



Gradations of Reality in  
Christina Stead

by

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## Summary

The thesis takes six of Christina Stead's most representative works and sets out to explore the writer's concern with a "multiform reality." This abstraction is not imposed upon the writer from without; in the Introduction we reveal that the frequent recurrence of the word "reality" in Stead's books elicits a complex, and above all, varying response from the reader, depending upon the context. These varying contexts, or gradations of reality, take a number of complex forms within the body of Stead's writing, and throughout the thesis we concern ourselves with three of the most important ones. The thesis is accordingly divided into three sections, each dealing with two works which best seem to illustrate one set of major preoccupations.

Section A looks at The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone and examines the way in which Stead portrays a reality dominated by powerful human impulses and imaginings. Here human autonomy is seen as the nucleus of reality, and the spirit is one of anti-determinism. We discuss these books as dramatizations of characters' perceptions of reality, and explore the different ways of imagining reality deployed throughout, and also the dramatic conflict of these within the human relationships depicted.

In Section B examination is made of Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England. In addition to discussing the novels' structural similarities, we expose the contribution of these to the sense of a fragmented reality, but one which ultimately seems to possess an underlying and unifying human structure. All the same, humanistic concerns are at times a little "displaced" in these novels, appearing to be engaged in a larger conflict with pre-established social, political, and possibly even supernatural realities. The notion of a governing human ego is challenged, but in the final instance is probably triumphant, if often in a negative and destructive sense.

Section C, in a reversal of what is generally the case with the preceding four novels, shows Stead giving primary consideration to non-human deterministic forces, although in

places the presence of the human is undeniably still felt. Here we discuss The Salzburg Tales and the novella The Rightangled Creek, and witness a marked displacement of human prerogatives within a reality seemingly ruled by extra-human, often inexplicable forces.

Finally our conclusion reinforces a notion we attempt to make clear at various key points in the thesis: that Stead's "gradations of reality" might belong to the realm of philosophic abstraction, but that this last can hardly be said to put a halter over the works. That is, whilst the works are speculative and point us towards all sorts of abstract issues and questions - a facet of Stead's writing given little emphasis by other critics, and hopefully put into proper perspective here - they are far from being static or lifeless. Rather they combine vivid characterization, realistic detail, and speculation to produce a multi-dimensional image of the world; an image anchored in our experience but also possessing a topsail of unrestricted imagining and questioning.



## Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any university, and to the best of the writer's knowledge and belief, no material previously written by another person except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text and notes.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

The act of generic classification in literary studies poses a number of interesting theoretical questions, not the least being whether or not we should reserve a category for the unclassifiable. If for argument's sake we may be permitted this minor conceit then it is probably to that category that we should relegate the bulk of Christina Stead's fiction. No doubt this is a too guarded, even evasive approach to the whole question of authorship and the individual voice, but guardedness and evasion do help - in the initial stages of a discussion at least - to ease one through the bottleneck of contemporary critical beliefs; beyond that, of course, they are quite unpardonable.

However, we do not wish to steep ourselves in critical theory. Our concern is with Christina Stead, a writer belonging to that genus of artist whose chief speciality is, for want of a more contemporaneous term, originality. "The idiom of the books is individual and not conventional,"<sup>1</sup> writes one critic as early as the 1930s, a claim echoed in subsequent decades by most commentators on Stead's fiction. More recently H.M. Green observes that "with Christina Stead the individual contribution is much more strongly marked than is usual in novelists...."<sup>2</sup> And both Douglas Stewart and Rodney Pybus, although connecting the writer's name with Lawrence and Dostoyevsky, are apt to qualify their comparisons with such statements as "she 'imitates' no one."<sup>3</sup> Even those critics placing Stead's work in the context of specific literary movements feel the need to emphasize the originality of her contribution. For example, Terry Sturm's considerations about Stead and literary realism point out her "formal and stylistic originality,"<sup>4</sup> whilst H.M. Green writes that although "most of her settings ... her characters, attitude, method and manner generally are those of modernity and of the cities, it does not follow that she is comparable with any other city novelist; but indeed she is not comparable with any other novelist at all...."<sup>5</sup>

Our desire to stress this quality of individuality at the very start bespeaks uneasiness about regarding the body of Christina Stead's work from a too specific angle. Such a

procedure might cause us to lose that sense of diversity, both of her interests and their treatment, which is partly the impulse behind her originality in the first place, her desire to open our minds in all sorts of unexpected ways and to cast different shades of light over our perceptions of reality. Undoubtedly this still needs to be brought under the heading of something, so we will be discussing generally Stead's concern with a multiform reality, since this allows for her breadth of scope whilst containing the concentration of detail so essential to her best works. Our emphasis on this curious word "reality" is no arbitrary matter, though, dredged up for the sake of a convenient generalization; Stead herself uses it a considerable number of times throughout her novels, as will be deduced from several of the quotations chosen for the following chapters. In the broadest sense it is clearly one of her key preoccupations.

Within this very general format we intend to examine closely that concentration of detail comprising the various permutations of the reality theme in Stead. And we hope in so doing to maintain some continuity in the overall scheme without sacrificing a sense of the striking differences of form and tone existing between the texts and often within their worlds. Indeed the tension between the concepts of continuity and discontinuity is itself a notion Stead sometimes deals with inside the books, and this will be shown most specifically in the two middle chapters.

These variations we speak of are many, as might be expected of such an unusual conglomeration of works, encompassing as they do most moods and styles "from the further limits of scientific precision to the romantic extravagance of fantasy...."<sup>6</sup> None of these so-called permutations may really be simply defined, however, but throughout the thesis we will attempt to isolate three main tendencies, relating them to six of Stead's best and hopefully most representative works: four novels (The Man Who Loved Children, For Love Alone, Seven Poor Men of Sydney, Cotters' England), a volume of short stories (The Salzburg Tales), and a novella (The Right-angled Creek).

These three main tendencies, soon to be outlined, will each be related to discussions of works grouped in pairs.

This is essentially an ordering effect, and not intended to suggest that each "pair" of works discussed - for instance, Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England - possesses a monopoly on the themes and structures examined. Rather we wish simply to show that the two works discussed in each category seem the most outstanding examples of Stead's imaginative speculation and creativity in a given area, and that this necessarily links them in all sorts of interesting ways. In this scheme the bonds between Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England, and between The Salzburg Tales and The Right-angled Creek, will probably seem the most striking, mainly because of the structural devices quite specifically shared by the works in each pairing.

The first category or section, however, comprised of our discussions of The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone, is also based on definite relationships between the two novels. These are perhaps more subtle than anything else taken up in the remainder of the thesis, though, and for that reason a little more elusive of any schematic approach, no matter how broad in conception.

In this category it will be argued that Stead gives us her most profound and generalized examinations of the reality of the inner human realm, or psyche. Don Anderson's significant observation might here be inserted:

Like Lawrence, Miss Stead is concerned with the private, passionate, erotic drives that shape the self and, for her - and no orthodox determinist would accept this - the "passional" is not merely another aspect of the "determined", but a force at war with determinism or fate, which drives the individual to strive for a world elsewhere, beyond the determined.<sup>7</sup>

Although the "'Lawrentian' dimension"<sup>8</sup> of character Anderson speaks of is integral to Stead's fiction overall, its presence is probably less qualified in The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone than any of Stead's other works. It is portrayed as the source of the various social, political and supernatural forces which in certain other works appear to conflict with it as independent phenomena.

