of frustration, Simon Pike, his sister Mary Cotter, and Thomas Cotter senior, have suffered respectively enfeeblement, madness and early death. The novel reveals how the lives and personalities of Nellie, Tom and Peggy are distorted by their inheritance of lovelessness, frustration and corruption.

Nellie and Tom 'had had too many privations as children and adolescents. He [Tom] was skinny, feebler than he showed now; and he had never done anything he had meant to do' (p. 105). Nellie is first introduced as:

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

Her appearance recalls that of Catherine Baguenault and Henny Pollit. All three characters are thin and have black hair, their gauntness being expressive

more of their emotional, rather than their physical, hunger. Nellie and Henny share the characteristic of being bird-like, with the particular reference to the marsh bird in the description of Nellie echoing the earlier use of the crane image in reference to Henny. Incidentally, Henny's diet of pickles and tea is very similar to Nellie's diet of onions, gin and tea, and neither character derives nourishment from these things. Henny feeds off her hate, in the end consuming herself; Nellie, like her mother Mary Cotter, feeds off the emotions of others. The paleness of the Pikes' faces (p. 97) betrays their emotional vampirism as they take on the aspect of harpies tearing the hearts of others to pieces, or vampires sucking away the life-blood of others.

One of the most dramatic scenes in *Cotters' England* is the tragi-comic scene of the Cotter family preparing and eating a chicken brought home by Tom. Chicken is a luxury unknown for a generation in the Cotter household, so no-one knows how to cook it (p. 100). It is finally put on to cook over low gas to save money, but after one and a half hours it is served uncooked and leathery. The dumplings have either disappeared or sunk into the lukewarm water. Unhappily, the potatoes, the only edible food, are thrown into the fire by the daft old mother (a crazed action representative of her earlier denial of her children's needs) while the rest of the family rummage around looking for the cutlery she has hidden (p. 101). Peggy, who avoids eating flesh, serves raw cabbage. The horror of this unsurpassedly gruesome meal is accentuated by the way in which the family eagerly and hungrily anticipates eating it. (Even the Hallers' dinner party in *House of All Nations*, or the gargantuan feasts consumed by Emily Wilkes in *I'm Dying Laughing*, cannot outdo the sheer awfulness of this scene which graphically shows a denial of basic hunger.)

In their cramped and frustrated lives, the entire Cotter family is hungry, but so too are others outside the family. As a perceptive outsider who has known Bridgehead, Eliza opens up the narrative to the suggestion that hunger is a critical factor in causing Nellie and Tom to fall prey to others. Her

conversation with Nellie resonates with irony on the meanings of hunger:

'I've always had the thought,' said Eliza, 'that hunger was a greater passion than love; and I've been surprised not to hear them talk about the distortions produced by hunger, the sublimations and disguised forms of hunger. . . . — So Jago played on your hunger and I don't blame you.'

'Oh, no, pet,' said Nellie flicking on her cigarette, 'man does not live by bread alone. I'm sorry but I can't agree, Lize. No he wasn't playing on our hunger. He gave us a big spread. That was one of the attractions. We'd go there for the food when we were just hungry chicks. No, he understood that there were bigger impulses working up in us and great aspirations. It was the intellectual hunger, we all felt. It was a great hunger. We went everywhere looking not for food, but for guidance and knowledge. You see we couldn't find any of it at home. And Jago understood us: he was the only one who did.' (pp. 211-12)

(This exchange demonstrates how naturalistically Stead handles the dialogue, a strong dramatic element in this novel, as in the others.) Emotional and spiritual hunger march side by side with physical hunger. Eliza Cook explains the hunger that drove her contemporaries, George, Nellie and Tom, to find something, anything, that would satisfy it, for, as she says:

'It was a hungry time then, all ways. It was from the slum to the factory, get married early and back into the slum with your first baby, the only recreation to wheel the baby on the moor on Sunday; and unemployment in the factories, the docks and the mines.' (p. 229)

Life, for these people, is an endless circle. Eliza continues her story of how she and her husband George escaped by moving to London to start a new life. For those who were left behind, there was nothing 'to satisfy their youthful intellectual and moral hungers' (p. 294). In their predicament the young 'prey on garbage, rather than be extinguished in death. But Nellie had not called it garbage, she called it knowledge' (p. 294).

These Bridgehead background details are important in piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of Nellie's character. Eliza and Tom give separate accounts of Nellie's youth while Nellie herself reveals glimpses of her past in her thoughts

and in her brief allusions. The first reference to her Bohemian associations occurs early in the novel in a train of thought about her past sparked off by a letter from her female friend, Johnny Sterker. Her thoughts end abruptly as she recalls the death of an Indian boy in the Jago circle who died a 'terrible death' (p. 34). The first signs of the 'guilt' spoken of by Tom (p. 106) are evident in her fearful reaction to Johnny's imminent arrival in London, an event which threatens to expose things about Nellie's association with the Jago circle. The narrator tells us of Nellie's strong loyalty but, typical of her duality, that loyalty is divided between Johnny and George. 'George would not tolerate the tramp woman; and what if he found out, suspected something?' (p. 34). Stead dramatically exploits the sense of mystery surrounding Nellie's past and the narrative whets our curiosity to know more, particularly about the Jago circle. The thoughts and conversations of other characters add further to the envelope of evil surrounding Jago and provide glimpses of Nellie's corruption or perversion. Tom's thoughts help to balance this by providing a sympathetic view of Nellie as the elder sister leading Peggy and Tom astray, not intending harm but acting upon her desire for love and attention:

he thought of Nellie, guilty, guilty as she said; and really guilty towards Peggy and himself as he knew her to be, seducing children to love; out of her great vanity wanting to be the only one to show them love; so that no one again could take them from her; but not calling it perversion, calling it knowledge, the true way. 'I can lead, I know,' she said. He knew she meant no real harm. She did not understand; and his love forgave her: 'the toughest girlie I ever met', as he said to her; and a most unscrupulous woman, as Pop Cotter was a most unscrupulous man; anything to be the center of everything and hog the limelight. Nellie, though, being a woman, and being so loving, was forgivable. (pp. 106-07)

It is fascinating that Tom should think of Nellie in such a way, as a seducer of children, 'leader', and hogger of limelight, that also describes the character of Sam Pollit. The coincidence, if it is one, is very potent, especially since both Sam and Nellie exert a similar spell-binding power over other people. Both

these characters are misled and wilful abusers of their power, prying and poking, interfering with the integrity, freedom and responsibility of others. It was observed at the beginning of this chapter that Nellie represents the dark side of Teresa Hawkins, but she also seems to represent a grotesque side to Sam Pollit. Whereas Sam believes everything (including himself) to be pure and good, Nellie sees evil everywhere. Not only do similar situations recur throughout Stead's dramatic novels, but characters do too, in different guises, so that the whole of Stead's work may be regarded as a continuum — as a representation of one long human drama spanning three continents and many years.

If Nellie is a reflection of Pop Cotter, she sees Tom as a reflection of their mother and there is also much of her mother in Nellie. Her comments about Tom and her mother ironically reveal herself:

‘He’s got a lot of his mother in him. She was a wily old spider sitting there in the glimmer of the hearth, a helpless complaining little body and drawing it all out of you, word by word, question by question, getting behind you. She made him what he is, afraid of his own shadow, starting at every word, full of deceit and shamming. Aching for love, for she never had a true love, the poor body: and he learned that of her too.’ (p. 208)

The wealth of information offered by the accounts of Eliza, Tom and Nellie of their backgrounds show that Jago was crucial in completing the process of twisting and misdirecting the youthful personalities of Tom and Nellie begun by their manipulative mother. The problems of misdirection and broken dreams are not confined to Tom and Nellie alone. They are also glimpsed in the references to the unhappiness of the older generation of the Cotters, and in Jago himself whose ‘bent and twisted impulses’ were the result of a lifetime of ‘struggle against frustration and failure’ (p. 210).

Eliza's story about Bridgehead is one of struggle to become educated, to get somewhere. George (Eliza's ex-husband) chose the direction of the trade union movement and his aspirations within the movement enabled him to

escape from Bridgehead. Nellie, according to Eliza, was at that time a hard-working journalist, generous and successful, making a big impression in her way. Then '[s]he got in touch with Jago's circle and took others in. That was a pity' (p. 229). Eliza sees the Jago circle as something which provided the youth of Bridgehead with an instant escape route — like taking a magic carpet ride into the realms of fantasy and dreams — unfortunately this direction debased and corrupted Nellie's original youthful ideals.

The endless cycle of life that Nellie talks of (p. 52) is an inescapable cycle of frustration engendering more of its kind. The centripetal forces of heredity and environment have created a tragic pattern of misery in the Cotter family that is not easily broken. In leaving Bridgehead, Nellie thinks she has left her past behind, but she carries it with her as a legacy of family tragedy. She is haunted by the 'terror' of the 'house of storm' (p. 45) as she so theatrically puts it to her friend Caroline. It does not seem that the tragic cycle is to be broken by Nellie's efforts. She labours under the delusion that her way, shaped very early by the misdirection of Jago, is the right one, but it only serves to spin the web more tightly around her.

In all the information scattered throughout the novel concerning Nellie and the Jago circle there runs the same theme — the hunger for love and learning being fed by corruption. Each mention of Jago carries with it a strong association with evil and death. The accounts of Tom, Eliza and Nellie herself, dramatically reveal that Nellie is a victim of this Bohemian group and that her passion for introspection and confession derives from there. All this accumulated evidence of evil, corruption, lovelessness and frustration reinforces the idea that we are witnessing the contorted struggles of people trapped in a kind of living death, that we are spectators to a 'static' drama.

Christina Stead is so insistent on the theme of pervasive evil emanating from Jagoism that I was prompted to investigate whether such a group ever existed in Britain. Professor Ron Geering, in reply to my correspondence with

him, pointed out the existence of a short novel called *A Child of the Jago* by Arthur Morrison, first published in 1896.¹⁶ 'The Jago' was the name given to a Shoreditch slum area in early twentieth century London and it was from there that the child in the story, Dicky Perrott, attempted vainly to escape by aspiring to better things. His efforts to escape were frustrated by the insidious influence of the Jago and its unsavoury, criminal characters, so that finally his only escape was death in a street brawl. Stead may have found the name Jago in this source and may have been influenced by the dark, depressing, deterministic message it contains about life, to use the evil associations of the name 'Jago' in the mysterious circle she creates. From the allusions to the Jago circle which occur in her novel, it is clear that she was concerned only with creating an ambience of evil and not interested in elucidating the nature of the evil except to imply that it was a kind of Bohemian group that indulged in dark and destructive activities. The exact goings-on are not important to our understanding of the narrative, for there is sufficient in the way of suggestion to stimulate the reader's imagination to conjure his own picture.¹⁷ What is important to the dramatic quality of the novel is that we should understand the way in which Nellie, misdirected and victimised by Jagoism, in turn misleads others, thus perpetuating the cycle of suffering.

Nellie is not the only spokesperson in the novel for her England, for George, too, speaks of Cotters' England from his perspective as a union organiser involved in the cause to change Nellie's England. On the social and political levels the novel offers evidence of 'terrible mistakes and blind turnings' (p. 37). Socialism had promised relief from oppression in the workers' struggle but like so many others, it, too was an unfulfilled dream, for we are told that '[the workers'] play has got to begin' (p. 38). Such references emphasise the lack

¹⁶ Personal correspondence with Professor Ron Geering, 9 Dec. 1987.

¹⁷ Cf. Margaret Walters, who finds fault with Stead's failure to explore Nellie's relationship with her Bohemian friends.

of direction in post-war England and how the national tragedy affected the lives of people, shattering their dreams and leaving them aimless, entrapped and fragmented victims of mistakes that were made.

The idea of misdirection is emphasised in the portraits of both George Cook and Nellie. George rose in status in the Labour Movement and then deserted his first wife, Eliza, to marry Nellie. Afterwards he left Nellie too, and England, to work on the continent for the International Labour Organisation. Nellie sees this as hypocritical 'living off the fat of the land' (p. 10), while in her estrangement from him, Nellie immerses herself in the workers' tragedies, literally living off them by writing 'sobsister' prose for a leftist newspaper (p. 214). Her writing, like her constant dramatising talk, is a manifestation of her emotional self-indulgence which her father sees as a betrayal of the workers' pride. George, too, has betrayed the workers for the good life of wine and women on the continent. Both are deeply critical of each other's motives and see only a partial view of the truth, being blind to their own particular brands of hypocrisy. While it is true that George has deserted his country for the sake of a meal (p. 215), it is also true that his earnings supplement Nellie's income and allow her the services of a housekeeper, dressmaker and window cleaner, providing her with the kind of lifestyle that might be described as 'bourgeois' if it were not for her Bohemian posturing that insists on squalor. Yet Nellie is generous to her friends and makes sacrifices for her family in Bridgehead, so it is difficult *at first* to see Nellie as a betrayer of others. The catalogue of betrayals further adds to the atmosphere of destructiveness in the novel.

In a brilliant scene showing these two characters dramatically engaged in exposing one another, George denounces the England for which Nellie maintains a misguided patriotism:

'The England of the depressed that starved
you all to wraiths, gave Eliza TB, sent your sister
into the Home, got your old mother into bed with

malnutrition, and is trying it on with me, too, getting at my health. I never had an ache or pain in my life: I beat their England. I lived through the unemployment, the starvation, the war, I knocked out a few bloody eyes and got me fists skinned a few times, that's all I ever got: and now I'm going to live for my country. You stay here and die in it. Don't you want to change it? Or is it only the beer-soaked sawdust of bohemia you love? The dirt and sweat of the tear-stained bachelor's bedroom; Bridgehead in all its glory? You don't know what you're fighting for. To change Cotter's England. Wasn't that what drove you on? Or just ragged rebellion?' (p. 216)

Nellie cannot see what is wrong with 'her' England. Her opposition to change associates her with the abandonment of the struggle and the dead end. In this novel struggle is identified closely with the socialist cause and consequently the ideas of betrayal and commitment take on a more definite political colour. Nellie sees herself as being engaged in the thick of the struggle while she sees people like Tom, George and her editor as bystanders. There is *some* truth in what she says but it is characteristic of her that she sees only a partial view of the truth. Her inability to exercise a discriminating judgement of other people is symptomatic of her general confusion. George sees the situation simplistically in terms of life or death and, because he associates England with death, disease and starvation, he opts for life, away from there. (Ironically he meets his death in Switzerland in a skiing accident, perhaps intended to be his just desserts for betraying the socialist cause.)

Bob Bobsey sees Bohemia as 'the way out for many people' in Cotters' England but George sees it as a trap:

'... Nellie's a prisoner of Bohemia. She won't grow. When I met her she was in it and promised to get out: she never got out.'

'Take her with you', said Bob, 'and she'll have to get out. Take her away from the weeds growing over the ruins. Even Nellie will have to change.'

'If I only thought she could grow - ' But George didn't think so. She not only wanted to stay in Cotter's England, or Bohemia as he saw it, but she wanted him to stay there, too. 'It's like asking someone to stay in a bad place in fairyland: I'm no fairy.' (p. 219)

At that moment he caught the glance of his Bohemian woman friend Bob Bobsey and saw that she looked 'very like a bad fairy' (p. 219).

I began my discussion of *Cotters' England* by asserting that this was a 'black drama'. The motifs of darkness, entrapment and evil, all signifying death or the dead end in the drama of the person, now come together in the character of the protagonist. Nellie is the embodiment of the spirit of Cotter's England; George identifies this as Bohemia which, in turn, carries the sinister, corrupt associations of Jagoism. George's last comments about 'fairyland', referring to the illusion under which the country sleeps, invite discussion now of the various elements of the psychological level of the drama wherein Nellie Cook is represented as a bad fairy, one image among others of a similar nature used to expose the evil inherent in her character.

Very early in the novel we are alerted to the coexistence of good and evil within one character. The window cleaner, Walter, is an example of the way in which Stead suggests that characters may not be what they seem. Nellie sees Walter as a poor, harmless, simple fellow who admires George and likes to listen to him talking politics, but Camilla Yates, the dressmaker, suspects him of being an informer, a 'dick' (p. 11). She remarks to Nellie that he gives her the creeps, '[h]e's all patches, a makeshift. I said, Now what act is that?' (p. 11). In the opening scene between Nellie, Camilla and Walter, Nellie is presented as a good soul, solicitous for Walter's welfare, giving him clothes and nattering away like an old friend to Camilla. She seems to be open, friendly, almost motherly in her generous concern. However the first description of Nellie (p. 13) tends to be at odds with our first impressions. Instead of being a strong, solid, maternal figure like Camilla, Nellie appears insubstantial, something of the air rather than of the earth, hence her birdlike appearance. The suggestion of unearthliness is developed further, indicating that there is something sinister about Nellie:

She wore pointed black shoes, the toes turned up,

the thin heels turned down with wear. The light fell on the hollows in face, neck, chest and bony arm and darkened the exhausted skin. Her small eyes, dark blue, looking out sharp between half-closed lids, were tired. (p. 14)

The details in this description of Nellie call to mind the fairytale image of a witch, especially when combined with the earlier details of her rounded back and pointed beak. In the conflicting images of her as protective clucking mother figure and sinister, crooning witch, we have the first proof of Nellie's self-division.

As soon as the image of the witch is suggested it is dramatically proven. Nellie's talk rises and falls with a sing-song cadence characteristic of an incantation. She murmurs, sighs, lights a cigarette before continuing, and as she warms to her performance she even manages to brush tears from her eyes (pp. 15-16), all actions that are calculated to entrance her audience. Camilla listens in spite of her irritation at Nellie's obvious glossing of the truth. The images Nellie uses to describe other people, 'elf' (p. 14), 'mischief-maker', 'will-o'-the-wisp', and 'harpy' (p. 18) ironically describe Nellie herself for '[it] was she who was the pitiful waif, the stray, the strange elf, all the things she saw in others' (p. 269). When she speaks of the snake and the fascinated rabbit or the tenacious, bloodsucking harpy (p. 18) Nellie describes her own effect on other people, as she charms and bewitches them into surrendering their life to her. The fundamental characteristic which gives her away as a witch rather than a mother figure is her preoccupation not with life, but with death.

Nellie's association with evil and corruption through the Jago circle is already established in this discussion. Her pathological interest in other people's misfortunes and her 'hunger for death' (p. 297) is also well documented in the novel. At risk of labouring the point of the connection between evil and death, some of this evidence needs to be considered because it helps to show how Nellie has gone wrong in her search for the 'truth' of life. The sufferings and deaths of others are a source of exaltation for her, appealing to her perverse view that life

should be 'like Dostoyevsky and Gorki' (p. 231). Her personal library contains many books dealing with strange people and events, revealing that Nellie, in her search, continues to feed on garbage, and that these books, rather than offering her a different outlook on life, tend to 'confirm her ideas' (p. 297). Her reading is an aspect of her tendency to speculate and her fault is that she seeks the truth in books instead of looking for it actively in life.

Nellie's ghoulishness is a deep seated aspect of her character. The absence of love in her childhood and her desire for the same things (love, learning and bread) that motivated Teresa Hawkins to embark on her quest, have plunged Nellie into an underworld existence where love and learning are debased and twisted into their opposites. Love, in Stead's novels, is associated with freedom, but, like Robert Grant, Nellie perverts these values selfishly and wilfully. Her love is a self-indulgent, egotistic desire to possess others, while she believes death to be a 'glorious freedom', a 'final flash of light' (p. 297) despite any evidence to the contrary. Nellie is obviously confused and misdirected. Jago and her Bohemian friends have not satisfied her emotional and spiritual needs, rather they have intensified her hunger. Her personal drama records the perpetuation of the cycle of suffering and pain as she wanders, frustrated and lost, entangled in the thickets she helps create, in her aimless search for meaning. Her inability to love without destroying and her blindness to the work she does, have caused her spiritual death. The use of fairy imagery in reference to Nellie is apt since she misguidedly destroys the living spirit of her victims in much the same way that fairies carry off the spirits of their mortal victims.

The first direct reference to Nellie as 'fey' comes from Caroline Wooller (p. 37). This reference might escape notice if it were not for the way in which the novel develops as a dramatisation of that quality. 'Fey' is a very appropriate description of Nellie as she exerts her glamour over other characters. A fairy or a witch is capable of spell-binding her audience, but so too is the best actor or actress and Nellie, as the great melodramatic

protagonist of the novel, combines the spell-binding powers of all three. Eliza reminds us in one incident of the novel that:

‘Nellie’s a thrilling woman! She can make you see things her way, though you know it wasn’t so. I used to think there was a lot of gimcrack and phony in her make-up, too much of the old man. She’s always imitating him and he was a grand phony.’
(p. 145)

There are two interpretations of the word ‘fey’, one being ‘leading to or presaging death’, the other being ‘fairy’.¹⁸ Either way, Nellie is presented as a foe to be reckoned with.

As an egotist, she errs tragically by assuming the role of Fate meddling in the lives of others. She is the false ally leading people away from the world of solid day-time realities into the uncertain, labyrinthine, dark realms where all sense of reality is lost. Like the miner she speaks of, Nellie distrusts ‘surface life’ for being gaudy and shallow (p. 263). We quickly realise that, in trying to plumb the depths with her constant urging to ‘introspect’ and ‘confess’, Nellie takes her hapless victims on a nightmarish journey through the underworld region she inhabits. Unlike the true guide, lover or ally figure (like Mendelssohn or Quick) who is invested with life-giving properties, Nellie is characterised by imagery which denies life. Her belief in the reality only of pain and suffering, loneliness, defeat and failure, is sublimated in her as a motivating passion which drives her on, persuading others that their search for love and happiness is the stuff of illusion and urging them to seek the final truth in death. In the role she assumes as ‘pathfinder’ (p. 19), she takes on the responsibility for awakening others to the reality she sees and she ‘guides’ them along ‘[the] lonely road, . . . through Vanity Fair’ (p. 154). Her desire for friendship becomes in her an obsession to possess her friends entirely, cutting off their outside contacts and destroying their faith in themselves. She denies the principle of individual

¹⁸ ‘Fay’, an obsolete variation of ‘fey’, is both an adjective (‘fated to die’) and a noun (‘fate, fairy, foe’). (See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1933 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961], Vol. IV.)

responsibility and freedom of choice of others to direct their own dramas when she says:

‘You must rely not on yourself but on others; on me. I can show you the way; and if I don’t, if you alienate me, your last chance is gone.’ (p. 43)

The penalty for following her, in Caroline’s case, is death. As one who cannot rest and who mischievously leads others astray, Nellie has the aspect of a will-o’-the-wisp. A favourite habit of the will-o’-the-wisp is to lead unsuspecting travellers, especially at night, into bogs – the psychological equivalent of which, in Stead’s drama of the person, is the emotional morass that results from being lost, led astray, or misdirected by making the wrong choices. With a little imagination, the glow of Nellie’s cigarette in the dark might be discerned as the will-o’-the-wisp’s candle.

Nellie’s fey qualities are introduced at the psychological level of the novel to convey the distorted nature of her personality and the mischief in which she is engaged. The supernatural and fairy imagery, in their connection with death and spirits, are linked with a pattern of bestial imagery that also accretes around Nellie. The connection between supernatural, fairy and bestial imagery may be explained by the folkloric and fairytale tradition of employing grotesque half-animal, half-human figures as monsters or spirits portending evil and, sometimes, death. Monstrosity, madness, emasculation, vampirism and lesbianism appear in the drama of the Cotter family as emblems of the inescapable stigma imprinted upon them by their frustrated lives.

The Cotters are spinners.¹⁹ The spider image has already been alluded to in this discussion in reference to the predatory natures of Mary Cotter, Tom and Nellie. Nellie goes to work like a spider, luring her friends into her parlour where she weaves her web of talk around them. Her habit of talking long into

¹⁹ A ‘spinner’ may be a spider, a nightjar, or one who tells a story, especially a tall story; but also the German word ‘*Spinne*’ is used colloquially to refer either to being mad or to a crazy or neurotic person.

the night also gives her the aspect of a nightingale, an aspect supported by her whistling. Throughout the novel there are several references to Nellie as a bird, specifically that she is a rooster or cock (pp. 12, 59, 105, 328, 269). Even the name Nellie (or Nelly) refers to a large sea bird. Her father also calls her a 'flatfish' (p. 59), the significance of which will be made clear later. Like the image of the spider, the bird imagery relates to Nellie's habit of preying on people since it is associated with the harpy, the mythic creature which defiles everything it touches. The harpy is usually represented as a woman with bird's wings and a pinched face caused by insatiable hunger.

The Cotter's house in Bridgehead is a 'henhouse' (p. 26), dominated by the women, Nellie, Peggy, their mother Mary and the visiting aunts, Jeanie and Bessie. (Nellie's house in Lamb Street is likewise full of women which she dominates with her swaggering and crowing antics.) The predominance of women in the Cotter household is suggested as a reason for the disturbed, weakened personalities of Uncle Sime and Tom.²⁰ Tom's incomplete sexual identification may be attributed to the early influence of his possessive mother and sister taking away his heart and to the bad influence of Bridgehead women generally, who tend to regard their men very poorly (pp. 105-06). It seems that where there are too many women, the men become henpecked victims, or, to continue the image of the harpy, are swallowed up by powerful women. The henhouse image and subsequent references to Nellie as a rooster rather than a hen, suggest that the imbalance of the sexes works to produce lasting psychological effects upon both men and women. (Stead's choice of male names, 'Johnny' and 'Bob', for Nellie's two friends, also strongly implies a sexual imbalance in these characters.) Nellie's lesbianism is part of the developing theme of imbalance and misdirection and may be regarded as a gothic phenomenon of her inner conflict and confusion. Tom's incomplete sexuality

²⁰ This situation compares with a similar one in *The People With the Dogs* where there are also too many women.

conforms to this pattern and it is noteworthy that in adult fairy tales the males are emasculated.²¹

Nellie and Tom recognise and understand each other's tragedy of fragmentation and self-division. Tom witnesses Nellie's predatory sexuality but wants to believe that she is 'goodhearted and honest' (p. 269) yet even he knows that '[t]here was something missing in her; she lacked self-criticism' (p. 270). For her part, Nellie recognises Tom's compulsion to act the part of a child to win the maternal affection of the women and she energetically campaigns against him. Still, she protects him in her way. Their inability to love unselfishly either sex is reflected in their incestuous, narcissistic love of each other. In the Stead canon to love unselfishly is to be creative, and self-love, as the opposite, is destructive. Nellie and Tom are the victims of a family inheritance of selfishness and inability to love; consequently they are destructive in their relationships.

The proof of Nellie's fey influence is witnessed in the central dramatic episode of the novel where she goes to work on Caroline whose illness makes her too weak to resist Nellie's wicked crooning (pp. 255-67). This episode relates to the Palace of Mirrors scene. Here, we see the bad fairy or witch in action, while in the earlier scene we saw the witch in image only — the image reinforced by action constitutes the drama of the person rounding itself out. In this episode, Nellie proves herself to be a creature of the night, literally destroying the chance of others to dream. When Caroline slips into an exhausted doze, Nellie's voice pierces the veils of sleep, waking her to a nightmare of endless talk:

Where would it end? The air was becoming unbreathable, filling with the smoke of Nellie's endless cigarettes; ash lay on the bed and pillows, it fell on Caroline's face and hair. (p. 265)

When Caroline finally gives in, admitting the 'truth' of her death, Nellie

²¹ On the emasculation of males in fairytales, see Ann Ronald, 'Terror — Gothic: Nightmare and Dream' in *The Female Gothic* ed. Juliann E. Fleenor (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983), p. 184.

is exalted and excited at the prospect of a sacrifice (p. 266). In Nellie's absence her brother and *alter ego*, Tom, waits to take Caroline home again, causing Caroline to voice her suspicions that 'it's a put-up job between you. I've always suspected it. You work hand in hand' (p. 267). It is true that together these sundered personalities comprise a formidable team. There is no character in the novel strong enough to oppose them, except perhaps Eliza, but even she succumbs to Tom while she sees through Nellie.

The climax of the drama comes on a night of the full moon at Nellie's house when strange things happen. It is here that the concatenation of images of Nellie is concentrated. It begins when Tom returns to Lamb Street to find the house full of Nellie's Bohemian women guests. Caroline's ghostly pallor is evidence of the effect of Nellie's 'care'.

Caroline seems to be forgotten now as Nellie carouses with her rough Bohemian friends, asserting her dominance over Tom. Brother and sister vie for the women's attention. In the centre of the circles made by the women, the chairs, bottles and glasses (arranged like Stonehenge), Tom throws a rose to Eliza. Angry and half-drunk, Nellie hurls her wineglass at him, cutting his hand. In the exchange which follows between them, Tom calls her a 'sweir beast' (p. 288). Apart from the allusions to Nellie as a harpy, this is the most *direct* reference so far to the monstrous aspect of Nellie's character. The refrain sung immediately by Flo, 'For Nellie is a sweir beast and canna cross the water', is from a folksong 'Caahacky' (or 'Caahackie'), sung by schoolchildren in the Tyneside area, possibly a Northumbrian or Durham dialect ballad about the monster, half cow, half fish, who rose out of the sea and spread evil over the land. The only way to escape this monster was to cross a running stream since the monster could not endure fresh water.²² (This may also suggest why the

²² The name and other details of the song were supplied to me by a friend's father, Mr. James Hault, who was born and brought up on the Tyneside. According to him the song was well known and sung by children in the area. (He recalled singing it during his childhood.) The monster motif can be identified as a local variation of the

women appear dirty.) In employing this motif here Christina Stead identifies the influence of Bohemianism as a spreading evil and is specifically referring to the way in which it has deformed Nellie, and through her, how it wrecks the lives of others.

Other obscure incidents in the novel now take on frightening significance. Quite early in the novel Nellie appears in a pair of blood-stained breeches (p. 50), then we have Tom's description of her appearance during the Jago days as a grotesque figure dressed in green (p. 269). Put together, these images suggest another motif, that of the evil fairy woman, the highland 'Bean-Si' (Banshee), who is generally dressed in green and is seen washing the bloodstained clothes of those about to die. The motif is a powerful one portending evil and death. Again, almost incredibly, the incident of Nellie baring her hanging breasts before Uncle Sime (p. 29), an incident which seemed to have little point in the narrative except perhaps to show Nellie's callous mockery of Sime's bachelorhood, also suggests the Banshee.²³ Nellie's tubercular coughing spasms are obviously the result of her incessant smoking while her dissipated lifestyle can be blamed for her generally poor health, but even these may be 'explained' as evidence of an evil spirit working through her. Consumption was supposed to be a fairy affliction.²⁴

At the beginning of this chapter it was stated that Nellie spoke as if possessed by a demon and that the spirit in possession of her was the spirit of Bohemia, identified by George as 'fairyland' or 'Cotters' England'. It is this spirit which works through her in her aspect as a bad fairy. Even the minor detail of the Cotters' 'black dog' (p. 94) may have been included as a fairy motif to reinforce the idea of Cotters' England as a fairyland. These motifs are not

Scottish "Nuckelavee". (See Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977], p. 311 for the motif.)

²³ See Briggs, "Bean-nighe" or "Bean-Si" motifs, pp. 19-20.

²⁴ See Briggs, p. 80.

accidental or gratuitous inclusions. They are woven carefully into the text to emphasise the dramatic effect of illusion as it is practised by Nellie.

The narrative of Caroline's terrifying experience at Nellie's Lamb Street house vividly conveys the impression of being trapped, stifled within a nightmare created by Nellie's spell-binding and smoking. When she wakes up later, Caroline is confronted by a 'slender, male figure [dressed] in an airman's suit' (p. 291). It is obviously Nellie, a creature of the air, wearing her brother's flying suit. Her 'gash of a mouth was smiling' as she beckons to Caroline. Animal imagery is scattered throughout this description, reinforcing the hideousness of what is happening. Like a shade of Mephistopheles Nellie points to the yard below where Caroline sees the weird, half-fish, half-women dancing naked under the moonlight (p. 291). She could be forgiven for thinking that she was still asleep and that the whole thing was a dreadful nightmare, but it is all too terrifyingly real for Caroline. Her vision of the women in the yard below recalls Thomas Cotter's impression of his daughter as a 'flatfish' and the fish image of the women also fits the Caahacky monster. As Caroline pauses to summon her strength before making her escape, she sees an apparition of a naked woman with:

half-moon face, neck like a can, thickset shoulders,
spidery arm after spidery arm, long shank after
long shank. The woman complete, some sort of
crab, moved past the dark door and went up the
other stairs. (p. 292)

We recognise the spider from the earlier description of the Cotters. Stead has clearly chosen her images deliberately and has woven them purposefully into the account of her characters' experiences. The horror of Caroline's vision of these unearthly creatures is then transferred to the chilling description of her confrontation with Nellie who stood before her, 'her gaunt jaws slightly open' (p. 293). Having effectively sucked out the life of her victim, it seems now that Nellie is about to consume Caroline entirely. This is immediately followed by the description of Caroline's panic-stricken flight from the scene only to feel

that she is being pursued by Nellie:

Caroline now floated along over-shadowed by the lank, hobbling stride of the woman who had taken her up, haunted her, and ruined her. She was walking away from her, but Nellie was someone she carried with her, as you carry a bad parent always with you; Nellie had got into her being, like the knowledge of drunkenness. (p. 294)

The hallucinatory, nightmarish nature of Caroline's experience that night at Lamb Street not only confirms the evil nature of Nellie's multi-faceted appearances, it also dramatises Nellie's statement to her (quoted earlier) that 'you're struggling in a nightmare and you're crying out for the hand that will wake you up. But unable to respond, in a catalepsis of unreality' (p. 264). In the long nights spent with Nellie, Caroline had been haunted by Nellie's deathly influence and now, totally weakened by her experience, she is unable to escape her relentless tormentor.