But this is not to underplay the role of conflict in

these books, for we intend discussing them as dramatizations of characters' perceptions of reality. The essence of their "drama" will be seen to lie in relation both to the conflicting perceptions within the characters themselves, and in the larger conflicts that occur between them when they set about ordering their lives in response to these perceptions.

A second category will be identified with the novels Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England, the two of Stead's novels which most closely resemble each other. (The Beauties and Furies also shares their most notable feature, namely their deliberate merging of apparently incompatible styles, moods and ideas, but is a poorly written work. There is very little material in it that has not been handled by Stead elsewhere with greater clarity, insight and force.)

(The gradation of emphasis the reality theme undergoes in these novels slightly displaces the human ego as the most dominant of forces. We might say that these books reveal to the reader a matt-work of planes of reality, these back-lit with an intensity that varies in accordance with the shifting emphases of the novels, their movements through different and conflicting modes of representation that take us into the human psyche and outside into the realm of everyday social reality and an almost unfathomable fantastic realm, all the while suggesting enigmatic connections between these.)

Although the "Lawrentian dimension" of the main characters in these books ultimately retains the upper hand - with all the attendant internal conflicts preserved, though - Stead creates an unusual conflict between it and the other forces. And this is enigmatically mirrored by the unique structural compositions of both novels, where a clash of styles re-creates, in a broader philosophical context, a conflict between social or everyday reality, and the possibly subversive impulses of the human ego seen somehow at odds with it. Within the social context of these novels, the human is often portrayed as curiously "other." And in their more symbolical modes this "otherness" occasionally assumes a fantastic, indeed even supernatural form, which may also suggest the presence of a complicating third factor - the metaphysical. Some attention will need be given to the ambiguous quality of this last phenomenon in our analyses of the novels.

Adrian Mitchell grasps the larger implications of some of these very difficult works when he writes:

While ideology may in some sense form the texture of the characters' mental life,<sup>9</sup> the mental life is also determined by innate inclination, and to that extent there is in Stead's fiction an imperfect adjustment between inner and outer realities, an interesting misalliance of the novel of character with the novel of ideas. Stead's recreation of the social circumstances of the thirties and forties is impressive, and equally thorough is her expression of a particular kind of life. But it remains uncertain just how far one accounts for the other.<sup>10</sup>

Mitchell's qualifying terms "imperfect adjustment" and "misalliance" perhaps hint at a certain dissatisfaction with such works, however, as if on a fundamental level they are a bit confused, and also confusing. Our view will be that, whilst disconcerting and often extremely uncomfortable to read, both Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England reveal a careful design and a coherent argument.

The third and final category established in the thesis will deal with what are probably the most difficult works of all, difficult mainly because of the more overbearing presence in them of a non-human or supra-normal realm. It will be represented by The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek, which grade reality so as almost totally to subordinate the ego to enigmatic external forces, or at least to render the latter equally powerful, in a fashion that is rarely the case in Stead's fiction. This necessarily gives rise to a more deterministic view of reality, but one which is impossible to explain in the context of orthodox "social" determinism.

Again we have interesting examples of the distinctive flexibility of emphasis and variety in the manner of exploration, which are the hallmarks of this highly original writer's output. The need to avoid sweeping generalizations about her fictive ideologies is therefore of the utmost importance. When Adrian Mitchell observes that Stead "rejects the distortions of conventional fictional strategies,

just as her view of life precludes the sense of ordained pattern,"<sup>11</sup> we may feel that he is confusing two separate issues. The writer does overthrow orthodox strategies (not that this in itself is a guarantee of worthwhile ideas, although it is in Stead's instance), but maintains the sort of open-ended perspective that can contain both the celebration of human autonomy found in The Man Who Loved Children, and the proposition of a rigidly predetermined reality discovered in parts of The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek.

Throughout Stead's writing career there seems to be no patterned progression from one specific "type" of novel to another. That is, her varieties of imaginative exploration are not encapsulated by set "phases." After all, more than three decades separate the related works The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek, whilst between the years 1936 and 1941, for example, she was able to produce three such radically different works as The Beauties and Furies, House of All Nations and The Man Who Loved Children.

For all this, in attempting to expose some of the gradations of the reality theme in Stead, we have ordered our three categories to correspond with a progression from the more "ordinary" works to the most "extraordinary" ones. However we use these words merely to connote a simple transition from what is generally considered the more accessible reality of the human mind to the far less accessible one of the fantastic and supernatural. Qualitatively speaking though, The Man Who Loved Children, the first work discussed, is clearly a far more "extraordinary" work than The Rightangled Creek.

Another element of organization imposed by this writer is the placing of the works in each pairing in their correct chronological order. This is not an entirely arbitrary structuring device though. In all the categories but the first, the second work discussed definitely seems a more sophisticated example of the themes and structures analysed in the first, suggesting a maturation of Stead's creative abilities in certain areas. It is therefore interesting to see how she slightly modifies and refines attitudes and their expression when she again takes them up at a later period in her career.



All the same, no too specific developments are suggested by this. Stead is one of those artists who appear to create very good, quite poor and extraordinarily brilliant works almost at random, much as Lawrence did. Charles Dickens on the other hand exemplifies that type of artist who develops with remarkable consistency from relatively lowly origins to a final phase of dazzling brilliance. An interesting parallel in music springs to mind if we compare, say, the somewhat erratic Hector Berlioz with the ever-developing Giuseppe Verdi.

The one most noticeable area of neglect in the thesis, and this quite deliberate, is seen in the failure to deal with works such as Letty Fox - Her Luck or A Little Tea, A Little Chat. The dominant impulse behind these novels is a sort of low-key social observation, disappointingly unaffected either by the complicated character psychologies or suggestions of the inexplicable found in other works. Given that this is yet another of Stead's domains, it is a particularly impoverished one, and this not because it is her most ordinary domain, but because it is not profoundly ordinary, as for example is the realm of Johnston's beautifully executed and moving novel My Brother Jack. To have included an analysis of it here would have created superfluous additional contrasts on the level of content but also, more importantly, quite unwanted contrasts in terms of quality.

Works like The People With the Dogs, The Little Hotel and Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife) are also less than Stead's average best, but do contain fine sequences. Most of the issues discussed in the following chapters will be found in these books, but their impact is muted by that curious lifelessness that occasionally overtakes Stead's style. This failing is all the more marked in an author who is capable of writing with an overwhelming exuberance, but it is this very attribute that is so difficult to sustain. After all, it is that proverbial "life of the party" who will seem most markedly robotized - and this word does spring to mind in parts of Stead - when the source of energy begins to run dry.

The only truly regrettable sacrifice, qualitatively speaking, has been of House of All Nations, a rich and remarkable work about the world of banking and high finance. A

discussion of this book, however, would perhaps best be incorporated into a thesis dealing more closely with sharply defined social phenomena in the writer's fiction. Our bias will be more towards the psychological and its conflict with Stead's enigmatic "gradations" of reality which render any disentanglement of single phenomena practically impossible without constant qualification.