Caroline commits suicide by jumping from the top of a large apartment building. Her suicide note with its references to lost honour and Nellie's 'cell of glass' (pp. 304-05) are too enigmatic for Nellie who is accustomed to replacing the truth with empty phrases and sentimentalised clichés. She cannot see the pointed meaning in Caroline's last desperate words.

Towards the end of the novel we see Nellie in a scene with Eliza, still play acting, dissecting the meaning of life, feeling the restoration of power in her after her brief absence from England. She tells her life-story as 'a story of thickets, brigands and enchanters' (p. 343) — a fairytale in which she thinks she plays a heroic role, trying to wake the sleeping from their illusions. Even now she does not realise that she is herself a somnambulist in a nightmare world of her own making. Exalted by her feeling of power and the prospect of further conquests, Nellie stays up gazing at the stars, working out new strategies. She finally falls into an exhausted sleep to be awakened by Eliza. In sleep, Nellie faces the truth that her life is a recurring nightmare, a fact which explains why she stays up night after night, keeping herself awake by drinking tea or gin and

smoking and talking endlessly.

Nellie's dreams involve taking 'endless journeys . . . to get a job and get away (p. 123) but her dreams always end with her back where she began, at Hadrian's Grove in Bridgehead. Her waking hours repeat this endlessly circular motion as her restless, obsessive pursuit of the 'unknowable' continues (p. 352). It may be seen as a search for a cure for the gaping abyss she feels within her.

Tom also tells of his strange, restless, dream-like journeys. He relates one in which he is walking across country, 'taking care because of the marshy spots', heading for a town (p. 148). When he reaches the valley in which the town is located, he finds no sign of life there at all — a situation like the one in the story told by Fulke Folliot and Catherine Baguenault towards the end of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* where the travellers enter a still, strange valley (*Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Ch. 11, p. 301). Another tale told by Tom concerns him 'wandering aimlessly' in spring time. His thoughts turn to the idea that he would like to be a hermit and live as an oracle in the woods (p. 148). Then, in retracing his journey to London, Tom takes 'a wrong turning' and ends up lost in a maze of streets (p. 150). The journey motif, as it occurs in these dreams and tales, refers to the direction taken by both Tom and Nellie. Their lives have been shaped by taking the wrong turnings and getting lost in the maze or woods (Nellie's thickets).

Both Nellie and Tom, in their different ways, show a tendency to withdraw from the mainstream of life, dwelling instead in the land of illusion. Nellie maintains that she dislikes theorising, preferring to live reality instead. However her habit of introspection, taken up with constant speculation about life and death, in her search for the 'truth', puts her in the land of Laputa that she holds in contempt (p. 157). As a consequence of turning her back on 'surface life', believing it to be nothing but an illusion, she sinks into the nightmare realm of the sleeper. Tom, as 'a bit of a troglodyte' (p. 225) is a sleeper too.

Nellie purports to show us England with the lid off, but is what she

shows us the 'real' England or only an illusion? The answer given by the novel is that we do witness an illusion. Through Nellie we see an England rooted in the past; superstitious, bleak, deathly, an England of the 'dark ages' as it were. But Nellie is not the only person in the drama through whose eyes we see things. We catch a glimpse of another England through the efforts of Robert Peebles, Nellie's editor, and Anthony Butters, a strike leader and union organiser, who are both working to release the workers from their veil of oppression and illusion. The socialist theoreticians whom Nellie so despises are revealed in fleeting glimpses as people who are struggling to raise the curtain so that the dramas of people like Tom, whose drama had not begun, may finally be played. Cotters' England is an enchanted, sleeping country waiting to be awakened from its death-like preoccupation with inward-looking and resistance to change.

Cotters' England is a most extraordinary novel. Whether it is approached as a novel documenting social conditions or as an incisive character study cutting away at the layers of personality to reveal the hidden drama of the person, this novel surely ranks as one of Stead's best. Christina Stead has exceeded all expectations in her creation of Nellie Cook and her brother Tom, two strange characters whose ambiguous qualities are a compelling source of fascination for the reader. Stead's portraits of them, reflected in the hall of mirrors at the fairground and in interaction with other characters throughout the novel, reveal them to be twisted, monstrous figures, unchanging in their various distortions. Their grotesque reflections provide an illusion of repetitive motion like that in a strange, shadow puppet play, except that their shadows, instead of being seen sharply on a brightly lit white screen, are cast against a gloomy background that represents the obscurity of post-war England.

Nellie and Tom wander aimlessly in a circle between Bridgehead, Blackstone and Islington — a pattern of physical movement that signifies their psychological entrapment. They have no sense of direction or a goal but they

keep on going. To keep on, not to give in, is to maintain the struggle, but for them the only escape from their merry-go-round is death. Like Robert Grant, they are caught in a trap as victims of their own self-deception and delusions, so theirs is a drama approaching closely the stasis of death. Their involvement with the mysterious Bohemian Jago circle has been fatal to their moral development, dehumanising them. Their inhuman, heartless aspects make them automata, puppets, or marionettes, as they perform their jerky, 'bent and wobbling' (p. 189) dance of death throughout the novel. Yet ironically their personal tragedy is that they *are* after all human, despite their grotesque distortions. They are capable of feeling and seeing their failings reflected in each other, without, it seems, being able to see themselves. While their horrifying aspects arouse fear, their recognisably human aspects, however distorted, deserve pity, making their drama 'a very normal tragedy' (p. 46).

The supernaturalism and fairytale elements in *Cotters' England* are grounded in the psychological reality of the characters; the level of social realism provides the 'outer' surface reality. The tension between these levels provides the dramatic interest of the novel. Stead succeeds in vividly combining the private drama of the troubled protagonist, Nellie, with the public drama of a troubled nation. We are finally to understand that living in a land of illusion, called 'Bohemia', 'fairylane' or just 'Cotters' England', has the effect on some people of a kind of life in death.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Tis Pity'

House of All Nations (1938)

Thou common whore of mankind, that putt'st odds
Among the rout of nations . . .

W. Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens* (IV.iii.44-45).

It's not business — it's — drama; it's the sort of
thing you see on the stage, rather.

Christina Stead, *House of All Nations*.¹

¹ *House of All Nations*, (New York, 1938; rpt. London: Angus and Robertson [U.K.], 1974), Scene 97, p. 734. All subsequent references are to this edition of the text.

The selection and arrangement of the novels discussed in this thesis have been based on criteria pertaining to Stead's idea of drama and the dramatic qualities exhibited by the novels. We have seen how the journey motif took precedence over the theatrical metaphor in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as a device for conveying the idea of process; then we saw how both the theatrical metaphor and the journey motif were developed to produce an organic structure in the drama of the person in the later novels. As this chapter will show, the theatrical metaphor is the controlling metaphor in *House of All Nations* to the exclusion of the journey motif. The result is that *House of All Nations* displays the most overtly dramatic structure and qualities of all the novels. *House of All Nations* also demonstrates Stead's sense of commitment and it makes certain statements about the nature of the human drama and the individual's role in it that will be elaborated in my conclusion.

House of All Nations is presented in the likeness of a play, being divided into a 'Sequence of Scenes' of varying lengths numbering one hundred and four altogether, reflecting the notion that what is going on in the bank is drama, 'the sort of thing you see on the stage' (Sc. 97, p. 734). The action is intended to represent events taking place over a five year period from 1932 to 1937 in a small private bank in Paris owned by the Bertillon Brothers. In keeping with the idea that a drama is in process, the scenes are written almost entirely in dialogue. Short character sketches introduce the actors as they make their first entrances and brief passages of description provide the equivalent of stage directions. Occasional scenes, like Scene Seventeen, 'In Praise of Gold', are devoted to exposition to provide background information which dialogue alone could not economically provide. However, the backgrounds of the characters are frequently provided in dialogue as one character comments upon another, a device used throughout the novels discussed so far and one which is significant in dramatic terms. Two scenes, Scene Thirty-one, 'Poor Pasteur' and Scene Thirty-three, 'Mamma', present letters exchanged between characters. These

interrupt the rapid flow of the narrative created by the more theatrical scenes but they can be defended on the grounds that they make important contributions to the theme and help cast light on a private side of character not otherwise seen. The need of Alphendéry's mother and his selfless concern portrayed in Scene Thirty-three contrast markedly with the greed and selfishness of Achitophelous and his mistress in Scene Thirty-one. While a few scenes take place outside the bank, most of the scenes are set in the bank itself, giving unity to the drama.

The cast of characters is too large to be listed in its entirety at the beginning of the novel. Four principal characters may be identified. Jules and William-Bertillon, the working partners of the 'Brothers Simla Corporation' or 'Bertillon Frères', own the bank; Michel Alphendéry, an associate, is employed by the Bertillons as an economist and his role in the drama and his relationship to the Bertillons fluctuates between lucky charm and scapegoat according to the moods of Jules Bertillon; and Aristide Raccamond, a 'customers' man', is the fourth leading player pushed into the spotlight by his ambitious wife. There is a following of characters like Henri Léon, Richard Plowman, Adam Constant, Theodor Bomba, Jacques Carrière and Marianne Raccamond who all play lesser roles, yet the effect of their characters in balancing the drama is considerable.

The principle of dualism operates in *House of All Nations* to the maximum in terms of dramatic effect and all-inclusiveness. Stead's use of dualities is reflected not only in the relationships between characters but also in the internal contradictions and tensions of individual characters. The triangular relationship formed by Richard Plowman, Jules and William Bertillon is balanced by another triangular relationship formed by Henri Léon, Michel Alphendéry and Adam Constant. Raccamond and Bomba, two 'insiders' who are toadies to the Bertillons, are matched by Parouart and Carrière, 'outsiders' who are the Bertillons' enemies.

Alphendéry is Jules's *alter ego* (Sc. 22, p. 171). He feels himself bound to Jules, and therefore the bank, by bonds which he cannot easily break. Conversely, Alphendéry is the ballast which steadies Jules's capricious and flighty aspects. In his absence, Jules gives free rein to his imagination and he 'flies', too high for the earthbound Alphendéry to exercise any restraint and prevent the bank from crashing. Alphendéry's honesty and principles earn him the Bertillons' trust and respect even if they do complain about his influence in guiding the day to day operations of the bank. As a Director of the bank, Alphendéry's solidity compensates for the absence of solid qualities in its principal. Jules is such an enigma that his portrait is painted in chiaroscuro with other characters representing the light and shade aspects of his character.

Jules appears to recognise this principle of character reflection by choosing carefully those with whom he wants to be associated. His opposition to Aristide Raccamond is well-founded in that Raccamond is exactly the 'ambitious dull guy' (Sc. 6, p. 63) whose mediocrity will tarnish Jules's brilliance and eventually destroy him. Alphendéry reflects the light aspects of Jules in his generosity and 'softness', while other characters, like Theodor Bomba, are reflections of Jules's dark side. Bomba's lack of principles exactly matches Jules's own creed of swindling and his propensity for secret codes and indecipherable messages appeals to Jules's love of mystery. Bomba and Jules thought they understood each other: 'each, in his vanity, saw himself in the other' (Sc. 55, p. 442). Even though Carrière is his hated enemy and Alphendéry his loyal friend and employee, Jules feels a closer affinity to Carrière because of their shared rascality (Sc. 49, p. 351). Likewise, Parouart the blackmailer, 'mean, hungry, crafty, neurotic, dirty and foul-smelling' (Sc. 54, p. 424), presents completely the opposite figure to the elegant Jules, yet Jules recognises him 'as a dissolute, worthless brother of his, in the confraternity of thieves' (Sc. 54, p. 426). Jean Frère, Alphendéry's socialist friend, is the solid, earthy counterpart of the mercurial, ethereal, capitalist

Jules. Such nice arrangement of characters reflects the total composition of the novel according to Stead's use of dualism as a dramatic principle.

Alphendéry is split between the two worlds of Jules and Jean. There are in fact two Alphendérys: the inspired socialist orator of the weekends and 'the fatalist Alphendéry of the bank' (Sc. 77, p. 612). Such division of personality is common among men in the financial world:

[they] have two skins, 'one to face the world with and one to show a crony when they love him.' The first is the *Financial and Commercial Chronicle* face and the second is their true face, their face of superstition, mental chaos, and childish absurdity. (Sc. 55, p. 441)

This description, by the chameleon-like Bomba, would fit almost any of the financial 'giants' in the novel, who, like professional actors, are capable of wearing any mask. Deception is their business. William Bertillon, for example, '[p]retends to be thorny but that's all part of his game — ' (Sc. 46, pp. 325–26). The sycophantic Raccamonds play the game, enduring the Hallers' dreadful dinner parties in order to get their business, but the Hallers, with the cunning of those well-practised in the game, ply their guests with wine and food and manipulate the dinner conversation in order to get information from the Raccamonds. Throughout the novel the theatrical metaphor and the associated metaphor of game-playing are used to emphasise the duplicity of characters as well as the general condition of unreality surrounding the bank and all who are connected with it. Since the bank represents the wider world outside it, this aspect of unreality has important implications for the overall meaning of the novel.

In addition to the more prominent players there is a host of extras comprising clients, family members, employees of the bank and friends and associates of those connected to the bank, creating a complex web of relationships. The effect is panoramic, with the total cast representing the whole spectrum of types and nationalities of people whose names range

alphabetically from Alphendéry to Zurbaran.

In spite of the size of the cast, individual performers are singled out for close observation as they come and go on the stage erected by Jules Bertillon, who, as 'Mercury' (Sc. 27, p. 208 and Sc. 72, p. 598), the master of illusion, god of trickery and thieves, is the director and string-puller of the numerous supers who act in his show. Stead's microscopic scrutiny of character is seen to operate even in this long and complex novel. Each movement, action, appearance and conversation which happens either within or outside the bank is recorded as though every single detail might be a clue to the unravelling of a mystery. This process of unravelling is the key to the nature of the drama and the dramatic technique employed by Stead. The bank is a mystery. What goes on there and who is behind it are the subjects of speculation and rumour. Stead's technique of close observation and analysis of character, her meticulous attention to every detail and her practice of allowing characters to speak freely and independently, are designed to allow the secrets of the bank to be discovered gradually.

Jules Bertillon exploits the mystery and wants to keep it that way, for it is his belief that: 'The more mysterious the business, the handsomer it seems' (Sc. 6, p. 63). But there are those, notably Carrière and the Raccamonds, whose ugliness of spirit will not allow them to tolerate the beauty of Jules's mystery. The Raccamonds complete the act begun by Carrière in destroying the illusion created by Jules. With Jules's disappearance the illusion of the bank dissolves and the 'play' therefore comes to an end.

Stead's use of dramatic techniques in *House of All Nations* is exceptional. While her other novels display similar techniques, it is in this early novel that she indulges her talent for the dramatic so effortlessly and significantly, matching form to ideas with consummate skill. She appears to have chosen the techniques of writing a play quite consciously to emphasise the unreality of the world portrayed in *House of All Nations*. Like most of her novels, *House of All Nations* rests on an elaborate arrangement of dualities, contrasts and

contradictions, the chief of which, in this novel, is the archetypal conflict between illusion and reality. The theatricality of the novel is a device that helps to reinforce the idea that the world of this novel, like the world it reflects, is 'an unsure shifting world' (Sc. 42, p. 308), 'a dream world' (Sc. 16, p. 130), and that the characters are 'living in a mushroom dream of monstrous unreality' (Sc. 55, p. 444). It is a world of illusion, like that of a play.

Stead has remarked that her novels represent 'scenes from contemporary life'.² Her fine ability to convey a sense of time, a feeling of what it was like *then*, is demonstrated at its best in *House of All Nations*. The novel captures, with a powerful sense of immediacy, the atmosphere in which the financial and political crises occurred prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe. The illusion she creates is a reflection of the world in microcosm: the confusion and uncertainty that are the essence of the drama of the bank reflect the chaos of outside events.

The drama of the bank parallels the inevitable progress towards collapse and disaster of the nations of Europe and beyond as financial crashes occur and the clouds of war gather to increase the darkness of the scenes being portrayed. This strong historical aspect of the novel sets it apart from many of the other novels discussed in this thesis, for, while *House of All Nations* portrays the drama of a person, Jules Bertillon, whose identity is bound up with the bank, it is also a historical drama reflecting that of all nations at that time. It is a drama portraying many people whose interwoven fates and destinies are linked to the bank and the creation of a deliberately cosmopolitan cast certainly supports this idea. Their dreams of wealth and power help keep the illusion of the bank afloat while the irony of their situation, in being psychologically, financially, and morally dependent on the existence of an illusion, is exploited by Stead in satiric fashion. The background of political and economic instability, together

² Christina Stead, in *Contemporary Novelists* ed., Walter Allen (London: St. James Press Ltd., 1972), p. 1169. The entry for Stead was written by R. G. Geering.

with the mention of historical figures like Hitler and Mussolini in the novel, imply a bigger drama going on in Europe of which the drama of the bank is a small part. The style of the novel, with its fevered, onward rush of scenes and piling up of detail before the final revelation of the bank's imminent collapse, is appropriately apocalyptic. The days being portrayed are the last days comprising the frenzied final act of the pre-war drama. Stead's visionary ability to see the dark days of the future does not, however, involve all gloom and despair. Her satiric humour and sense of the farcical in events are highlighted by scenes such as the one in which Davigdor Schicklgrüber, a Jew employed by the mysterious Lord Zinovraud, negotiates the purchase of the name of a small Jewish company that makes black shirts (Sc. 51, pp. 381-84).³ The unremittingly cynical epigraphs at the beginning of the novel set the satiric tone of the dark comedy that is to take place in *House of All Nations*, and, once again, this novel demonstrates Stead's sensitivity to the moral and political issues of the times.