The tenor of this Introduction will hopefully have revealed that "close readings" of the chosen texts are to be the basis of the thesis. The writer's assumption is that these are possible and desirable, though of course not the only components of valid criticism. A method based on imaginative or "interpretative" analysis has been used over and above a more fashionably scientific one, and this for two reasons: firstly, the writer does not wish to travesty the physical sciences (scientists rarely set out to travesty arts criticism), and secondly, it seems logical to want to meet the imaginative phenomena we call "art works" on their own territory - that of the human imagination. As the eminent ethologist Mary Midgley points out:

All "arts disciplines" have now to resist being seduced from their own peculiar ways of thinking, which they evolved to suit their own subject matter, to more fashionable "scientific" models. What is scientific is not what looks like physical science, but what is like it - in the sense of using the right methods for what it is trying to do.<sup>12</sup>

But just as it is unnecessary, indeed quite pointless to assume that all literary criticism should only deal with what is provable and verifiable, so is it important not to defend vagueness and capricious fancy in the name of critical speculation. The intermediate path in literary studies between imaginative precision and the realization that there are natural limits to the precision possible within this subject, seems a reasonable and sensible aim. In this regard it is perhaps useful to keep in mind Aristotle's commonsense dictum which states that "it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits."<sup>13</sup>

SECTION A

The Man Who Loved Children

## Chapter One



### THE MAN WHO LOVED CHILDREN

As an examination of the inner human realm, The Man Who Loved Children is unrivalled by anything else Stead has given us. It is, like For Love Alone, essentially a dramatization of characters' perceptions of reality, but with an added dimension. It is a celebration of this inner realm, and the sheer pleasure many derive from it, even at its darkest moments, is founded in this unique celebratory quality.

The excited reception given the novel since its reissue in the 1960s thus refers us to something more durable than the vaulting critical enthusiasm which might briefly surround the re-discovery of any forgotten masterpiece. It refers us to a quality of the book urgently registered by the reader sensitive to its power, but very difficult to articulate without recourse to the sort of emotional eloquence that often appears, at least to some, irrelevant to incisive critical discussion.

This is not quite the pedantic point it might initially appear to be. In his article Graham Burns asks for "analytical attention" beyond the sense of "delighted acquiescence"<sup>1</sup> he detects in Randall Jarrell's essay. Yet this "delighted acquiescence" in the world of the novel, if not the mainspring of many good articles on the book, is at least a fairly common factor - as shown by R.J. Scholfield's catalogue of critics' eulogies<sup>2</sup> - and should direct us to an important facet of its overall theme, which exuberantly insists on the primacy of the human imagination as a potential source of liberation and moral worth, providing it is not misused.

Widespread acquiescence in the novel's world testifies to its unique imaginative directness, and its capacity to communicate its own awareness of the storytelling process as something offering us, in Stead's words, "the hope of recognizing and having explained our own experience."<sup>3</sup> Thus the imaginative force of the book allows us to enjoy what Dorothy Green calls "its 'first fine careless rapture'"<sup>4</sup> at the interface of imaginative and actual experience, just as

Louie's brothers and sister are held in thrall by her tales of the "Korinchi-man" and "Hawkins," desiring to incorporate the experience of tale-telling into their everyday lives and yet wanting also to preserve their sense of it as something directed from outside themselves by the tale-teller, who has the capacity to reveal, mystify and explore with his invention. We will be saying something towards the close of the discussion about this aspect of the book, if mainly to emphasize that we should not equate it with certain recent tendencies in reflexive novel writing. As Angela Carter so rightly observes:

For her [Stead], language is not an end-in-itself in the current, post-Modernist or "mannerist" mode, but a mere tool, and a tool she increasingly uses to hew her material more and more roughly. Nor does she see the act of storytelling as a self-reflexive act.<sup>5</sup>

If some of the things we have been saying sound curiously idealized we should be aware that we have already stepped on the snake lurking in these gardens of innocence when we suggested that Stead presents the human imagination in her book "as a potential source of liberation and moral worth, providing it is not misused." The misuse of imagination, the misuse of ways of perceiving and constructing reality, the terrible human conflicts born of this and the subsequent problems of self-extrication, through awareness and understanding, pervade this novel, so that whilst the experience of reading it is everything we have implied it is - enthralling, exhilarating - it is also inherently and deeply disturbing. For the novel is both a celebration of the human imagination, and an account of its reverse capabilities when it becomes, not an instrument of liberation, but one of oppression. And this, as we hope to show, informs the dualism of critical statements such as the following by Elizabeth Hardwick: "The Man Who Loved Children is sordid and bitter....The grim unfolding of the drama is, nevertheless, done in such a magical, abundant, inventive manner that the reading is a pleasure from beginning to end."<sup>6</sup>

That the problem of human perceptions of reality is at

the core of the book is not a line commonly taken by other critics, though it is made explicit - but with a quite different bias - by Veronica Brady, who in her article writes:

What it [the novel] suggests is that the source of all the oppressions which beset us lies in the imagination, and that the way to freedom is to imagine the world differently. Our problems, that is, are not essentially economic, social or political, but rather ontological: we have misconstrued the nature of reality.<sup>7</sup>

Brady explores some of the implications of this within a very broad philosophical scheme, and evaluates The Man Who Loved Children in terms of one of the three imaginative traditions she sees governing Western culture. Her discussion of the "metaphysic" of the novel, however, leads her to suggest that it "proceeds by way of poetry, relying more on metaphor and image, on rhythms of narration and action rather than on story line or the development of character."<sup>8</sup> The poetical aspect of the narrative is an indisputable and very beautiful factor, but one which should not be separated from Stead's development of story and characterization, for The Man Who Loved Children is one of the few great novels of this century which places such a high premium on these qualities.

In what sense, then, is the novel primarily about the imagination, about the conflict between ways of seeing? In a general sense there is the evidence of the many textual devices which draw attention to characters' modes of thought and expression, although to call these "devices" as such is to run the risk of suggesting a sort of schematism in the finished product which, although even detectable in a work as fine as For Love Alone, hardly mars The Man Who Loved Children.

(Whilst speaking of schematism we should stress, having suggested that the book is largely about the conflict between perceptions of reality, that nothing could be more damaging than to envisage Henny and Sam as representing, according to some abstract scheme, realist and idealist, the opposite poles of perception, or to regard Louie simply as their visionary foil. Even at the novel's farthest symbolic reaches this

would not merely be drastic over-simplification, but inaccurate. The conflicts are born of far subtler criteria than this, because in this novel Stead has cut closer than ever before or since to some of the fundamental problems which besiege human relations, and these problems are inevitably elusive of any schematic mesh we may care to throw over them.