The title of the novel is a good place to begin examining the underlying ironies created by the dualities dramatised in and by the bank. The name of the bank itself is an uncertainty. On one side of the great bronze doors of the bank is a plate inscribed 'BANQUE MERCURE' which suggests that the bank shares an incorporeality with its creator, Jules Bertillon. On the other door is inscribed the more solid-sounding 'BERTILLON & CIE S.A.' (Sc. 2, p. 15). The title, 'House of All Nations', also refers to the bank, ironically implying that the bank is something other than what its imposing façade and 'nice furnishings' (Sc. 2, p. 19) suggest. There exists a fundamental contradiction between the appearance and reality of the bank. It is '[a] hollow jewel' (Sc. 2, p. 23). Michel

³ Bruce Holmes points out in his doctoral thesis, that 'Schicklgrüber' was Adolf Hitler's real name. Holmes, 'The Moral Dialectic of Christina Stead,' Diss. University of Newcastle, N.S.W. 1984, Ch. 5, p. 94.

Alphendéry laughingly describes the bank as

a sort of cosmopolite club for the idle rich and speculators of Paris, Madrid, Rio, Buenos Aires, New York, London, and points further east and west. (Sc. 2, p. 19)

The bank is a veritable house of all nations. Referring to her choice of title for the novel, Christina Stead explains:

[the bank] was right in the centre of fashionable Paris, and had many fashionable people of all nations there. The reason I called it that — that's the reason, though it refers to something quite other.⁴

The 'other' is made clear very early in the novel when William Bertillon refers to a Parisian brothel called 'House of All Nations' (Sc. 2, p. 29) which is again named by Henri Léon (Sc. 52, p. 388). The brothel image is one among several images used to point the contrast between appearance and reality, in this case that the façade of respectability and solidity of the bank hides the real nature of the phoney business being transacted within. The duality of the bank extends to its clients, who, under their façades of fine clothes, jewellery and titles, really belong to the grotesque underworld. Clients and financiers alike are described as '[t]hieves and streetwalkers. . . leeches, doublecrossers, and vain fools' (Sc. 55, p. 449) and also as

powder-puff inventors, rich ragamuffins, and superannuated gangsters . . . sneaks, go-betweens, crooks and drainfishers that regarded the bank, as every other bank in Paris, as their natural prey'. (Sc. 54, p. 422)

This cosmopolitan, fashionable, 'high society' represents a Vanity Fair, providing ample scope and opportunity for the ironic observer to exercise her talent for barbed wit as well as subtle and overt satire. According to Michel Alphendéry, the nature of the business conducted within the bank is selling 'not grain and stocks, but flesh' (Sc. 55, p. 450) — a statement linking the bank, in his mind, quite definitely to the brothel.

⁴ Stead, Wetherell interview, p. 440.

The use of grotesquerie in Stead's novels is associated with the ugly face of reality, that face which is often hidden under a façade or veil. We first see it used in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* in the madman's vision of humanity struggling in a dark underworld behind the curtain of fair outward appearance. The images of prostitutes leering out of darkened doorways or stepping out into the dark streets of Sydney to confront Michael Baguenault, images strongly suggestive of Dickens's London in its evil aspect, form part of the grotesquerie established in that novel. Like Dickens, Stead uses grotesquerie to point to the dark, seamy side of reality and in particular, to indicate moral debasement and misdirection. The sense of being lost and associations of evil are conventionally indicated by the imagery of darkness. Accordingly, Stead treats brothels as places of the night associated with corruption, crime and the underworld. Brothels are arguably 'night' places since even the most fashionable townhouse, which presents a respectable face and is indistinguishable from its neighbours by day, is transformed when it opens for business, most frequently at night. The unmasking of vice is a major theme of the novel as its epigraph from Diderot indicates.⁵ The respectable 'daytime' aspect of the bank is a mask for its corrupt activities. It truly belongs with brothels, cabarets, nightclubs, casinos, theatres and the sideshow alleys of the fairground, all of which are referred to in the novel, in the 'world' of night. The association of the bank with these places adds to the ideas of wickedness, illusion and deception being practised by its owners and cosmopolitan clientele. The use of brothel imagery is basic to the theme of the pursuit of money in *House of All Nations*.⁶

The bank represents the ideals or dreams of those who have helped in its

⁵ A translation of the epigraph reads: 'One is compensated for the loss of one's innocence by that of one's prejudices. In the society of the wicked, where vice is seen with its mask raised, one learns to know them.'

⁶ Holmes identifies the 'nexus of sexuality and money' in Ch. 5, p. 85, of his thesis. This connection is common to many of Stead's novels and is seen particularly in the later novel, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*.

creation and its falseness and instability comment upon the nature of those ideals and the men (politicians, lawyers, blackmailers, stock-brokers and the like) who practise them. The following discussion will trace the development of underworld or night-time imagery, especially as it is connected with the bank, to show not only how consistent and pervasive is its use, but also how it contributes to the philosophical basis of the novel. While the discussion may appear to be digressive, it does have direct relevance to the ideas of duality and illusion which form the dramatic basis of the novel. Bear in mind that the bank (as 'House of all Nations') represents the world in microcosm, so that what the imagery says about the nature of the bank relates also to the world.

Scene One of the novel opens with Henri Léon, a Don Juan type of character whose restless pursuit of money is matched by his insatiable pursuit of women.⁷ Léon immediately introduces the reader to the realm of night-time reality in the opening scenes. He takes his party on a spree through the night spots of Paris — the restaurants, nightclubs, theatres and cabarets which are familiar territory to Léon and his ilk. In these places he conducts his 'other' business, arranging future assignations. (By day he is a commodities trader.) The women in his company and the whores who frequent the cabarets are similar in their outward appearance. The distinction between them is blurred even further when the moral nature of these women is considered. The business of the whores is open and undisguised while the 'nice' women, like Marianne Raccamond, cloak their selfish and materialistic motives under the guise of their desire for friendship. In the financial world women are generally regarded as merchandise. Henrietta Achitophelous is introduced as a weak-minded woman whose marriage is about to be transacted as a business arrangement, making her little different from the whores she disdains. In these scenes the true values of love and friendship are shown to be debased and

⁷ The portrait of Léon in this novel is enlarged in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, where Robert Grant is easily identifiable as an older Léon.

corrupted by the desire for money.

The aura of mystery surrounding the bank also links it to the brothel. Because it is a mystery, the bank is a fertile bed for rumour. When Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern make enquiries about Bertillon's bank they discover that it is 'the most unreliable house in Paris' (Sc. 65, p. 524), that it is, in a clever use of wit and irony on Stead's part, a house of ill-repute. (The use of the names of comic characters from *Hamlet* is an example of the way in which references to the theatre and allusions to plays are scattered throughout the novel.)

Alphendéry is under no illusions about the nature of the bank. For his willingness to sell his services to the Bertillons out of his love for them, Alphendéry sees himself deprecatingly as 'a whore' (Sc. 71, p. 548). To add to the brothel imagery, disease, specifically those diseases associated with prostitution, syphilis and gonorrhea, is an occupational hazard for men of finance in this novel. When Aristide Raccamond's health declines into nervous hysteria and fever it is rumoured that:

he was neurotic because he had just discovered that he had syphilis. This was natural, for almost every man in the board room, . . . was suspected or known, . . . to have just contracted syphilis or gonorrhea. (Sc. 82, p. 635)

Others in the financial world subscribe to the opinion that he manifests the symptoms of paresis, the general paralysis of the insane. This view is consistent with Stead's presentation of unbalanced and misdirected characters generally as maniacs.

The disease imagery alludes to the power of money to infect, to bring out the worst aspects of human character. The allusion may derive from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*'s bitter denunciation of gold as whore. The novel portrays dramatically how the lust for gold in the form of money universally sows dissension between brothers, friends and lovers as its power is sought to increase the individual's power. *House of All Nations* makes a strong statement condemning the intrigues, deceptions and betrayals that are

practised by those engaged in the greedy pursuit of money. Since the bank itself is a deception it appears to engender others, until swindling on a vast scale spreads like contagion.

While the brothel imagery conveys the duality and moral corruption of the bank, other images are used to reinforce the idea of illusion *and* introduce the pattern of endless circular motion that, as we have seen in the earlier chapters, is associated with aimlessness. The maypole image, used to describe the confused activity of people scurrying around in circles in the bank (Sc. 11, p. 96) suggests the Wheel of Fortune because of their shared circular motion. The logical extension of this is the image of the casino, a place where the fortunes of people depend on the turn of a wheel. William Bertillon, contemptuous of the 'small fry' who gather in the bank to gamble on the stock market, says: 'You may think this is a bank, Stewart, but it's just a casino with letter drops on the front door' (Sc. 35, p. 237). Later he connects the casino image to that of the brothel when he tells Jacques Manray that '[asking] the stock market to make your living expenses . . . is like going to a whore' (Sc. 35, p. 241).

Like the maypole and wheel of the casino, the merry-go-round is an image of circular motion used to describe the bank. The suggestion of a fairground, the 'sideshow of life' that we encountered in Nellie Cotter's remarks in *Cotters' England*, is explicitly contained in the merry-go-round image, drawing attention to both the circular motion and the duality of appearance and illusion that is associated with the sideshow. William Bertillon introduces the idea of the merry-go-round and Jules responds with the theatrical metaphor, the climax of all these images:

William grumbled, 'This is not a bank, it's a merry-go-round. Do you have to have your finger muddying every pie?'

Jules grinned, 'This isn't a bank: there's a sign outside saying BANK and when they see it they come inside and drop their cash on the counter. If I put up the sign BARBER they'd come in just as automatically looking for a shave. It's all in the sign. This is a stage I've set and filled with

supers for the great act of Jules Bertillon, multimillionaire, and when the climax comes, I bring down the curtain. In the meantime, *they* pay to see the show.' (Sc. 37, p. 251)

This exchange anticipates a similar conversation between Aristide and Marianne Raccamond which is also littered with theatrical references. Marianne sees a financier as a kind of showman who 'needs props, grand viziers, and court jesters at times' (Sc. 42, p. 305). From her point of view, Aristide lacks ambition and allows himself to be set up on strings by Alphendéry, who she believes is the behind-the-scenes controller in the bank. Aristide's rotund appearance and fawning manners suggest the fool. Marianne urges him to change this role, to become a serious actor, to play instead the politician and form alliances for his own advancement. She believes that '[a] character in a play, even a super, must at least elbow the other players a bit to show he's alive' (Sc. 42, p. 306). Aristide undertakes to do this; however he is not cut out to bear the heavy responsibility of a serious role and, as the drama of the bank progresses to its climax, his acting degenerates into the farcical.

Contrary to Alphendéry, Raccamond is taken in by the façade of the bank, believing in appearances. To him, the trappings of the bank are evidence of substantial wealth, hard work and influence (Sc. 66, pp. 530-31). The idea that the bank may not be solid is terrible to him for it begins to eat away at the foundations of his faith in the system of which the bank is part. Further, if the bank is not solid, it reflects negatively upon the image of respectability Raccamond is trying to cultivate. His respectability is itself only a façade, 'a matter of fat' (Sc. 67, p. 540). Aristide's plan to discover the truth of the bank's operations springs from his realisation that '[the] bank is a stage, Marianne: there is something in it I can't seize, for the life of me. I don't know what gives it momentum' (Sc. 42, p. 306).

Convinced of the theatrical nature of the bank, Aristide then proceeds in very theatrical fashion to discover what is behind the illusion. He engages in an

undercover scheme of his own, assuming the role of Director of the bank in order to gain access to the bank's secrets. In doing so he very nearly destroys himself physically and spiritually, since he is engaged in rending apart the fabric of his system of beliefs.

William Bertillon talks of the seedy underside of the bank in his remark that '[e]very bank has its pigsty customers' man' (Sc. 67, p. 540) and obviously Aristide Raccamond, with his connections to the white slave and drug trades, represents this ugly side of the bank. Aristide is to be condemned for being a hypocrite but he is not alone. He is part of the underworld society closely connected to the bank.

Christina Stead consistently uses night imagery to portray the dream-like, to signify the world of unreality or illusion. It is used to symbolise psychological disorder in Michael and Catherine Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*; it denotes the nightmare phase of Teresa Hawkins's dream when she embarks upon her night journey and it is used in *Cotters' England* to symbolise the distorted personality of Nellie Cotter and the illusion under which she and 'her' England suffer. Because of its association with brothels, casinos, theatres and sideshows, all of which are places of the night or the 'underworld', the bank belongs to the world of illusion or distorted reality. Its creator, Jules Bertillon, is described as mad, and 'wealth, like genius, is to madness near akin' (Sc. 14, p. 123). The bank's illusory quality comes from being the product of Jules's insane fantasy — it is '[a] fantasy in the brain of an ignorant, flighty, self-centered freak' (Sc. 80, p. 629). As a 'palace of illusion' it possesses a beauty which attracts and charms those who go there but, as Alphendéry points out to Henri Léon, its beauty masks the fact that the bank is a 'Tower of Famine' (Sc. 2, p. 23).

While some are aware of the deception there are many who are not. The most alarming aspect of the bank from Alphendéry's point of view, is that the bank stands as a symbol of all the 'solid' values which the majority of people

believe in. To them it represents:

not only the old order, a stable financial system, the basis of the centre-left, republican, catholic or socialist politics they go in for. It also represents their home, hopes of marriage, children, summer holidays, life insurance, old father's kitchen garden, medical expenses, everything in life. (Sc. 80, p. 629)

The awful irony is that what they believe in is non-existent. The bank is a symbol of the Lie, the great Illusion, around and upon which all people's dreams and illusions are built. In a statement echoing Baruch Mendelssohn's words in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* about official drama constructed on the 'grotesque comic-opera conventions which no-one dares mock'⁸, Bertillon's bank and the business within it are said to comprise one act of 'a gigantic, monstrous masque put on the boards to fool the people' (Sc. 8, pp. 80-81).

When all the details of the bank are considered it emerges that the bank bears a remarkable resemblance to a theatre, making everything that takes place within it, if not dramatic, at least theatrical. The stage is extended metaphorically to include everything within the building, making the audience (the bank's customers) players in the drama. The bronze doors of the bank open inwards to a 'quiet green murmuring entrance hall' (Sc. 2, p. 16) on the ground floor. The area is open between the entrance and the lobby in which the tellers' booths and cashiers' windows are located, allowing Michel Alphendéry to observe the transactions taking place from his position near the front door (Sc. 2, p. 25). A desk (corresponding to an attendant's counter?) is located strategically between the door and the grand 'pale marble and green carpeted' staircase (Sc. 2, p. 18). The clients pass through the entrance and busy lobby to the 'great hall' where the stock exchange business takes place. At the rear of the great hall is the boardroom. From the great hall 'three circles of higher balconies' (Sc. 8, p. 83) rise on pillars into the roof. Access to the first floor is gained either by the grand staircase or by the gilded lift-cage. Another access,

⁸ *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Chapter 8, p. 242.

unknown except by William and Jules, is the hidden staircase behind the boardroom (Sc. 2, p. 26). The galleries are in theatre parlance the region of the wealthy patrons with their private boxes 'surrounded by flashing mirrors, serpentine brass, and electric bulbs concealed in cinquecento blooms' (Sc. 8, p. 84). It is here that Jules has his room, 'a large room overlooking the general entrance' (Sc. 8, p. 84) as well as all the activity directly beneath. His room is decorated to impress, fool and flatter his clients. The theme of duplicity is continued when Jules decides to fill his bookshelves with impressive looking books even though the 'ginks' who visit him there to discuss their accounts or engage in idle gossip, cannot read (Sc. 46, p. 333). In Jules's absence from the bank the 'lusters' in his room are kept burning, symbolising his presence and thereby helping to maintain the confidence of the bank's customers. (There is also something of the temple about this description, especially in the lights which are kept burning.) Secret doors and hidden staircases allow Jules and William to exit speedily and re-enter the bank unobserved (Sc. 89, p. 684). Another small, narrow staircase descends from the great hall to the vaults below (Sc. 8, p. 83). These doors and staircases sound like the trapdoors and concealed entrances and exits of a stage. The similarity of the bank's layout to a theatre reinforces the notion that it is a place where deception is practised by professional illusionists. The entrances and exits of different characters and the scenes that take place in different parts of the bank, are all presented in a very theatrical fashion, so that Stead's method of dramatising the events is a constant reminder of the nature of the bank and its business.

Above Jules's room is the large room occupied by Richard Plowman. This room is quiet and remote from the bustle of activity below: it corresponds in theatrical terms to the 'gods' but its function as the inner sanctum of the bank's principals again insinuates the idea of a temple (erected to the gods of capitalism?). Rarely, if ever, do visitors to the bank go beyond Jules's or William's rooms, as though mere mortals are permitted to climb only so high.

The uninitiated are barred from the secret transactions (rituals) that take place here. (Although it is never actually stated in the novel, it may be that Plowman, who treats Jules like a favoured son, is the ultra-wealthy backer of the bank and all Jules's schemes. Perhaps he is the Jove to Jules's Mercury.)

The whole building bears a resemblance to a large, grandly decorated theatre like the Opéra mentioned by Adam Constant (Sc. 8, p. 82). The irony is that the high society members who frequent the Opéra do not realise that they are parts in a similarly theatrical show when they enter the Banque Mercure. Some clients and customers' men (like Mouradzian) *are* aware of the deceptions being practised in the bank and willingly go along with the illusion, but others, like Raccamond, are not such willing participants and therefore do not play the game according to Jules's rules. If Jules is to avoid blackmail, scandal or the collapse of his schemes, it is better that the deceptions should be concealed from these people.

To round off the comparison of the bank with a theatre, it should be mentioned that financiers are as superstitious as those people who are traditionally involved in theatre. Adam Constant observes that '[f]inanciers are great mythomaniacs, their explanations and superstitions are those of primitive men: the world is a jungle to them' (Sc. 8, p. 77). The incongruity of the prosperous Raccamonds consulting a fortune-teller, Madame Quiero, is not the only example in the novel of this characteristic of financiers. Both Henri Léon and Jules see Michel Alphendéry as a lucky mascot. Léon sees the sign of luck on Alphendéry's forehead at their first meeting and thereafter wants to be associated with him. He holds the Jewish superstition that 'the Hebrew letter Shin' on someone's forehead signifies that person as a "shilee'ach" — an inspired messenger (Sc. 53, p. 403). Léon also lives in fear of an old colleague of his, Julius Kratz, whom he regards as being his Leporello.⁹ Similarly, Jules regards

⁹ Henri Léon does finally meet his fate in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* when, as Robert Grant, he meets his Leporello, Hilbertson.

Raccamond as his 'fatal bogey', bringing him bad luck (Sc. 89, p. 686), an irrational notion which, nonetheless, is borne out by the events of the novel. These minor details are all evidence of Stead's care and particularity in depicting the idiosyncrasies of her characters. Such superstitions and irrational fears seem to be basic to the psychology of people living in the world of other-reality.

Jules's clients and closest associates believe in him as they would believe in magic. They trust in his luck and regard him as a kind of Faustian figure who can change anything to gold. But by hitching their fortunes to Jules's rising star they also risk crashing spectacularly, since they are not, like Jules, 'fliers'. They appear to be 'sleepers', spell-bound by the illusion Jules creates. Their sudden awakening to the truth at the end will prove just how deluded they have been. Because, as sleepers, they are so apathetic and so easily duped, they have made possible the nightmare that is yet to come in the war and the atrocities that it will involve. Underlying the comedy of *House of All Nations*, therefore, is a serious message concerning individual responsibility.

With talk of revolution and all the insecurity and instability of the European financial, economic and political affairs forming the background to *House of All Nations*, it is not surprising that Stead should choose the theatrical metaphor to convey the impression of an unreal world. In such a world of uncertainty and illusion the question of values is a central concern. It is mentioned in the novel that the rise of Hitlerism cast a deep shadow over Europe and consequently men like Jules began to see the time as the last opportunity to make a quick fortune before the end. It is 'the day of the short-play heroes' (Sc. 81, p. 633). It is stated that 'by June, 1932, all values, however expressed, whether in paper or gold, were at the lowest point of the century' (Sc. 82, p. 633). Although this statement obviously applies to the financial market, it carries the implication that it is not only financial values that are at their lowest point. In an atmosphere in which '[the] world was really crumbling'

(Sc. 82, p. 634), moral values also appear to be at their lowest point. What is there to believe in and live for? Jules Bertillon provides one answer to this question, Michel Alphendéry provides another:

‘I’ve got always to be thinking about money or I feel life isn’t worth living. Hang the dog! What do I care or . . . [sic] What else is there to live for, Michel, tell me?’

Michel braced himself, clean as to face, collar and cuffs, and spectacle—shine, said with his air of upright little professor of law, ‘There’s mankind to live for — [.]’ (Sc. 26, p. 197)

This exchange between Jules and Alphendéry identifies the philosophical debate being dramatised by the novel and broaches the idea that aims and directions give meaning to the drama of life. It cannot be stressed too strongly that this is an important idea in Stead’s conception of the drama of the person. Aimlessness, or the pursuit of false ideals, is assigned a negative value in Stead’s dramas since these things are equated with destruction of the self or of others. The discussion so far has emphasised that without a clear direction the character becomes trapped in an endless cycle of suffering until, like Michael Baguenault, Henny Pollit or Robert Grant, he or she ‘drowns’ in the maelstrom. Similarly, the pursuit of false ideals leads to the dead end. The images of circular motion and images of illusion that have been identified at length in this discussion, assume greater relevance now that they have been linked with the idea of direction in Stead’s drama of the person.

Jules Bertillon’s aim is to make money and all his energy is devoted to that goal. He began his career by peddling American telephone books to Berliners in 1921 (Sc. 47, p. 344). At the time the novel opens, he had already amassed a great personal fortune making the rest of his life, to Alphendéry at least, appear to be meaningless. The narrative implies that Jules wastes his life, and therefore his creativity, in the pursuit of money especially when he is already extremely wealthy. However, we are told: ‘He was, in fact, a man gifted from birth and specially destined for his business’ (Sc. 9, p. 90). His greed is not

condemned by the narrator as severely as the Raccamonds' ambition. His saving grace is his 'principle' that he cheats only those people who are of his own class. He will not take the money of the poor artisan or the starving artist, for example, but is quite happy to accept the accounts of the titled and wealthy of any nation. His philosophy of life appears contradictory. His creativity is in making money but he is generous in handing it out to those he loves because, as he says, it is 'gambler's gold, fairy money . . . I give it because I can make it: why should I hoard it? I can always make it' (p. 90). (Incidentally this attitude contrasts markedly with that of the Hallers who are insatiable hoarders of luxury goods and who, as well, are childless and friendless.)

Money and materialistic self-aggrandizement direct the majority of the characters in *House of All Nations*. Their appetite for wealth and power is gross in the extreme but there is a point at which their limit is reached. Jules Bertillon and his kind share the hubris of businessmen (Sc. 55, p. 449). These men build a pyramid of success upon their schemes and dreams for power, but once the apex is reached, the only direction left for them is 'to go down' (Sc. 69, p. 565). The basis of their dreams is egotistic fantasy and hollow and rotten values, and any structure built on such a foundation is liable to collapse easily. Since the bank is an illusion created by Jules its collapse is inevitable. It epitomises the corruption of the system of which it is part. Compared to the theory of individual freedom on which capitalism is based, the actual workings of capitalism are ugly, involving the exploitation of others even to the point of virtual enslavement of the workers who help to prop up the system. (Jules, who provides the 'idea' of the bank and is its chief Director, is elegant and charming, but what actually goes on is ugly in moral terms.) Compared to the cruel Argentinian millionaire cattle rancher, Zucchero Zurbaran, who treats his workers worse than his dogs (Sc. 14, p. 117), Jules seems an angel. The notion of relativity in values is extended even further when Zurbaran is said to be not as bad as other South Americans who 'combine the cruelty of their own system

with the cold-mannered sadism of England' (Sc. 14, p. 118).

The Banque Mercure embraces capitalists of all nationalities. Its outward appearance and trappings give the impression of conservative solidity while it conceals within it a merry-go-round of cheating and fraud. Its existence poses a threat to the security of all those people who entrust the bank with their savings, representing a lifetime of work, as a matter of course. Their fate becomes joined to the fate of the bank so that when the bank collapses, so do the dreams of the people who believed in it. The rich and cunning and the fat lawyers who are parasites on the system do not suffer, indeed they are willing gamblers who know the stakes and they know that when the house loses, they win. So it is the fact that a deliberate fraud is being perpetrated on all the innocent people who are involved in the workings of the system (including the employees and their families) that is repugnant.

Scene Forty-five, 'Christian Stockbroker', portrays Ralph Stewart engaged in a discussion with Alphendéry which appears to be a general discussion of life, but their completely different moral positions again show the relativity of values. They both agree that it is important to have faith in 'Principles' (Sc. 45, pp. 321-22). Stewart is a staunch royalist and professed Christian whose religious beliefs give him the will to endure 'the endless rough-and-tumble' (Sc. 45, p. 321) but the irony is that his true religion is money. Christianity, here, is held up as a sham, an essentially false construction (like the bank) whose collapse, as Nietzsche argues in *The Will To Power*, is inevitable in the building of a new world view. Stewart clings to the traditional world view even if it is about to collapse in the face of fascism or communism, depending on which way the winds of revolution blow. Alphendéry, the atheist and Marxist at the opposite pole to Stewart, puts his faith in something he knows to exist, humanity itself. His chosen direction, the betterment of conditions for mankind through the socialist cause, receives undisguised endorsement from the author.

Stead's admiration for Alphendéry is so marked that his appears to be the dominant personality being portrayed in the novel. The novel is about the bank, and the character most linked with the bank, Jules Bertillon, would therefore seem to be the logical protagonist of the novel. However, the novel does not have a single protagonist, but has instead two: Jules Bertillon and Michel Alphendéry. To continue the principle of dualism, Alphendéry's honesty is put up as an absolute to match Jules's pure dishonesty. In thematic terms, Alphendéry's 'gold' is the true one while Jules's is false. The committed direction and vitality of one is dramatically posited against the apparent aimlessness and fatalism of the other, but at times it is hard to tell which is which. The situation of Jules and Alphendéry is complex since both have their good and bad points. Jules's sheer vitality and roguishness is far more attractive than Alphendéry's sermonising and apparent inertia, yet it is meant to be Jules who is stuck on the revolving wheel and Alphendéry who is engaged on the quest. Obviously there is greater dramatic attraction in a character who gives his money away on a wild bet or sudden impulse than in one who dutifully gives his money to his wife and old mother. (Alphendéry's sense of duty reminds us here of Joseph Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*.) The adventurous Jules approaches life as a game of chance in which luck, not choice, determines the outcome, but he wants to make sure he controls the game by weighing the dice in his favour.¹⁰ He lies, cheats, swindles and makes bets, calculating to make his fortune on the misfortune of others. His may be the way of the wicked, but the wicked seem to have more fun.

Like the voice of many of those engaged in the pursuit of money, Marianne Raccamond's is the voice of ambition and greed. She speaks for the value of money as an absolute: 'in an unsure shifting world: money gives us a sure set of values; everything else is mere opinion' (Sc. 42, p. 308) — an irony in

¹⁰ Henny Pollitt in *The Man Who Loved Children* takes the fatalist's approach to life also. Her game of solitaire is emblematic of this.

itself when rumour is rife that sterling is about to go off gold leading to the destabilising of all currencies. (This finally happens in Sc. 61, p. 498.)

Scene Seventeen, 'In Praise of Gold', is devoted to the theme of gold as an absolute, a symbol of invisible divinity eliciting universal awe, power, desire and hostility. Christina Stead writes of its beauty and attractiveness and of its association with 'ultimate wealth, perennial ease, absolute security' (Sc. 17, p. 135). Her reference to the transforming power of gold echoes Goethe's *Mephistopheles* and Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. She alludes to gold as a symbol of the highest values aspired to in the 'Sir-Galahad' quest, an allusion which speaks loudly for the idea that the quest motif helps to impose a pattern of meaning in life. The aims of the quest are simultaneously individual and universal, overriding personal ambition and rendering personal aims and goals selfless, since the ultimate goal of the Sir Galahad model is the good of mankind.¹¹ In the brief, illustrative anecdote concerning Jules Bertillon and Armand Brossier which follows in the same scene, Stead refers to gold as a tangible symbol of the intangible bond between the two men (Sc. 17, pp. 135-36). The harmony enjoyed by Brossier stems not from material wealth (an immaterial value), since the gold is not his, but from the solid values of trust, loyalty and love which maintain his relationship with Jules.

By associating the bank with the brothel, Stead declares that the pursuit of money relates to lust and the opposite of love, self-love. The pattern appropriate to the dramas of those who are so engaged is the pattern of aimless circuitous motion that finally comes to a dead end. Jules Bertillon, Henri Léon, Aristide Raccamond, and the rest, are pursuing an empty value. Against this Stead presents the true golden ideal to be aspired to in the positive, lasting values of loyalty and love. These are the polarities set up dramatically by the novel: Stead's drama is constructed on the duality of money-love and

¹¹ The quest motif is used by Christina Stead in *For Love Alone*, discussed in Chapter 5, above.

love of humanity.

One set of characters, Jean Frère's socialist fraternity including Michel Alphendéry and Adam Constant, dramatises the struggle being waged by the side of the poor, unemployed, cold and starving workers who are forgotten by the bankers in their unreal fantasy world. Neither the masquerade going on in the bank nor the lives of the workers seem real, and when viewed from a distance, both groups of people appear to be engaged in a futile struggle. This is the basis of William Bertillon's view when he comments on the lives of the workers:

They live, but as far as we're concerned, they only live from the time they punch the time clock in the morning till the time they punch it in the evening. In between those times, they're only moving pictures of men to us. (Sc. 12, pp. 103-04.)

Thus, just as the novel invites the reader to view the rich actors in Jules's play as wooden puppets given momentum by greed and ambition, William asks us to see the workers as puppets too, brought to life only by the manipulations of the rich employers. However, Jean Frère, Alphendéry and Constant give the workers something to live for which they believe to be real, in the aims and ideals of the socialists.

The values of the socialists can only be achieved by hard work, something which is foreign to the financiers in the novel. Jean Frère's garden is as non-existent as the bank. It is a jungle of 'tangled weeds, grass, shrubs, and lumps' (Sc. 7, p. 73) making it not unlike the jungle of disorder inhabited by the capitalists. Disease exists here too, in the black caterpillars which devour the growing plants. Yet the socialists work hard to transform the wild, neglected garden. The brotherly love enjoyed by those sharing the work is posited as the real and lasting value which can be achieved in their common pursuit. Thus their work and their aims help to create meaning where there was none. There is in this work a type of creativity which is endorsed by the author.

The kind of creativity possessed by Jules Bertillon, on the other hand,

produces no solid achievement, only ink scratches in a book (Sc. 26, p. 197). Jules's 'work' is really a game. His making of money is ironically likened to the work of a playwright whose business is linked to the staging of illusions (Sc. 27, p. 207). Jules's dreams do not aim to alleviate suffering but to increase his already considerable personal wealth. The implications are that his creativity is wasted and that his life is ultimately aimless. Alphendéry makes an emotional speech on the effect of money on people's lives, especially the effect it has upon creativity. It takes the painter, writer and sculptor away from their work and makes ghosts of them. Without money they cannot live (the sculptor is starving and threatens suicide if the bank does not advance him money) but in their preoccupation with making money on the stock-market, they are diverted from their artistic occupations. It is a familiar dilemma not easily resolved, however, Adam Constant finds time to work in the bank and produce a book of poems at the same time, showing that it is possible to combine different kinds of work successfully. (His situation is very similar to Stead's own situation, working in a bank in Paris during the thirties.) For the average person, the pursuit of money on the stock market, which involves being imprisoned in stuffy rooms watching 'rows of numbers changing' (Sc. 34, p. 234), is not the dynamic, creative life but a form of imprisonment in an aimless, sterile and therefore static existence.

Stead's fictional world, like the real world it reflects, is not resolvable into simple divisions of black and white; it is a complex world where attitudes and values often overlap between the 'worlds' of the socialists and the capitalists. Henri Léon is motivated by humanitarian goals as much as he is by the motive of profit in announcing his wheat scheme. Unfortunately the men to whom he entrusts the scheme to be developed do not share his vision and consequently the scheme fails in the negotiating stages. Alphendéry and Constant belong to both worlds and, despite their differences of personality and political opinion from Jules, they remain loyal. Their socialist values are transferred when they enter into business on Jules's behalf but since the very

business in which they are engaged is dishonest, they suffer in consequence.

There is a bond between Jules and Alphendéry, forged by Alphendéry's love and loyalty, which appears to transcend the differences between them. Their relationship dramatises the power of the golden ideal to transform contraries. In the circle of Alphendéry's love, Jules seems to open, allowing some of his positive inner qualities to emerge. His simple gift of a gold pencil on Alphendéry's birthday speaks louder for the value he places in Alphendéry's friendship than a more lavish gift would. Such actions make Jules tower over the baser natures of other financial men in this novel. But Jules is fickle. His trust and love are given only to be withdrawn. The essential aspect of Jules's character is his mercurial temperament and this makes him anyone's for the taking, like an expensive high-class whore. After Alphendéry has been jilted by Jules for Bomba, Alphendéry is heard discussing Jules with Adam Constant:

Alphendéry sighed. 'You don't know Jules.'
 Adam smiled. 'I'm beginning to. He's fascinating!
 'Tis pity he's a banker. He's only made to be a flier,
 a dancer — a messenger of the gods.' (Sc. 62, p. 503)

Adam's comment, alluding to John Ford's play and reminding us of Polonius's comment upon Hamlet's 'madness', resonates with the irony that underlies the whole of Stead's presentation of financial giants as corrupt or mad with ambition supporting a system that inevitably exhibits the same qualities.