However, it might be objected that some early analytic passages in the novel encourage the reader to regard the characters as simple representative types. Laurie Clancy for one quotes a lengthy passage which seems to reveal a more schematic juxtaposing of character types, but rightly qualifies his initial point by grasping a sense of covert sameness lurking behind the more overt contrasts. He writes: "One of the points that Stead is making in the passage is that the perception of reality which both parents possess is a deficient and distorted one. Both of them sentimentalize it...."<sup>9</sup>)

To return to the point about the attention Stead gives to characters' thought and expression, we observe that The Man Who Loved Children is not only vibrant with what the characters say and think, but with a sense of them constantly expressing themselves in a rich variety of ways. If this appears too fine a distinction, we need only think of Sam ceremoniously and endlessly sermonizing, inventing blueprints for an ideal state, making up poems, distorting popular songs, imitating Artemus Ward; of Henny raging from house top to cellar, making of each tirade a sort of scena, colourfully transforming the trivia of a trip to town into narratives of epic form, tirelessly gossiping and exchanging lore with relatives; of Louie inventing her "Aiden Cycle," scribbling in her diary, quoting from literature and famous men, reading, dreaming, writing, making up plays and languages in code; of the special family rituals like the nightly exchange between Ernie and Henny; of the mighty verbal battles between husband and wife; of the episodes involving letter writing; of the rounds of singing and storytelling; and so on.

Activated human consciousness is at the core of this novel in a fashion which is extraordinarily overt; our emphasis on such words as "imitate," "transform," "encode," "read," "write," "sing," "sermonize," "invent," "quote,"

"dream," "relate" and so on, points us to the varieties of imaginative and communicative endeavour which, with a sort of natural and realistic haphazardness, dominate this novel. What might be called the book's expository extremism - a dimension which it shares with poetical drama and opera - exists within the context of human conflict, and the scenes are numerous and memorable in which the dramatic impetus and thematic ideas stem from a conflict of viewpoints embedded in the way reality is imagined by the different characters. The relation of this to the point made earlier about the liberative and oppressive aspects of human imagination, and to the whole problem of communication generally, artistic and everyday, will arise naturally as we further develop the argument.

One of the things we are most impressed with after reading The Man Who Loved Children, is a sense of the vast discrepancy between children's and adults' ways of seeing. The sheer obviousness of this should not distract us from its importance, and its relation to a whole host of central issues; notably aspects of Stead's characterization of Sam and Louie, both of whom hover, though in significantly different ways, between the worlds of childhood and adulthood. We should not anticipate this too soon, though.

The notion of a certain natural insularity built into the children's manner of regarding the world is something which Stead is at pains to clarify, because it reflects on other important issues which we shall be raising in due course. Nowhere is this more startlingly clear, for instance, when following one of the novel's longest chains of ugly and disturbing incidents, most of which are witnessed by the children, we are told: "[A]fter listening for some time, they were too tired to puzzle over the whims of their fantastic father, and one after the other fell happily asleep. It had been a long and glorious day - Daddy's birthday, the neighborhood kids, the chasings round the Wishing Tree, their presents to Daddy for which they had saved up so long, and Miss Aiden coming to see them."<sup>10</sup>

The "long and glorious day," however, is Janus-faced, for uppermost in the reader's mind is the memory of Ernie's humiliation over the spilt chamberpot and ravaging of his



scrap-iron collection; of a tortured conflict between Sam and Henny; of the repercussions of the play Tragedy of the Snake-Man and Louie's outburst about the hideousness of her adolescence; of the heartbreaking episode involving Ernie's money-box; of the pathetic moments when first Louie, then Ernie, begin to gauge the extent of the family's poverty and attempt to conceal it before Miss Aiden arrives; and of the teacher's visit itself, underlain with a sense of Henny's terrible misery and degradation.

Another, relatively minor scene designed to impress on the reader the difference between the children's and adults' interpretation of things occurs shortly after Henny's baby has been born. The children are playing "mothers," and begin attaching funny names to their parents and relatives. Bonnie overhears them calling her "Greta Garbage" and complains to Louie: "Greta Garbage, Toni Toilet ... they always see me out there with the garbage can and the wet mop...." (p. 292). To this Louie responds, eager to correct the distortion the adult perspective has cast on the scene: "Oh, no, it isn't that ... Garbage is just a funny word: they associate you with singing and dancing and all those costumes you have in your trunk!" (p. 292).

We note in passing that many of these scenes with the children are unique partly because the reader has a sense of stumbling upon them unexpectedly, of discovering an entirely different world in the midst of the adult drama; for example, when earlier in the book Aunt Jo arrives to reprimand Bonnie for her affair with a married man, the latter overhears some of the children at a game of "make believe," and the main action is unobtrusively suspended to detail a sparkling account of their play, before the indomitable Jo bursts upon the scene. And the sense of discovering, or perhaps of recovering, an insight into the world of childhood, with its own particular slant on reality, is conveyed too in the unforgettable moment when Saul announces that "Tomkins was changing the stones on the path so they could see a new view" (p. 42). At such moments the contrast between the two worlds is founded on differences in perspective almost too great, we feel, to accommodate complete understanding on either side.

We started talking about the children by referring to the "natural insularity" embedded in their world view, and we should develop this in relation to their interaction with the adults in the book, particularly their parents:

There were excitement, fun, joy, and even enchantment with both mother and father, and it was just a question of whether one wanted to sing, gallop about, and put on a performance ("showing off like all Pollitry," said Henny), or look for mysteries ("Henny's room is a chaos," said Sam). A child could question both father and mother and get answers: but Sam's answers were always to the point, full of facts; while the more one heard of Henny's answer, the more intriguing it was, the less was understood. Beyond Sam stood the physical world, and beyond Henny - what? A great mystery (pp. 32-3).

This passage subtly creates two levels of meaning; on one level we have a sense of the tensions between the adults, enclosed mainly in the parenthetical asides, and to which the children are impervious, and on the other we have the fact of this imperviousness itself, which is associated with the children's intense imaginative life, their desire "to sing, gallop about, and put on a performance" or else to "look for mysteries." Stead is careful to preserve this distinction between viewpoints in all of the passages where, in the context of Sam's and Henny's eternal tug-of-war, reference is made to the position of the children. "Each of them [the parents] struggled to keep the children, not to deliver them into the hands of the enemy: but the children were not taking it in at all. Their real feelings were made up of the sensations received in the respective sing-songs and treasure hunts" (p. 33).

Adrian Mitchell observes that the children "are protected ultimately by their egotism,"<sup>11</sup> and it is important to see the link between this egotism and the extent of their imaginations, the latter enclosing them like a shell. The conscious and unconscious appeals made by the parents to the children's thought thus have their natural limits, because - as Stead subtly shows us - the impulses they

arouse are largely controlled by the children themselves. A certain level of childish autonomy or protective self-consciousness is evident, for instance, in the scene where Sam puts on his baby's act before a neighbour's child, and the boys, embarrassed that their father should act so in front of one of their peers, no longer find his clowning as fascinating as they usually do: "[T]heir father was making a fool of himself; but they were high-minded about it, they let him amuse himself" (p. 48).

In a much later scene, after Sam's absence in Malaysia, during which time "they had never given one thought to their father's schemes and ideas" (p. 253), the children find his talk too infested with foreign words to stimulate, and we are told: "[A]s they could not understand him, they looked bored" (p. 295). This again emphasizes a sort of ego-centred } insularity in the children which is beyond Sam's capacity to exert a complete hold over them. (Of course Sam is not so easily cast aside, even if he is not "inherently" fascinating to them; after this he carefully affects a modulation into relatively normal English, a fine example of how his language, as Burns puts it, "appears to be a kind of child's play" but is "actually a carefully calculated idiom."<sup>12</sup>)

The vying for control of a given situation is an impulse Stead constantly returns to in The Man Who Loved Children, and the form it most often takes is the struggle for imaginative dominance. This is not intended as a reductionist view of the book, for it opens onto issues of serious concern: notably the insistence on the imagination itself as a force in human relations, and the possibility, through a deepening awareness and understanding of its function, of controlling it for the purposes of a larger good. We have been concentrating on the children, and the enclosed nature of their imaginative world, because this quality of "imaginative enclosure" is one of the central themes of the book, placed as it is in relation to characters' moral development and the other important theme of communication.