Jules and Alphendéry possess an innocence that is incorruptible. Alphendéry has 'a heart of gold' (Sc. 49, p. 354), probably the only gold he will ever possess, but it is this which prevents him from being corrupted by the bank. Likewise Jules's otherworldly quality of god-like innocence (Sc. 56, p. 558) preserves him from the tarnishing effect of his worldly pursuits. This quality inspires love yet it may also inspire jealousy and hatred as evidenced by

Carrière's determined effort to ruin Jules. Alphendéry is likewise the subject of suspicion and hatred, especially from Raccamond who is jealous of Alphendéry's close position to Jules.

Jealousy, hate, envy and ambition are the passions that motivate Parouart, Carrière and Raccamond to destroy the illusion of the bank created by Jules Bertillon, but they are not the province of the capitalists alone. Similar irrational passions disrupt the socialists' gathering at Jean Frère's house causing discordancy where there had existed harmony in Scene Fifty-five, 'Time Forward, Time Abolished'. This happy scene, portraying the socialists disputing amicably and singing to the accompaniment of the accordion, is abruptly shattered when Suzanne Constant enters. Her husband Adam, an idealist who vociferously criticises the capitalist system for its falseness, is in love with Jean's wife Judith.¹² Suzanne's theatrical outburst, provoked by her belief that she has been betrayed by Adam, is not unlike Aristide Raccamond's theatrics when he discovers Jules's betrayal. The scene proves that the socialists are just as much affected by disloyalty and betrayal as are the capitalists. In both instances it is shown that the weaknesses of human nature get in the way of achieving the absolute being sought.

Scene Fifty-five is the counterpart of Scene Forty-two, 'The Stuffed Carp'. Jean Frère's humble stew contrasts with the rich poison served to the Raccamonds by the Hallers. The elaborate ritual of serving and eating the *pièce de résistance* of the Hallers' meal, the huge, decorated, stuffed carp, is in marked contrast to the simple enjoyment of the stew by the gathering of socialists. At the Hallers' there is an excess of food greedily consumed until the Raccamonds feel sick. The consumption of the vast quantity of liqueurs, food

¹² The similarity of the characters of Adam and Suzanne to Harry Girton and his estranged wife Manette in *For Love Alone*, is noteworthy.

and wine in a sparsely decorated apartment and in the company of the grafting Georg and Sophy Haller, is emblematic of the emotional and moral grossness shared by the Raccamonds and the Hallers. Scene Fifty-five presents quite a different situation. The stew is good and there would have been plenty to go around the entire gathering but that one person, Charles Lorée, had eaten four platefuls. His greed meant that Suzanne and Judith had to go without. Lorée appears to be one of those socialists identified unfailingly by Christina Stead in her novels as hypocrites. (George Cook in *Cotters' England* is another example.) The scene dramatically shows that greed is not an attribute exclusive to the rich. Many of the scenes in *House of All Nations* may be read in this way to reveal how Stead's dramatic method works in balancing one scene against another.

Other scenes are constructed deliberately on the idea that they constitute plays within a play. For instance when Constant visits London, he finds himself acting in a farce conducted by Quidd, Soleck & Co., 'the brilliant but theatrical firm' (Sc. 62, p. 507). Constant feels ridiculed by the to-ing and fro-ing he is forced to engage in on Jules's behalf, putting the questions to which Jules already knows the answers. The charade continues in the offices of another firm of lawyers, Ledger's, where 'Constant thought, "Why keep up one absurd unreal play to support another absurd unreal and criminally misplaced drama?"' (Sc. 62, p. 509). Adam acts like a puppet in this scene confirming Jules's philosophy that '[you] make money by having a game and employing smart dumbbells to work at it for you,' (Sc. 62, p. 520). A further example of the play within a play idea is Scene Eighty-seven, 'An Interview'. The Comte de Guipatin recommends that Jules should put on a fine show when the time comes for a confrontation with Raccamond - '[l]et it be grand, Jules: put the

lusters on . . . act the grandee!' (Sc. 86, p. 656). The ensuing scene, set at the Bertillons' mansion, displays Jules's strong 'sense of theater' [sic] (Sc. 56, p. 455). In this scene Aristide is so full of his sense of self-righteous indignation that he barely needs to act, the performance coming naturally, his words and gestures denoting a passion so effectively that Stanislavsky would be proud of him. The usually self-possessed Jules is seen to crack under the onslaught of accusations from Raccamond. He shouts at Aristide furiously, reminding him of his subordinate position in his, Jules's, drama: '[w]here did you get all the poppycock that you're full of! You aren't a customers' man, you're an actor' (Sc. 87, p. 664). 'Actor' is used derogatively here to express Jules's idea that Aristide is at all times being directed as an actor in someone else's show, either by Jules and his cronies, or by his wife. Nevertheless Jules seems to recognise that *his* play has come to an end and that there is no point in trying to outwit Aristide, thus proving his fatalism.¹³ Much later Aristide tells Mouradzian:

I am a fool, but I'm a good fool. That they [the Bertillons] sold out my clients, robbed me after all my work for them, when they were, as one says melodramatically, living on the sweat of my brow — why, I couldn't adjust to the idea straightaway. It's not business — it's drama; it's the sort of thing you see on the stage, rather. (Sc. 97, p. 734)

Significantly when Jules flies the scene and the police close in on the bank, most of the events are reported. The play is over for Jules and there is no need for further dramatisation. The narrator concludes the novel with reports to indicate that, although Jules and his bank had disappeared, he had created something lasting in his legend which lived on. As it is stated in the early scenes, 'he laid the foundation stones of a house of legend in which he lived safely for many years' (Sc.9, p. 90). Like Ali Baba of *The Arabian Nights* which

¹³ Cf. Holmes who thinks it strange that the Bertillons should not put up more of a fight (Holmes, Ch. 5, p. 110.)

was his bible (Sc. 9, p. 89), Jules's financial adventures continue to fascinate long after he is gone.

The message of the drama played out in *House of All Nations* is that the construction of illusions is a necessary act in the making of meaning in life. As the narrator comments in *For Love Alone*:

Come down to brass tacks, the world was like that but mercifully we had to have illusion to go on living; it was a race-wide, world-wide, perhaps *knack of biological survival*.¹⁴

Ideals are abstract things, illusions, to be aspired to in order to have an aim or direction in life. Social systems are unreal constructions based on fictions — ideals. The novel demonstrates that such systems are subject to corruption and, in turn, exert a corrupting influence over the individual. According to Nietzsche, their value must be called into question if the creative processes of life, the forces of the will-to-illusion and the will-to-power, are to continue to shape and give meaning to life. Raccamond's mistake was to destroy the illusion of the bank in his wilful abuse of power instead of working to bring about change for the better.

Paradoxically, some illusions are more solid, that is, worthwhile, than others. The 'gold' of the socialists is more real than the gold of the Banque Mercure and the world that it represents. The value of illusions lies in the hard work and cementing of ties that go into the aspiration, for the actual ideals are rarely achieved, except perhaps transitorily. Work alone is not the answer, because it would be to live (act) in a void: 'The boulder of Sisyphus to roll up all over again!' (Sc. 42, p. 284).

Although the bank is presented as an illusion, the dedication and hard work of its employees provide some substance to it. The bank's collapse appears

¹⁴ Christina Stead, *For Love Alone*, Ch. 17, p. 199.

to affect the lives of the Bertillons and their wealthy clients very little, but the lives of the ordinary workers are shattered. The difficult thing is matching the work and the ideals.¹⁵

Like Stead's other novels, *House of All Nations* poses more questions than it gives answers. Finally we have to admit, with Stead, that there is no single, perfect answer to the problems posed by the novel since life is a question of individual choice, the freedom of which cannot be proscribed. One conclusion that may be reached however, is that the misdirected and corrupted members of society portrayed in this novel brought upon themselves the destruction of their dreams and the subsequent nightmare of fascism.

Many of the qualities already discussed in the previous chapters are seen to be fully developed in *House of All Nations*. The dramatic structure of this novel, its use of dualism as a dramatic principle and the references to illusion with the appropriate imagery that underpins all of this, are all features of Stead's presentation of her 'drama of the person'. The notions of direction and commitment, which are basic to the drama or struggle of life as presented by Stead, imply that there are ethical considerations to be taken into account in choosing which direction to take.

Seven Poor Men of Sydney and *House of All Nations* are at the beginning of the corpus and they emphasise respectively the warp and weft, the psychology of characters and the backgrounds or contexts in which they are placed, in the structure of Stead's drama of the person. *House of All Nations* is the most ambitious novel in the corpus. It emphasises a global context of the drama of the person and suggests that, because of the psychologically universal characteristics of people as 'wakers' and 'sleepers', even those novels that are

¹⁵ Joseph Conrad's idea of work compared to ideals in *Heart of Darkness* exposes the real problems of the process.

bound by their local or national contexts are to be regarded ultimately in universal rather than in narrowly personal or national terms.

CONCLUSION

Are we characters, or are we the mechanical results
of situations? The only thing that we have is will.
...¹

There is no doubt that a strong force shaping Christina Stead's novels is her attraction to 'drama, and personality and psychology'.² Destiny and fate, two concepts which express the extremes of fortune possible in the course of dramatic action, are seen to operate in Stead's drama of the person indicating the different directions which the lives of her characters may take. In her dramas, destiny is something to be accomplished through the will-to-power and it requires decisive, positive, moral action on the part of character. As it was pointed out in Chapter One, when a character embarks on life it is what he does with his life, the active and creative aspect of shaping life according to personal ideals and goals, rather than the fatal passivity of what life does with him, that is important in the struggle for fulfilment.

Stead uses several times the image of the tangled thicket to express the complexity of life. The struggle through the thicket is the process governing the dynamic basis of the drama of the person. The struggle to express life as a reflection of personal dreams, to translate dreams into reality, is akin to shaping life as art and it is this creative process that affirms the importance of individual will in choosing his or her direction.

¹ Christina Stead, letter to Dr Thistle Stead; contributed by Anita Segerberg, 'Notes and Documents: A Christina Stead Letter', *Australian Literary Studies*, 13 (1987), 100.

² Stead, Wetherell interview, p. 446.

Nietzschean will-to-power and will-to-illusion are two vital aspects in the individual's struggle to fulfil psychological needs expressed as love, learning and bread; the three goals of Teresa Hawkins's quest. The creativity and dynamism inherent in the will-to-power and will-to-illusion emphasise the freedom and responsibility of the individual, but, throughout Stead's novels, that is frequently seen to be in conflict with social and moral issues. This situation has been identified in this study as a major source of dramatic tension: a traditional source of conflict that is worked out in the course of the novels. The characters' urge to escape and control their own lives is fundamental to providing the movement of the drama.

When the will-to-power is abused by unscrupulous characters like Sam Pollit, Robert Grant or Nellie Cotter to obtain power over others, thus limiting their freedom and responsibility, it has been presented as an essentially destructive process inimical to the dynamism of life and contributing further to the oppression that has to be struggled against. Stead's drama of the person emphasises the traditional values of love and freedom in terms of being in harmony with others. Humanity emerges as being the greater good towards which the drama of the person should be directed. Love for others, not egotistic self-love, is ultimately the creative power that drives the dramas towards fulfilment.

Dualism is a feature of Stead's dramas. The discussions of the novels highlighted the use of contrasts in character and situation which were complemented by contrasts in style and patterns of imagery. The shifts between them contribute to the illusion of movement essential to the idea of drama. The underlying dialectic of the novels creates force-fields of energy, the limits of which are marked by polar extremes. In choosing the direction he or she will take in life, the character can either choose one of these extremes or find a middle path that represents a balance between them. The general movement of Stead's dramas is posited as a struggle to break free from the centripetal

forces exerted either by the family or by society at large, or by the psychological limitations that put the character in a rut. These forces are part of the background of the character that has an important bearing on the type of dramatic movement that ensues. The absence of movement contradicts the dynamic principle of life and where this occurs, it signifies the condition of stasis in the spiritual death or proximity of actual death of a character. The substitution of endless circular motion for directed movement conveys the failure of the character to escape and actively shape and control his or her life.

Stead's attraction to drama, personality and psychology includes a recognition of the affinities among myth, legend, dream, drama and psychology, affinities expressed cogently in the symbolic language shared by them. Fundamental to the idea of dramatic action or movement is the notion of change or process. By employing symbols in the presentation of psychological states and by investing her characters with the potent force of myth, legend and dramas of the past, Stead emphasises the timeless quality and endless process of her drama of the person.

Symbols help to create an evocative quality in the backgrounds of her novels, establishing the mood and dramatic potential of the situation while also providing stylistic reinforcement to the subsequent psychological exploration. Symbols and patterns of imagery are part of the dualism of the novels. Darkness and light, for example, are recurrent symbols in the texts. The use of seasonal metaphors, noted in reference to many of the novels discussed, follows this dialectical pattern. According to the Romantic vision of 'the reunion of man with himself, with other men and with his surroundings, the dead of winter bursts into the joyous life of spring'.³ Stead most frequently uses winter metaphorically and literally as the cold season of alienation and spiritual death. Loveless, lonely and suffering, her characters must struggle through the dark

³ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism – Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), Ch. 5, p. 259.

winter periods of their lives to reach the spring season of love and new beginnings. The sleep of winter most closely approaches the sleep of death but it is also here that the struggle is most intensely waged and felt.

If we focus on the stages of development in personality that are dealt with in the discussions of the four novels from *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* through to *The People With the Dogs*, we witness an ongoing drama of developing personality from childhood (we see the Baguenaults briefly as children) through adolescence and youth to maturity. *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone* concentrate upon the years of adolescence and youth respectively. *The People With the Dogs* takes the next stage, dealing with the mature years of the mid-thirties in the life of Edward Massine. The pattern may be traced to its logical end in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *Cotters' England* whose characters are middle-aged and, in Robert Grant's case in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, finally old. A deathly atmosphere hangs over these two novels. The earlier novels are 'spring' novels, marked by the energy, vigour and idealism typical of youth. However, there is a qualification to this statement. Although the major focus of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is youth, this novel was described in Chapter Two as a 'winter's tale' because of its predominantly dark tone and, significantly, one of its themes is alienation. *The Man Who Loved Children* has a double focus since it deals simultaneously with the loss of youthful dreams in Henny's tragic life and the development towards fulfilment of the youthful dreams of Louisa Pollit. Overall however, that novel may be regarded as having the atmosphere of burgeoning youth as it comes to concentrate on the character of Louisa, the waker. *For Love Alone* demonstrates the seasonal pattern in its totality. In this novel, as in the others, the variations in the weather, like the changing tides, are physically present to act as a natural metaphor for the daily and seasonal fluctuations in the moods and circumstances of the characters. *For Love Alone* opens in the heat of summer as Teresa encloses herself in the sensuous, drowsy realm of dreams and

fantasy, followed by a burst of energy as the coolness of autumn sees her embarking on a new life. Her struggle takes place through the long, lonely winter months and finally, as she finds her goals in her love of James Quick, the season of spring ends her period of suffering. The inertia of the characters in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *Cotters' England* puts them, according to this seasonal pattern, into the category of 'winter' novels.

In the two categories of winter and spring novels we see contrasting types of drama based on two different types of movement: the directed forward movement of dynamic drama and the endless motion of aimless, circular progress or static drama. In this overall pattern of the corpus, *The People With the Dogs* marks a midpoint between these two groups of novels. In order of publication, *The People With the Dogs* (1952) comes after *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* (1948). I chose to discuss *The People With the Dogs* first because of the way in which it fits the pattern of the awakening process established in the earlier novels. It embraces all the seasons with each one corresponding to the fluctuating moods and indecision of the main character, but the predominantly drowsy atmosphere and rich, golden tone of *The People With the Dogs* identifies it as a summer novel dealing with the awakening process of the sleeper, Edward.

This seasonal pattern in the range of Stead's novels reinforces the general impression that her work represents the whole drama of the person through the various stages from youth to old age. The contrast between the youthful, vigorous energy and fervour of Louisa and Teresa and the initial lethargy of Edward Massine or total inertia of Robert Grant is dramatic.