The point has been made by many critics that the character of Sam Pollitt is like that of a child, and it is precisely his "imaginative enclosure" which Stead emphasizes as the supreme manifestation of his egotism. Sam does, of

course, differ from the children, and it is the differences which render the workings of his imagination oppressive and dangerous; but again, we are anticipating the argument.

"The communication between men ought to be the most sacred of all things" (p. 427), declares Sam shortly after invading his eldest daughter's diary. Such a statement, and in such a context, goes beyond simple irony to reveal aspects of his character central to an overall understanding of the novel. It points to his conception of communication as something external to the inner self, communication needing to be "between men" to be "sacred"; he thinks of "the advertisers of radio programs" as "wonderfully humane people" and imagines "that if a real savior ever came, he would come over the radio" (p. 519). Importantly, he finds incomprehensible the notion of the self communing with itself, ample evidence of which practice is provided, in the scene in question, by Louie's diary.

Such statements as his words to Louie, "I am only a dreamer in realities" (p. 131), direct us not so much to a level of imaginative self-consciousness, as to the self-pitying tone he uses when attempting, as he does here, to convince his daughter of his inordinate suffering at the hands of Henny. And later when he tells her the virtues of "understanding yourself" and of "penetrat[ing]... human motive" (p. 362), it is his crude mastery and aping of Louie's general outlook on life, as a means of gaining her confidence, which strike us, and not any sense of real insight. We suspect this because Stead carefully prefaces his homily with the suggestive words: "Sam paused for a moment, to attract her attention, but since she said nothing, he went on in a softer, more insinuating tone...." (p. 362).

Sam's real attitude towards communication with the self informs Stead's initial presentation of him at the very beginning of the book. Here we observe him walking home from work, thinking of his appointment in the Pacific and attempting to suppress thoughts of his affections for one of his colleagues: "[B]ut what desires beset a man! They are not written in the calendar of a man's duty; they are part of the secret life. Some time the secret life rises and over-

whelms us - a tidal wave. We must not be carried away" (pp. 17-18). Sam regards the imagination, what he calls "the secret life," as a threat to human autonomy, and here gives the impression of standing objectively outside it, tuning himself rather to the wavelength of the external world where real - "real" as in "tactile" - contact is made with other men, and the effusions of the imagination are banished. Alongside Henny, "creature of wonderful instinct" (p. 36), with her Aladdin's cave of personal treasures, and Louie with her vivid imaginings and private creativity, we have Sam, the great rationalist and believer in science, scorning the fiction and "sickening tommyrot" (p. 426) he finds in his daughter's diary, appearing consciously in direct opposition to the life of the imagination and forcibly opening onto the world of externals.

And yet it is one of the great subtleties of the book that Sam's whole life is made to appear fixed in the life of the imagination; the imagination, that is, severed from its own self-conscious or reflexive source. Herein lies one of the important similarities between Sam and the smaller children, except that Sam's case is complicated by his disowning of the imagination - a tendency the children never exhibit - this revealing a special level of consciousness in Sam with certain semi-articulated aims, which will be discussed presently.

It is primarily through Sam's idiom, which one character in the book claims can "create a world ... a wonderful illusion" (p. 313), that Stead impresses on us a sense of the imaginative base of his world. His scientific rationalism, which may initially distract us from this, quickly reveals itself to be closer in spirit to pulp science-fiction than anything else. Sam's romance of science - of which an example will be given - underlies almost all his "scientific" talk; but, and this is extremely important, he does not romanticize science for the sheer sake or pleasure of it, nor is it necessarily symptomatic of a complete withdrawal from the real world, for it would reduce the complexity of this unique character to imagine that he has lost contact with reality to the extent of actually believing everything he says, and that his imaginative enclosure signifies some form

of autism. Rather it is connected with the aforementioned "semi-articulated aims," Sam's impulse to power, and Stead's subtle linking of this with his self-conscious disavowal of the imaginative or "secret" life, provides us with key insights into his character; but first we need look at some of the manifestations of this power impulse, within the context of a discussion of the imaginative basis of his perceptions.

In one of the several fascinating conflicts between Sam and Louie, the elements of Sam-style imagining, and the different impulses we detect behind his and Louie's ways of imagining, are drawn together to expose fundamental distinctions between these two characters, although at first we will be mainly concerned with Sam. It is a scene occurring on the first Sunday-Funday, when Sam outlines to the children a science-fiction world of selective breeding, "projection by dematerialization" (p. 82), and formularized people assemblage.

"We are people of 3001 [said Sam]. Each one has a formula and is reassembled according to that minutely correct formula. We haven't the freaks and neuroses of the Dark Ages. We were born according to formula: we are not a hazardous aggregation of mean genes. We approximate a mean, the mean of our intellectual class. When we are born, we are studied, and deviations, if noxious to the species, are suppressed; good deviations are preserved. And furthermore, we bear our formula on our arm band!"

"But the arm band would be decomposed in the tube," Louisa discovered triumphantly.

Sam grinned and bit his lip. "The formula for each passenger would be radiotelegraphed ahead with the notice of his having taken a ticket," said he. "Thus," he suddenly cried, "Looloo, you meant to be mean and clever, but actually you merely gave me another idea - thus, you could resurrect the dead from the residue of fires, after accidents - resurrection would be real, not a faded dream."

"That is wonderful," said Louie, much struck.

"Slightually," Sam smirked, "slightually, your

poor little Sam is wonderful, but a prophet in his own mud puddle --" (p. 83).

This is one of the many scenes in The Man Who Loved Children where the bizarre and colourful subject matter might initially distract us from the remarkable subtlety and complete naturalness with which Stead has revealed important facets of character, these being her primary interest. Thus, of more central concern than the ideological implications of Sam's speech, is the sense of pure invention we detect in his manner, revealed when Louie challenges his scheme with a simple piece of reason and he is forced to give his argument a sudden - indeed quite arbitrary - twist. This quality of invention is emphasized by Stead's clever managing of the awkward halt in his almost stream-of-consciousness formulations, with the insertion of the words, "Sam grinned and bit his lip," followed by the telling cry, "Looloo, you meant to be mean and clever, but actually you merely gave me another idea [emphasis added]."

But with Sam, as has been suggested, it is not a case of invention for invention's sake and the pleasure this might afford - as it clearly and significantly is with Louie, who is "much struck" by the more excessive aspects of her father's romance - or even invention for the sake of promoting, imaginatively, a deeply felt ideology. Rather it is an ego-centred, power-directed form of imagining which seeks, simply, to gain control over a given situation. For, after winning over even the recalcitrant Louie in this scene, Sam relaxes into a sort of tepid self-irony which betrays his smugness, and Stead's choice of the word "smirked," to describe the manner in which he announces, "slightually, your poor little Sam is wonderful, but a prophet in his own mud puddle --," captures perfectly the sly pleasure of one who has just scored such a victory.

Briefly, something might here be said about the ideological content of Sam's many sermons, because we have just touched on it in a rather dismissive way. That is not to say that we should intimately concern ourselves with the "ideas" enclosed within them, except to observe that they generally posit some sort of idealized autocracy which, in

its own exaggerated fashion, approximates the environment Sam often attempts to create for his own family, as in the scene just described. Such objective comments by the author, however, as "Sam was a vague eclectic socialist, and some of the things he wrote were far more horrifying to his friends than he understood" (p. 316), are designed to provide us with a rationale for his initially startling notions, so that, rather than be too taken aback by them, and subsequently make them the substance of a critique of - or even an attack on - his character, we place them within the context of his constant imagining, as does his perceptive friend Saul Pilgrim: "Sam ... when you talk, you know you create a world. I live in a wonderful illusion: especially when we take walks at night, I can hardly believe in the workaday world!" (p. 313).

Similarly, in the memorable sequence where the Pollitt family moves house there is another of those seemingly innumerable moments unobtrusively revealing character through situation, which reinforces this side of Stead's portrayal of Sam. On the drive to Spa House we are told that the children experience disappointment "after the grandeur of Washington" and "were unable to admire what Sam admired" (p. 318). Sam alters the course of his driving to show his boys College Avenue and the military Academy, "and suddenly ... Annapolis appeared to them a great and glorious place; it burst forth in the most brilliant colors. Having achieved his effect, Sam smiled...." (p. 319). It is the "effect" Sam craves above all, and not, as might first appear to be the case, the ideas behind the effect, which are of secondary significance and generated, as Stead tells us, by "vague" and "eclectic" notions.

At this point we should again turn our attention to Sam's power impulse, and the association we suggested exists between this and his own conscious disavowal of imaginative forces or the "secret life." Importantly, Sam's child-like imaginative enclosure is equated with his adult hostility towards the imagination because there is a latent assumption in his whole manner that he stands outside his imagination; in other words, Stead shows how when one imagines oneself to be "beyond" imagination, one is never so much trapped inside it at the non-reflexive level, like a child. The



small children, however, whilst part of a non-reflexive imaginative world like Sam, represent a natural stage in a process of human development, some of the complex extensions of which we come to understand through Stead's portrayal of Louie. Henny, whom we have overlooked so far, is also an integral part of this scheme, as we shall see.

But Sam, an adult with an adult's reasoning (specious as this might be) and power, can only be felt as an oppressive force, since his imaginings are franked all over with the stamp of absolute reality, protected as they are by his adult, semi-self-conscious view of the imagination, which separates it from the "calendar of a man's duty" - from the presumed "real world," in other words. Thus Sam, in the adult struggle for dominance, protects his imaginative world through a sort of convenient oversight which, in distancing him from his child's sphere, keeps the latter intact and simultaneously allows him to flex his adult muscles. This sort of double insularity, this preservation of his undeveloped, child's view of the world through a misuse of the adult powers of reasoning and reflexive imagining, contrasts with the direct and spontaneous protection afforded by the children's imaginative impulses. Their illusions, their capacity, for instance, to regard a day such as the one described earlier as "long and glorious" when in fact to us it is made to appear fraught with suffering and ugliness, are neither oppressive nor dangerous; for there can be, as we will see with Louie, positive development from this point, development which neither sacrifices childish vision for adult maturity, nor necessarily inhibits a truthful imaginative understanding of the adult world or communication of its nature.

After Sam returns from Malaysia there is a marvellous scene similar to the earlier Sunday-Funday episode, which again shows Louie (more forcefully this time, in keeping with her development during her father's absence), challenging his misuse of the imagination, and Sam rapidly modulating his scientific talk into a more blatant appeal to the children's fancy, as if to get them on his side quickly, before his loss of footing is too evident.

The scene begins with Sam using, significantly, a sort of story-time framework for his scientific view of the world;

a comment on his own vision, certainly, but also an extension of his instinctive need, not to spellbind the children as Louie does with her tales, but to gain their attention before holding them in his power. "I want you to listen to an idea I had today while your little brother was being born. The laws of nature are few, and she follows them inevitably; she obeys her own laws" (p. 300). And so he continues, finishing with the words, "These things are not mystic, they follow an inexorable law," to which Louie asks the question, "How do you know?" (p. 300). At this point Sam immediately switches to a more playful form of dogmatism, a tactical means of throwing off Louie's question and of tightening his grasp on the children:

"I make it rain, don't I, kids?"

"Yes," they said eagerly.

"When I say, 'Sun, you can shine!' doesn't it shine?"

"Yes, yes," they chorused joyfully.

"And when I say, 'Rain, you kin rain half an hour and then stop,' don't it obey me?"

"Yes."

"But Looloo thinks I don't know nuffin; Looloo only thinks of hummilatin [humiliating] her wise father."

"You don't make it rain," said Louie (pp. 300-301).

Louie's insistence leads Ernie, the second eldest, to rebel against Sam also, "but he [Sam] would not give in, and to crush the influence of his two older children who had reached the age of dissent, he wickedly seized a large blowfly which he had been watching on the tablecloth for some time and putting it between finger and thumb flipped it at his elder daughter" (p. 301). This is one of the most telling presentations we have of Sam in the entire book, tracing as it does his initially sober, adult-like manner, then his reversion to a form of childish gaming which conceals an adult wilfulness, and finally the open examination of his motives when, like the school bully, he flicks a blowfly at his daughter and starts up a chant of ridicule and mockery in order to dominate the situation again. (Sam's assertion

that he can "make it rain" is a clear example of his saying something he would obviously know not to be true, and so indicates other intentions. This is an extension of our claim that Sam has not lost contact with reality to the point of necessarily believing everything he says.)

The same open examination of his motives also appears in a slightly later scene between Sam and Louie, after the former has taken his daughter and her friend Clare for ice-creams, and he exclaims: "I don't want you to be like me ... don't be such a dope. I only want you to think the way I do...." (p. 355). The more sober manner, the less obviously brutal method, reveal the same desire for imaginative dominance on the part of Sam.

And as an enlargement of our earlier, brief discussion of the scene in which the children attach made-up names to their relatives, and to bring things full circle, we note Stead's contrasting of their innocent, imaginative endeavour through language, with the barely concealed threat to individual will contained in some of Sam's verbal inventions. For example:

"My system," Sam continued, "which I invented myself, might be called Monoman or Manunity!"

Evie laughed timidly, not knowing whether it was right or not. Louie said, "You mean Monomania."

Evie giggled and then lost all her color, became a stainless olive, appalled at her mistake.

Sam said coolly, "You look like a gutter rat, Looloo, with that expression. Monoman would only be the condition of the world after we had weeded out the misfits and degenerates." There was a threat in the way he said it (p. 50).

Stead's insertion of the sentence, "Evie laughed timidly, not knowing whether it was right or not," as a preface to Louie's scathing comment, adroitly introduces a sense of the advantage Sam is taking of the younger children with his verbal dexterity. Louie's sensitivity to this unmasks Sam, so that again the intention behind his playful inventiveness is suddenly and openly revealed in an ugly, overt threat and change of manner.