The characteristics of Stead's characters as 'wakers' and 'sleepers' are worked out according to Stead's use of dualism and, not surprisingly, correspond in general terms to the seasonal analogy just outlined. In the myth of Somnus, the dull god of sleep, the realm of the sleeper is an isolated cave removed from human life and yet is not death. It is the realm of clouds, shadows

and stagnation where the light glimmers faintly, a realm suggestive of the hibernatory phase of winter. All is still and there is no sound save for the murmur of the River Lethe which invites sleep attended by dreams.⁴

Stead uses the mythic, legendary and fairytale characteristics of the tale of the sleeper to suggest the state of sluggish inertia that is close to death. The season most often used is, appropriately, winter. However, summer may also be used to symbolise a period of sleepy inertia in a character. Both Teresa Hawkins and Edward Massine spend their summers in pleasurable dreams. The pain of feeling that something is missing impels them both to wake up and set out in the active process of making those dreams reality. The sleep of winter and the sleep of summer are different. While the sleep of winter holds the potential for re-awakening, it more frequently signifies the crippling forces of stasis and the approach of spiritual or actual death, as we see in the characters of Robert Grant and Nellie Cotter. The sleep of summer, particularly in Edward's case, is the drowsy slumber that occurs when the life of the senses is indulged in to excess; it is a sleep from which it is easier to awake.

Associated with the state of suspended animation is a complex range of natural imagery signifying stasis, neglect and waste that go with the absence of fulfilment and the undirected life. We find in Stead's first novel a reference to 'miasma', marsh gas or, in the myth of Somnus, the vapours that are exhaled from the ground around the cave of sleep. Baruch Mendelssohn, loveless and lonely in a dreary part of his life, writes:

There is a miasma that rises out of that lake of old memory at night and makes the imagination pestilential. It is like a drug. One deserts the electric bric-à-brac clapper-trap lustre and uppercrusted tone of all your society and wanders under a cloud too thick for lightning to pierce.
(*Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Ch. 5, p. 143)

'Miasma' calls to mind the still waters where life has reached the point of

⁴ See *Bullfinch's Mythology* (New York: Avenel Books, 1978), pp. 71-72.

stagnation, completely the opposite to the turbulent floods of vigorous, active life. From its Greek root, 'miasma' also conveys the effect of moral debasement or pollution that occurs when the wrong directions are taken in the drama. In Mendelssohn's case, it refers to the temptation of withdrawing from active engagement in life into the soporific, nostalgic state of reviewing memories. The miasma of fantasy and dream can work upon character like a drug, preventing rather than enabling escape, unless the character can summon the will and energy to act.

The use of swamp or marsh imagery is seen in the portraits of certain characters who are sleepers stuck in an emotional or moral morass. Henny Pollit and Nellie Cotter, for example, are portrayed as marsh birds. The swamp also suggests mire and we have seen how Robert Grant, as a consequence of his misdirected life, dreams of sinking in the mud towards the end. Sluggishness, inertia, spell-bound illusion, mud, swamp or marsh all convey entrapment and the fatalist's attitude of retreating from life, or wandering down a blind alley. The sleepers need to be woken; they await the beginnings of their plays rather than directing them themselves. They suffer the consequences of a futilely wasted life.

The unfulfilled, 'wasted' lives of the sleepers are associated with neglect. The representations of these lives are accompanied by the imagery of rank growth. This imagery is derived in part from the legendary tale of the sleeper: everything within the sleeper's castle is unchanged except for the dust and cobwebs of long neglect, but outside and around it, a dense thicket of thorns grows which shields the castle but also cuts it off from the processes of nature. The struggle through that tangled thicket represents engagement in life. One who is not so engaged, or whose efforts are misdirected, dwells in the fairytale realm of the sleeper or the land of illusion. In *Cotters' England* the expression 'weeds growing over the ruins' (*Cotters' England*, p. 219) is used to describe the neglected, somnambulistic state of England. It is seen also in *The People With*

the Dogs where, at Whitehouse, the grass grows long and rank, the pipes are blocked so that no water flows and the ubiquitous sow thistles of myterious origins spread, like the vines, everywhere. In *House of All Nations* the socialists gather the weeds in Jean Frère's garden to make a salad.

In contrast to the imagery of weeds are the formal standard rose gardens of suburban houses seen by Joseph Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* which may be interpreted as representing controlled, suppressed growth. The metaphors of growth in relation to the fulfilment of individual potential continue in the use of desert imagery that signifies the 'lonely, ingrown life' (*For Love Alone*, Ch. 27, p. 340) of the struggling spirit. The plant associated with the desert is the aloe or century plant and it is linked with the legendary pattern of the sleeper because it 'awakens' and flowers only under favourable conditions that may occur once in two or three generations.

Wasted lives are also portrayed as shrivelled or crippled growth. There is the stunted growth of the mediocre Joseph who struggles bravely to achieve a limited understanding of himself and settles finally for a circumscribed and ordinary life of hard work and continued poverty. The external circumstances of many characters' lives render them emotional cripples, distorted and twisted like Nellie and Tom Cotter whose unfulfilled hunger has worked destructively upon them and upon those with whom they are associated. The complete opposite to these images of hampered development is found in the description of James Quick who is portrayed in language that contains images of sun, radiance and energy:

[Quick] was naturally a genial, loving, unsuspecting, and gay man, exuberant in company, of which he was fond to the point of vice, he now set about making friends, eager to introduce his sweetheart to them, and to expand into life again, like a robust plant. (*For Love Alone*, Ch. 38, p. 459)

The use of these patterns of imagery to symbolise growth, development and psychological states of character correspond to the two types of movement

that occur in Stead's dramas. Vitality is associated with the active, self-directed and dynamic life working towards destiny while poor growth and sluggishness is associated with the endless circle of undirected motion. The sleepers dwell in the night-time realm of unfulfilled dreams, either too weak to throw off the veils of sleep or else destructively spinning the webs of illusion around themselves and others. By contrast, the wakers possess the passion and striving qualities of the fairytale hero or quester. These are the dynamic, aspiring Faustian and Romantic characters, the two sides to the waking coin, who have the strongest will and who use it creatively to direct their own dramas.

At the extreme of the waking end there are those who are too much awake, either in possessing genius or in being mad. The distinction between genius and madness is ill-defined since the genius (whose creative will amounts to an obsession or mania) like the madman, oversteps the bounds of conventional behaviour and risks plunging forever into the abyss. Yet it is a risk which the waker, genius or not, must willingly take, for as Tom Winter points out in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*:

'La Rochefoucauld said, "Yew need a little madness to get out of some situations." Here is one. That madness is revolution, and for yew it's a tap on the napper to wake yew up' (*Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Ch. 6, p. 170).

A little madness is a necessary ingredient to the aspiring character wanting to get out of the rut. Too much and the character approaches the dangerous level of being an egomaniac. The waker, like the hero of ancient Greek myth, or like Faust or Zarathustra, needs a little mediocrity to keep him on a level plane still in touch with humanity.

The waker who shapes his life in a process which compares to the shaping of art may be thought of as an artist. This process is the creative basis of the Nietzschean doctrines of the will-to-power and will-to-illusion that are such strong elements in Stead's dramas. The connection between the active life

of the imagination, often represented in the novels as fantasies and dreams, and creativity, is seen most clearly in the lives of the wakers. The temptation to withdraw into the pleasurable life of the imagination and forego the pleasure and pain of the world is a very real one for Stead's characters, but especially for the artists. The dilemma of choosing between the inner and outer world, or between individual and social responsibility, is, for the artist, the most intense. Stead's dramas explore the problems of the artist and the intellectual in the lives of many of her characters.

Michael Baguenault is the first example of an artistic character whose tragic life manifests this dilemma. His propensity for genius at an early age becomes the full-blown torment of a lost soul as he is aware of his inability to live an ordinary life. His response is to retreat into a cell of his own making from which he unhappily watches life pass him by. He is an extreme example of the cult of self.

Victor-Alexander and Teresa Hawkins are further examples of artists who share the dubious distinction of choosing at first to retreat; Victor-Alexander withdrawing to his house appropriately called 'Solitude', Teresa to her room at the top of her house. Teresa sees herself as an exile from the imaginary Cytherea, the country of love. She announces her rejection of society and her Romantic disposition by adopting mediaeval style dress, drawing attention to the fairytale aspect of her story at the same time. Her greatest eccentricity in the eyes of those around her however, lies in her idealisation of love as an ennobling, grand ideal worth suffering for. For a time she tries to live like a saint, withdrawing into a monastic cell of self-denial in order to increase her inner strength and avoid the temptations that will divert her from her chosen goals. Victor-Alexander is a hermit too who literally lives on the hill overlooking the chaotic life below him. Like Michael, he is disappointed in love and becomes preoccupied with spiritual and aesthetic concerns. He does eventually come down from his place of self-imposed exile to the valley below

where he decides to take part in social life, putting into practice the ideals of harmony and order that he lived for on the hill. Teresa finally refuses the last temptation, that of martyrdom to her cause, when she recognises in Quick the goals of her struggle. Her 'bristling black and sterile plain of misery' (*For Love Alone*, Ch. 41, p. 494) opens out then to a world of wide, new horizons. Although Teresa is not portrayed specifically as an artist or an intellectual, there are enough aspects of her character as a waker and mythomaniac to put her into this category. Her spiritual predecessor, Louisa Pollit, also manifests the dilemma of the artist in having to choose between her private dreams and her social reality. Her final decision may be seen as an act of madness, but to her, the reality of her family life is itself madness — a nightmare directed by a maniac — from which she determines to escape.

A strong Marxist bias can be detected in the high value given to combining artistic and intellectual work with working for others in the portraits of Mendelssohn, Alphendéry and Constant, all of whom are Marxists. The artist or intellectual must work for himself and for others or else be condemned to a lifetime of alienation and lovelessness, the sterility of which brings about spiritual death and thus the end of creativity. Alphendéry, a socialist intellectual, finds the stress of being split between two diametrically opposed worlds too great for him and he leaves the Bertillons to work for another financier whose views are closer to his own. Constant successfully combines his poetry and his work in the bank. The roles played by both these characters in Jean Frère's alternative 'play' help to maintain their sanity that is jeopardised by their participation in Jules Bertillon's insane dream. Mendelssohn, the forerunner of Alphendéry, is a struggling scholar. He sees life, especially its seamy side, very clearly from the window of the upstairs room where he studies at night. His days are spent as a printer and it is in his job that he befriends Joseph Baguenault and is able to put his principles and love of humanity into practice by helping Joseph.

Love is posited as an absolute to be striven for in all the novels discussed. The problems of finding love and all its permutations in egotism, narcissism, incest, love of power and love of wealth, are dramatised as the various characters, wakers and sleepers alike, are involved, in their different ways, in the struggle to find love. Louisa Pollit's drama took shape as she strenuously resisted the power of her father and the demoralising effect of the familial conflict. The irony of the title of *The Man Who Loved Children* reverberates throughout the novel as love has been turned to hate. The man who purports to love children controls them as objects to be moulded in his image. Louisa's struggle involves asserting her responsibility for choosing her own direction independently of parental authority. Her characteristics as a waker ensure that she is active in pursuing her destiny. Like Teresa Hawkins, she commits herself to an action and is determined to see it through to its end.

A conclusion that can be drawn from these aspects of Stead's portraits of her characters, is that there is a strong emphasis on the idea of commitment, not in a narrowly ideological or political interpretation of that word, even though ideology looms in the backgrounds of the novels, but in terms of holding fast to the struggle once begun. The psychological 'landscape' of Stead's drama of the person involves the theme of commitment and its opposite or negative aspects in betrayal and being lost. The features of the landscape range typically from the depths of the abyss where there is utter lovelessness, alienation and despair, to the heights of ecstasy in the joy of freedom and love attained. In between, the characters wander a barren plain or struggle through the swamps, thickets or city jungles and deserts. The tale begun by Fulke Folliot and continued by Catherine Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (Ch. 11, pp. 299-302) records the progress of travellers bound on a journey to discover the meaning of mysterious words on a black stone. The travellers cross mountains, a barren bone-littered plain, they climb hills and view the activity below them in the valley, but when they enter the valley they see death and destruction.

They push their way tenaciously through desert and finally reach the object of their travels to find that it is only an illusion: 'there is nothing there but a shivered boulder' (*Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Ch. 11, p. 301).

The discussions of the selected novels have made frequent references to Stead's use of irony in her concern with showing how life really is and have also commented on the strong Nietzschean thread of influence as part of the philosophical basis to her dramas. Some readers have been impressed by the dark tone of some novels to consider that Stead belongs within the category of Naturalist writers whose 'message' is finally deterministic or even nihilistic. Charles Glicksberg, writing on the role of irony in the evolution of the twentieth century novel, sees nihilism as an inevitable consequence of the Naturalist's outlook and asserts that:

the doctrine of the relativity of 'truth' leads to one of two conclusions: one that the quest for truth is hopeless and man must therefore take refuge in his 'pipe-dreams' or illusions or that man is the shaper of his own destiny, the maker of history, the father of the gods and the creator of religion, art, science, the touchstone of truth and the originator of value.⁵

First, Christina Stead is a naturalist observing and recording life, not a Naturalist. Her use of irony and the Nietzschean influence notwithstanding, her novels do not display a completely deterministic or nihilistic outlook on life. Stead's novels demonstrate that, instead of taking refuge in pipe-dreams or illusions, a situation conducive of inertia, her characters must use their dreams creatively and be, as Glicksberg puts it, the makers of history. The creative part of life is the will to shape or create values and meanings in goals to be achieved and, because they may be corrupted by wilful abusers of power, they need to be constantly renewed and reaffirmed. The dynamics of this creative process involve the dualities of life — good and evil, joy and suffering, pity and fear, fulfilment and tragic waste — in the constant flux and struggle that is life.

⁵ Charles I. Glicksberg, *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature* (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1969), Ch. X 'Illusion Versus Reality', p. 143.

Stead's novels demonstrate that our efforts are not futile since every effort to roll up the stone brings out good qualities in trust, loyalty, courage, endurance, friendship, self-sacrifice and love, as well as the negative qualities of betrayal, exploitation and selfishness. Mankind as the creator of meaning is the most tangible value to struggle for.

The discussions of the novels elucidated 'background' as something broader than a naturalistic presentation of social, political or economic contexts. Stead's novels do describe historical processes at work and in nearly every case those processes, as they are reflected in the lives of her characters, involve the hard realities of struggling to live and shape life in a complex world where the terrain, metaphorically speaking, is constantly changing. The dynamics of the struggle to reach the goals of love and freedom in the drama of the person are determined by the ups and downs of the psychological landscape, the hindrances and favourable conditions, the hinderers and aid-givers, the nature of the goal and the nature of the character. Historical processes are seen at work in the characters' lives in social, economic and political conditions, as well as biological factors such as heredity, sexual needs and differences. The central concern of Stead's dramas is always character and individual will, so historical processes take a secondary place as Stead focuses her attention upon the drama of human personality.

Stead's Marxist sympathies emerge as a thread in the weave of social and individual concerns that make up her novels. Marxism appears as part of her deep consciousness of social forces and social responsibility, but her relationship with Marxist ideology, which merits greater attention than the scant acknowledgement I have given it, appears to be marked by an ambivalence that characterises many of her attitudes. As a moralist, she is aware of the perennial conflict that exists between social and individual responsibilities and warns of the danger of ideologies controlling the individual. In advocating the right of individual choice in the drama of the person, she

insists upon there being, above all, a freedom of choice. Stead's Marxism, as it appears in the novels, is an ideal whose purity is subject, like any other system, to the imperfections bred of human nature. Her Marxists exhibit these imperfections as clearly as any of her characters.

The use of the theatrical metaphor throughout the novels emphasises the theatricality of characters and refers to the dramatic method employed by Stead to present her characters and their lives objectively and for the most part, impartially. The attitude of presenting the world as a huge stage setting is part of this scheme, implying that there are different levels on which the dramas occur. Personal dramas are often microcosmic reflections of the national and international dramas that are taking place in the background. The existence of a wider and more general drama often relieves the tension created by intense concentration on a few characters and it provides an outside perspective from which the drama of the person may be judged.

The metaphor of the play traditionally belongs with the thinking that the world we live in is a world of illusion and that the aims of the struggle of life are not attainable in this world but in the hereafter. Stead consistently demonstrates that if her characters turn their backs on this world, they turn their backs on life and enter a 'nightmare world' or fairytale world of illusion, the world of the sleeper. The conclusion to be drawn from Stead's dramas is the general principle that this world is the only one we know with certainty to exist and we must make the spiritual effort to find the right way, for us as individuals, to live in it.

Stead recognises the endless variety in human personality. Because each person is different, there is not *one* right direction that will suit everyone: the processes of awakening and shaping life vary according to individual personality. The individual will must be used creatively to shape life according to personal goals that are attainable in *this* world. However, those characters who are seen in the novels to be actively pursuing their individual goals while

helping to shape a better life for others are those who receive the author's endorsement.

While it is true that her role as a novelist is that of a spectator, observing and recording accurately and in detail the lives of people in her own time and within the urban milieux with which she was most familiar, her work is finally to be regarded as something more than this. Her dramas push aside the constrictive barriers of time and nationality. She interprets the individual lives of her characters within a literary framework that reflects the universality of the human drama and places her drama of the person within a philosophical context not defined by any particular ideology but marked nonetheless by a strong emphasis upon choosing a creative, dynamic direction in the struggle of life, an emphasis that can be traced to the influences that shaped her own struggle.

EPILOGUE

For the unbelievers, those who still cannot accept Stead's characters as being true to life, the following article, which appeared in 'The Mercury', 26 October 1988, may be of interest:

Son took out spite on his doting mum

London, Tuesday

DOTING mother Yvonne Nary knew what to expect in return for the love she lavished on her spoilt middle-aged son, Keith Potter, a bash on the head with a broomstick.

So, when she went next door three times a day to cook her unemployed son's meals, do his housework and run his bath, she wore a head scarf stuffed with two bedsocks for protective padding.

The 38-year-old bachelor, who had never had a job, would take out his deep-felt sense of failure on his mother, aged 68, by hitting her with a metal-ended broomstick he kept in the cupboard.

He had qualified as a solicitor, but never obtained a practising certificate. He later also passed many of the examinations which would have made him a doctor.

His mother, who remarried after divorcing his father, paid all his living expenses.

But, if she said she had been trying to get him a job or arrange an interview, he would fly into a temper, the Old Bailey heard today.

Mr John Bevan, prosecuting, said that last June Potter was given a three month suspended sentence for causing his mother actual bodily harm.

Less than a month later, he again attacked her with the broomstick as she toiled at the kitchen sink at his home in Putney Hill, South-West London.

When they began to talk about a job, he hit her again.

Bruised and battered, she still returned later to run his bath and he beat her again. It was then she went to the police.

After his arrest, Potter told police: 'My life has no sense of direction.'

Frustration, he said, had made him take it out on his mother.

He was jailed for two years and nine months after admitting another charge of actual bodily harm.

The Mercury, (Hobart, Tasmania), 26 October, 1988, p. 6.

The Punch and Judy show of these people's lives recalls many situations portrayed by Christina Stead, and invites the playful observation that here we see life imitating art. The situation of a molly-coddled son, stifled by a possessive mother who directs her son's life, is a familiar one to readers of Stead's novels. Even the name 'Potter' has the ring of a Stead character. It is also fascinating that Potter should claim frustration and lack of direction as the cause of his extraordinary behaviour.

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Christina Stead's 'Drama of the Person'

DESPITE considerable efforts in the past to come to terms with Stead's fiction, her novels remain complex and problematic to many readers. The contents of her novels are more like a tangled thicket, to use an image used by Stead herself to describe her impression of life, than a neat, well-trimmed maze. In order to negotiate the tangle we need to find that thread of interest which links the apparently incompatible elements of the novels together.

Of all the influences, scientific, philosophical and literary, which shaped Stead's intense and unusual vision of the world, it seems that what they have in common is their strong appeal to her '... sense of drama, and personality and psychology.'¹ Drama, in the broadest sense of the term, is implicit in the nineteenth century Darwinian view of life as competition and struggle. As a naturalist, Stead tended to see life in these terms. Drama also underlies the work of Nietzsche, both in Zarathustra's powerful dramatic voice and in his conception of life. The dramatic principle of the essential dualism of man and the natural world also informs her vision. Life, as she presents it in her novels, is a process, a flux, that occurs between two poles.² This dualistic approach to life may have been derived from her interest in the Romantics, for, in the words of William Blake (the Romantic poet, not Christina Stead's husband):

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human Existence.³

But this aspect of Stead's vision is not necessarily Romantic since duality has a much wider and older philosophical background in the western humanistic tradition.

The dialectical emphasis of Stead's vision of life pervades all aspects of her novels creating an identifiable and constant tension within them. Stead's

1. Christina Stead interviewed by Rodney Wetherell, 'Interview with Christina Stead', transcript in *Australian Literary Studies*, 9 (October 1980), 446.
2. Bruce Holmes makes a similar point in his study of Stead's work, *Moral Dialectic in the Fiction of Christina Stead*, (PhD Thesis, University of Newcastle, 1984), 'Introduction', page 10.
3. William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', in *The Collected Works of William Blake* (London: The Nonesuch Press; New York: Random House, 1957), Plate 3, p. 149.

creation of characters, for example, confirms that consciousness of self is experienced through contrast. Each element has its counterpart so that it would seem at first that there are explicit contradictions in her work. We find, for example, that naturalistic description gives way to gothic fantasy or grotesquerie, and the abrupt shifts from one to another are a source of disorientation for some of her readers. These contrasting elements of her work do not exist in a mutually exclusive relationship where each must be regarded as being isolated in a fixed state from the other, but instead, they relate to one another reciprocally, to express the dynamics of the dialectical principle of unity. *Drama* governs the process of change which occurs between the poles.

Previous studies have acknowledged the duality of her work, one of the most recent being Gina Mercer's paper which observes the pattern of thesis and antithesis operating throughout.⁴ But none has acknowledged this practice as being an essential part of Stead's presentation of life as an ongoing drama.

Of those French Realists and Naturalists whom Stead acknowledged as influences upon her, Balzac appears to have been the most pervasive. The idea behind Balzac's *Human Comedy* was to present the drama of life, 'drama' here being used as a term to differentiate his novels from the romances which preceded it. Both Balzac and Stead extend their idea of drama in the novel to include theatrical allusions, some of which will be discussed later in this paper.

The strongest evidence of Stead's interest in drama is to be found in her attraction to ancient Greek drama, her love of Shakespeare, and her admiration for the work of Webster and Strindberg.⁵

Since Stead's vision of life meant that she saw life as drama, it follows that she wrote about 'the drama of the person'. She has declared:

I'm a psychological writer, and my drama is the drama of the person . . . I wait and wait for the drama to develop. I watch the characters and the situation move and I don't interfere. I'm patient. I'm lying low. I wait and wait for the drama to display itself.⁶

This statement conjures up a vision of Stead as an intrepid naturalist, lying concealed in an urban jungle hide from where she can closely observe the behaviour of her subjects. It expresses the main tenets of her work: her interest in character; her conception of life as drama; and her dramatic method in which the objectivity of the naturalist and the invisibility of the

4. Gina Mercer, 'Christina Stead — A Radical Author: Patterns of Thesis and Antithesis', *SPAN* No. 21 (October 1985), p. 137.

5. Shakespeare and Webster are acknowledged by Stead in Wetherell's interview; for Greek drama and Strindberg, see Joan Lidoff, 'Interview with Christina Stead', Surbiton, England, 1973, in Lidoff's *Christina Stead* (New York: Frederick Ungar Press, 1982), p. 185.

6. Christina Stead interviewed by Jonah Raskin, 'Christina Stead in Washington Square', *London Magazine*, IX, no. 11 (February 1970), 72.

dramatist are combined. It remains now to demonstrate how Stead's idea of drama and her dramatic method manifest themselves in her novels.

Stead begins her novels following the Balzacian method of dramatic exposition, by carefully introducing the background details of her characters' lives. Her psychological analysis of character begins with a picture of the family, the city, the social and economic conditions — all those circumstances which help to shape the development of the personality. This background often involves conflict expressed either in terms of contrasting imagery or in opposing personalities, thus presenting the initial situation from which the drama of the person gradually unfolds. Frequently this situation suggests that the process will be slow as the protagonists struggle against the conditions which beset them.

The issue of power is at the core of the relationships between her characters and the struggle for power is often that which impels the development of independent personality. If we extend the general principle of drama to include further theatrical references we see that 'direction' is important in the drama of the person. There are two possible movements or directions governed by:

... centripetal forces that seek to close the world in system and the centrifugal forces that battle completeness in order to keep the world open to becoming.⁷

The drama of the person proceeds from resistance against centripetal forces found either 'within' the personality of the character or 'outside', embodied in other characters, or found in political, social and economic forces.

Each character is seen to have the responsibility for directing his own drama of life and of course this is where the Nietzschean 'will to power' is exercised in personal control. (This is important as it denies any charge of determinism operating in her characters' lives.) But Stead reveals that extremes of control, either too much or too little, are equally dangerous in the development of character. It may be that the element of control is what differentiates drama from melodrama. Certainly the examples of Michael and Catherine Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* confirm that the absence of personal control makes melodrama out of their lives. Yet for some characters, particularly those marked with the sign of 'artist', the only way to go is to follow the extreme route.

Teresa Hawkins, in *For Love Alone*, and Louisa Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children*, have a strong sense of personal destiny. They exercise their will in directing their lives towards their chosen goals and they are both prepared to take extreme actions to ensure that they are achieved. But even here, the pattern of dialectic operates since they pass through a nightmare

7. See Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge Mass. and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 'The Architectonics', pp. 79-80.

stage of suffering (self-induced or otherwise) before their dreams are realised.

Power of one person over another is anathema to Stead except where it is manifested in the important recurring figure of the friend or lover. This benevolent figure assumes a positive role in assisting certain characters to achieve their goals or direction in life. This mythical figure is familiar to us from legendary and folkloric literature.

In *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* this figure is embodied in the character of Baruch Mendelssohn who directs Joseph Baguenault in his search for knowledge. Later in *For Love Alone* we see this figure more fully realised in the character of James Quick, whose fortuitous entrance into Teresa Hawkins's drama arrests her descent into despair, awakens her to the love she seeks and directs her to the eventual realisation of her goals. Mendelssohn's and Quick's direction of others is a careful, nurturing process. They have positions of power over other characters both in loving and in being loved, but they do not exploit their position to deny the autonomy or integrity of the other. However according to Stead's dialectical practice, there is a negative side to the friend or ally figure and we see this clearly in characters such as Sam Pollit, Robbie Grant and Nellie Cotter, whose egotistic, wilful manipulations and betrayals obstruct and may even destroy other people's lives if they are not resisted. To complicate matters we find that Stead admired the confidence trickster Jules Bertillon whose 'dream' ruined many lives. Issues like this represent the sort of problems posed in Stead's novels.

'Dream' and 'drama' are used as interchangeable terms throughout Stead's novels to refer to the illusory quality of life. The use of the theatrical metaphor as paradigm of life is a pervasive notion which goes back a long way in western literature. Calderón's play *La Vida es sueño* enjoins both notions of life as play and dream.⁸

Stead's first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, is a 'dream of passion' for it is not only a representation of past life in which persons and events are like shadows in the dim dream of youth, but there are references within it to life

8. For a brief discussion of the history of the theatrical metaphor see E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated from the German by Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953); Ch. 7, 'Metaphorics' section 5 on Theatrical Metaphors, pp. 138-144. It is interesting to note that Petronius, an author Stead mentions in *For Love Alone*, is cited by Curtius as a user of the theatrical metaphor together with the idea of life as a battle.

Although it is not known whether Christina Stead was acquainted with the works of Calderón she was certainly familiar with Shelley's work, including *The Cenci*. While Shelley was engaged in writing *The Cenci*, and even beyond then up until his death, he was engrossed in the plays of Calderón. In style and dramatic composition, Shelley's works bear the stamp of Calderón. Therefore it is possible to trace Stead's idea of life as a dream or drama and her use of the dramatic principle of contrasts back to Calderón, through Shelley. See Salvador De Madariaga's essay 'Shelley and Calderón' in *Shelley & Calderón and Other Essays on English and Spanish Poetry* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1920), pp. 3-48.

as an old tale (a winter's tale in particular). Marion Folliott's thought that their life was a dream and incoherent when told is an allusion to *Macbeth*, later supported in Chapter eleven of the novel when the madman (idiot?) tells his own incoherent tale of beauty and horror.⁹ In other novels the theatrical metaphor and allusions to plays similarly thicken the texture of the work and add a further dimension to the dramas being presented. For Bertillon in *House of All Nations* the illusion is everything. In his words:

It's all in the sign. This is a stage I've set and filled with supers for the great act of Jules Bertillon, multi-millionaire, and when the climax comes, I ring down the curtain. In the meantime *they* pay to see the show.¹⁰

In Balzac's *Old Goriot* '[money] is life itself, it's the mainspring of everything'.¹¹ In Stead's novels money is an obvious source of power and the lack of it is at the root of problems for many of her characters. Poverty adds to the struggle of life and the burden includes disease, neglect and lack of nourishment, both physical and cultural. Such background factors inevitably influence the ensuing dramas since they may distort or warp the characters' subsequent development, producing a 'crippled' person. But the worst kind of cripple to be found in her novels is the imbalanced personality or Nietzschean 'inverse cripple' — 'men who are not more than a great eye or a great mouth or a great belly —'.¹²

The personalities and physical traits of many of Stead's characters suggest their niche in an *Animal Kingdom* predator-prey scheme.¹³ (Like Balzac's *Human Comedy* all sorts and conditions of people are represented in Stead's dramas.) A hierarchy of a kind exists ranging from the 'god-like' (Bertillon as 'Mercury' is an obvious example) to the lower orders of creatures such as the toady Aristide Raccamond. The Balzacian forest becomes in Stead's novels the city jungle or desert wherein the struggles for survival take place. However Stead does not detract from the humanity of her characters by employing such metaphors or conferring such a scheme upon them. Rather, she emphasises that their essential human qualities make them prey to themselves, to others and to the vicissitudes of life. Her presentation of characters reveals them to be many-faceted *personae* whose complex natures are to be grasped through the roles they enact.

In Stead's 'drama of the person' there is a very strong impression of watching characters 'on stage' as it were. Her method of characterisation is a process of unmasking, to use the theatrical metaphor again. Each character

9. Christina Stead, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Sirius Quality Paperback edition (London: Angus & Robertson, 1981), Ch. 9, p. 260; Ch. 11, pp. 303-304. (See *Macbeth* V.5.24-28.)

10. Christina Stead, *House of All Nations* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1974), Scene Thirty-seven, p. 251.

11. Honoré de Balzac, *Old Goriot*, translated by Marion Ayton Crawford (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 242.

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated with an introduction by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), Part Two 'Of Redemption', p. 160.

13. Like Balzac, Stead read Cuvier's *Animal Kingdom*.

sees, and may reflect, different facets or aspects of the others. This is supported by Stead's frequent use of mirror and light imagery, including the side-show hall of mirrors which reflects grotesquely distorted images of Tom and Nellie Cotter in *Cotters' England*. However, the spotlight glare of Stead's vision, as it is focussed on the slowly revolving characters, enables us to observe each facet very closely and under this light they pour forth their confessions, or manifestoes of themselves, in uninhibited speech.

This, perhaps the most outstanding feature of Stead's dramatic technique, is something else which she derives from Balzac. Their speech flows in a torrent to water the desert of their lonely and empty lives and as they speak they become noticeably more and more animated. While each one speaks we are conscious of an intensely felt emotional and intellectual life and a reservoir of energy which, when spent, leaves *us*, but not necessarily the speaker, exhausted. They do not always speak naturalistically but will adopt the self-conscious pose of actors and use the full-blown rhetoric of theatrical speech in the *tirades* they deliver. This is consistent with the image many of them hold of their lives as plays in which they are the principal actor-directors. Edward Massine, in *The People With the Dogs* for example, refers to his past life as 'an old play I used to be in'.¹⁴ As Stead once pointed out, her purpose in making her characters so eloquent is to demonstrate that anybody 'can talk like Medea' about their troubles and that everyone is a 'fountain of passion'.¹⁵

Her characters' entrances are often markedly theatrical and they use histrionic gesture and gesticulation to give emphasis to their speech. As they speak the other characters become 'spectators' of the performance, sometimes making ironic comments upon it. Catherine Baguenault, a melodramatic actress herself, comments upon the 'ham-acting' of her brother, for instance.

The lives of Stead's characters are therefore represented as individual dramas within the whole of life. When many background factors, such as heredity, political or economic forces, are beyond their personal control, it is quite important that the characters possess this freedom of speech for it is their way of making meaning in their life. The greatest problem with this aspect of the 'drama of the person' is that if our 'ears' are constantly assailed by long and monotonous speeches, then we are inclined to become 'deaf' to the minor changes of key which occur from time to time. There are limits to the endurance of the audience (the readers) and the lengths and repetitiveness of the monologues are faults in Stead's presentation of the drama.

Stead frequently treats us to ironic glimpses of the disparity which exists between a character's stated ideals and the actualities of his existence,

14. Christina Stead, *The People With the Dogs* (London: Virago Press, 1981) Part Six, p. 338.

15. Christina Stead, in a review by Jean Williamson, 'Christina Stead Tells of Her Latest Book!', in *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 9 March, 1935.

something which is also commented upon by very minor characters. In this way her characters' illusions or hidden dreams are exposed but, more significantly, their delusions are also revealed.

Some critics have seized upon the importance of ideas in the creation of characters to accuse Christina Stead of creating 'ideograms'. Stead is not only interested in how people express or exchange ideas but also in the *effect* of those ideas on their development. Her interest is primarily in character *not* ideas in abstract.

Although Stead has specifically disclaimed the talents of a playwright she does demonstrate an attraction to drama and the ability to transfer the dramatic into the presentation of her characters' lives. For reasons of brevity only some aspects of her 'drama of the person' have been used in this paper to illustrate the significance of drama as a key element drawing together the other qualities of her work to form a rich and sometimes chaotic tapestry of life.