(If it seems that we might be concentrating overmuch on the relatively minor scenes in The Man Who Loved Children, it is because, as with any great work of art, it is often the little details we recall with the greatest pleasure, and which impress us with a sense of their creator's imaginative authority. Often our grasp of the great climactic moments of such works is concentrated, not only into our intense recall of these details, but also into a realization of their incidental, yet curiously immediate significance for the characters involved. When Hamlet's Queen Gertrude, in a magnificently evocative speech, gives her account of Ophelia's drowning, we are transfixed - as she, in a sense, must be, or else she would hardly mention it - by the detail of the willow's "hoar leaves" reflected "in the glassy stream," another "reflection" - though in an inscrutable, poetical dimension - of that momentary and pathetic suspension of Ophelia and "her weedy trophies" above "the weeping brook."<sup>13</sup>

Similarly in Madame Bovary, to take another example, Flaubert gives us numerous occasions to note a character's fixation on the minutiae of a crisis. As Emma lies twisted in her final agony she hears "from the pavement outside ... the loud noise of wooden shoes and the clattering of a stick,"<sup>14</sup> and dies frantically thinking of the blind man whose menacing image these sounds conjure for her.

But let us not confine this phenomenon to literature. Who does not watch and listen to Mozart's most sublime masterpiece without registering the barest traces of the Commendatore's music in the aftermath of Don Giovanni's fall to hell; we grasp at it as Leporello does, whilst he attempts to understand and convey what he has just witnessed, but for him and us it drains away like magic quicksilver, the stuff of a stupendous, terrifying, and glorious vision. Don Giovanni is full of such elusive and powerful moments, perhaps more so than any other work of art. We might also think of the brief sequence before the great Act II sextet, as Donna Anna and Don Ottavio appear dressed in mourning to the accompaniment of mysterious, barely audible drum-rolls and an extraordinarily smooth modulation to D minor, these a disturbing and surprising reminder of the grief and tragic doom at the

core of this opera.

And to take a more contemporaneous example, if in a very different vein to the Mozart, consider the film Repulsion, one of Polanski's more expertly directed psychological dramas. The heroine's fix on some pavement cracks, during certain key moments of her slow mental collapse, expands into nightmarish proportions for her and us, as Polanski plays cruelly and obsessively with the girl's bizarre link of "crack" and "crack-up"; the recurrent hallucinatory images of barely perceptible cracks suddenly and ferociously gaping open with a tremendous, ear-splitting roar, take the viewer into the heart of the tormented girl's illness, her wildly disproportionate response to the tiny and apparently meaningless details of life.

The Man Who Loved Children abounds with unforgettable, incidental moments also. We are unlikely ever to forget the moment when, during the violent climax of the first mighty argument between Sam and Henny, Sam suddenly exclaims, "'The gas is on full!' and Henny turned to it, and turned it down under the bubbling kettle" [p. 144]; or when Henny suddenly focuses on her wedding ring, and gives us one of the novel's most brilliant and well-known set pieces; or when in the playground of Louie's school the shoe is dislodged from the roof top and hits a teacher, a scene of startling beauty and pathos; or when Sam discovers Louie feverishly scrawling "Shut up, shut up" [p. 363] all over her homework papers; or when, shortly before Miss Aiden's visit, Louie makes a connection for the first time between the absence of drinking glasses in the Pollitt kitchen, and the family's poverty; or when Henny leaves the Washington bar after her final degrading scene with Bert and is subjected to the mocking laughter of three young girls; or when, directly after her death, one of the children's teachers suddenly appears to claim money loaned to Henny - a brief and surprising episode which miraculously checks the overwhelming hysteria of the suicide-murder sequence, and prepares us for the desolating, though normalizing, conclusion to that chapter with the words, "Louie turned back to give the children some breakfast" [p. 511]).

The character of Louie in The Man Who Loved Children is

a rich and enigmatic one, clearly representative of some of the novel's key issues, and although she has figured but slightly in our discussion so far, it is perhaps of more immediate importance to see her links with the other central personages first, as a means of creating the necessary frame of reference for a proper discussion of these key issues. Thus we should now turn our attention to the figure of Henny Pollitt, the other of Stead's grandiose creations who vies with Sam and Louie for central stage position throughout the book. In fact the conflict of three dominant, though very different, characters is dramatically satisfying in this work, as it has so often proved to be with immense works like the Agamemnon and Othello, or a calculated thriller like La Tosca.

Mention of the stage and theatre provides us with an appropriate opening for a discussion of Henny, touching as it does on a central aspect of the paradox of her character. For Henny, like the child-adult Sam, is a paradoxical character, and the contradiction resides in her combination of a perversely theatrical sort of romanticism, with her own avowed hard commonsense and pragmatism. Stead makes it clear from the beginning that these are problematically entwined, and not to be easily considered in isolation. Shortly after the famous, often-quoted passage which lists, like a monstrous re-working of Leporello's "Catalogue Aria," "the only creatures that Henny ever saw" (p. 9), her grotesque view of life, Stead informs us: "[W]hen she told her children tales of the villainies they could understand, it was not to corrupt them, but because, for her, the world was really so. How could their father, said she, so fool them with his lies and nonsense?" (p. 11). Henny's overblown, distorted view of a world ever peopled with "new characters of new horror" (p. 8) has as one of its components an entrenched protestation against the "lies and nonsense" of her husband, and the fantastic world she sees him as representing. Ironically, we are reminded of Sam's objections to the "sickening tommyrot" he finds in Louie's diary.

It is essential to grasp this as an incongruity, for in a sense it aligns Henny with Sam, if not so much in terms of a similarity between their respective visions, then in terms

of their mutual protestations against attitudes which nevertheless determine their own individual perspectives. Just as Sam's protestations against the imaginative life are a sham, so are Henny's against all supposedly falsified constructions of reality. However, Henny's capacity for self-deception, as we hope to show, is not rooted in the same impulses as those at work in Sam.

Before proceeding further we should ask, how justified are we in casting a shadow of doubt across the "authenticity" of Henny's view of reality? Randall Jarrell writes: "There is something grand and final, indifferent to our pity, about Henny: one of those immortal beings in whom the tragedy of existence is embodied, she looks unseeingly past her mortal readers."<sup>15</sup> Whilst containing much truth, such a statement does not give us a complete picture of Henny. Undoubtedly this character possesses some of the tragic eloquence and genuine passion of a tortured Aeschylean heroine: the massive suffering contained within the simple description of her heart breaking (p. 323), after the shift to Spa House, or the huge emotional gestures behind the great outburst to Ernie about her financial crisis, which culminates in her ghastly "Ugh-ugh" as her son sits "amongst the ruin of his money box" (p. 414), or her words to the same boy before she helplessly beats him, the novel's most terrible scene, all testify to this. But there is a wilfully perverse, indulgent and petty side to her nature as well; she may possess Aeschylean characteristics, but there is also a sense in which she appoints herself as one of Victorien Sardou's screeching monsters.

Thus occasionally the opulent viciousness of her tirades is more gratuitous than furious, or else simply mechanical, as if the real passionate negativism had dried up through mean-mindedness and become purely a process, a gossipy rite. For instance, as she sits with her relatives at Monocacy, monotonously gossiping about an acquaintance called Connie, who "had a breath like a salt mine and a great belly like a foaling mare, floating and bloating and talking about her medicine and when she went to the toilet" (p. 168), her distorted perspective, far from translating experience into a new and meaningful language, reveals simple tawdriness.

And so do her actions, when later she humiliates the servant girl Nellie by noisily refusing to touch the latter's clothes except with a pair of brass tongs, which she actually (and incredibly) produces whilst screaming her abuse. The tragic "immortal being" is at such moments replaced by a melodramatic hag, the shoddier half of our earlier theatrical equation.

Our emphasis on the need not to take Henny's view of reality on its own terms, without qualification - as some critics, in their reaction against Sam, are perhaps wont to do - is important, because Stead has, as with Sam and the other characters, made it part of a drama which reflects on the problem of human imagining in relationships, rather than contenting itself with the simpler task of overwhelming us with the "rightness" of the different ideologies or perspectives that might contribute to that drama. The Man Who Loved Children enables us not only to see the varying degrees of clearness and obfuscation inherent in the different perspectives, but to perceive first and foremost their connection with the various impulses at work in complex human relationships. No doubt our later discussion of Louie will appear to favour, in its underlining of certain moral principles, individual viewpoint over its relative position within a more objective scheme, but we can only hope to start making inevitable moral judgements after we have first attempted to come to terms with the other.

At this point we should return to our earlier claim that Henny's protestation against attitudes which all the same inform her own condition, links her with Sam in a crucial sense. But Henny's is a deadlock situation in the way that Sam's is not. Her rebuke of romance (this term a summary, really, of all that she claims to loathe in Sam and Louie) and her contradictory dependence on it as one of the governing principles of her life, is an abstract definition of her self-hatred, as we hope to show. It is this self-hatred, the internalization of the conflicts in her nature, which marks her as different from Sam.

Sam, the great externalizer, intending "to oil the universe with the game, and make the luxurious sportsmanlike spearfish work for mankind" (p. 408), is protected from the revelatory horrors - illusory or real - of introspection, and



this by a combination of natural childish "unknowingness" and outward-directed, adult manipulativeness; the world is him, but it is also a big toy to play with. He handles even his own suffering like the child who deliberately raises a scab to toy with it; the pain is clearly felt, but subordinated by the simple and mindless desire to tamper. Henny, ever associated with the cloistral image of her bedroom - a place of refuge crammed with a thousand items - and the lone game of solitaire, is trapped inside herself, a rat that has imagined that the confines of its box are smaller than they perhaps really are... In this sense the difference between Sam and Henny is the difference between misery and despair, but the extent to which the latter represents a form of knowledge that is in any sense "deeper" than the other, is an issue Stead calls into question and will be discussed when we come to consider the complicating factor of Louie.

Before returning to the important question of Henny's "self-hatred," we might connect what has just been said with two key passages occurring at one of the great climaxes of The Man Who Loved Children: the tremendous marlin-boiling episode, surely one of the most powerful sequences in all literature, as consistent, forceful and mysteriously evocative in its deployment of elemental imagery as one of the great scenes in Shakespeare. (As Jarrell points out in different words,<sup>16</sup> superlatives may be discovered by the score in so much criticism, but rarely can they be applied without fear of irresponsibility or over-indulgence, a privilege afforded all who are fortunate enough to find occasion to write on this marvellous book.)

The key passages we speak of describe Henny's final game of patience, a scene much commented on by the critics, and a closely related, though rarely - if at all - discussed moment occurring shortly afterwards, involving Sam.

The symbolic overtones of Henny's game, which takes place in her bedroom, should be remarked on first. It emphasizes not only her essential aloneness, but her need to create some sort of dialogue with herself within the confines of this sphere, as a form of imaginary escape. For if the self can imagine itself "from the outside," as it were, some

relief might be obtained from the illusion of distance this creates. But what Henny realizes with a terrible certainty in this scene, is that such a tactic is only a game, a form of cheating the self which is ultimately all the more self-alienating.

Significantly she begins playing her "famous double patience" (p. 471), only to realize that the dialogue between the two sets of cards is stalemated from the start. Of the subsequent game, which emphasizes the element of cheating, a means of bypassing the stalemate, we are told: "[It] looked unpromising, but the game started to come out with the greatest rapidity ... and Henny, used to cheating herself, this time was tempted to cheat the other way, blocking the solution" (p. 471). The wilfully negative self-opposition built into this, the sheer self-defeat and sense of entrapment, of all alternatives (even the good ones) leading up the same blind alley, reaches its devastating conclusion when, laying the cards out one more time, Henny realizes:

The game that she had played all her life was finished; she had no more to do: she had no game. She was angry and, picking up the cards again, shuffled them carefully and started to lay them out in the same old pattern, but she had only laid down nine cards when she was seized with such a violent nausea, such a feeling of the emptiness and aimlessness of the game - thinking that she might have to go through another fifteen or twenty years before it came out again! - that she gathered them quickly and threw them into her drawer loosely (p. 472).

This quality of self-reference, or internalization, about which more will be said later, is conspicuously absent from Stead's portrayal of Sam. In order to understand all the implications of Henny's symbolic game of solitaire (it is symbolic in a double sense, being evocative of wider issues for both Henny and the reader), we need contrast it with the brief scene occurring shortly afterwards. Here we witness Sam standing in the open-air washhouse, boiling up the

monstrous fish, and suddenly assailed with feelings of purposelessness and emptiness. The recurrence of the notions of aimlessness and futility provides the strongest and most explicit link with the card-playing sequence, and the outdoor setting tellingly contrasts with the earlier bedroom setting and its evocation of enclosure and the paralysis of despair:

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? I musn't think that, thought Sam, shaking himself and beginning to hammer out bent nails that he had saved from old packing cases: waste not, want not, same applies to energy. Musn't waste emotion, want it for a great job in the future, maybe....  
(p. 474).

Sam's blind spot, which protects him as the little children are by theirs, is created by his inability, and refusal, to take seriously the inner life; that is, to accept the level of "personal truth" created for most adult humans by their commitment to their own deeper thoughts and feelings, as diverse and sometimes potentially dangerous as these might be. His odd moments of suffering are deliberately lost in a flurry of industry, completely forgotten by sundown on a Sunday-Funday. His pangs are like little Evie's sudden, tearful outburst after Louie relates the tale of "Hawkins," quickly put aside and tucked away. But with the small child, of course, we feel that this process is completely natural, since her experience of suffering has nothing larger to relate to than a child's limited, albeit intense, conception of life; her imagination has yet to take root in those "dark places of the heart,"<sup>17</sup> which Stead knows so well.

But Henny has a blind spot too, and this is located,

ironically, in the faculty for "internalization" so noticeably lacking in her husband. And this brings us back to the point about her self-hatred, and the link between this and certain conflicts in her nature, which will now be discussed.

The strange scene in which Henny makes to strangle her step-daughter, and then puts her hands to her own throat in a repetition of the same motion, is our most important key to this, and tells us as much about Henny as the scene with the blowfly tells us about Sam. With a few strokes Stead creates an image of a gesture, an action, which gives us more insight into a character than we could hope to gain from pages of description. The notion of an attitude, an idea, turning back violently upon itself is a fundamental mechanism of desperate, internal conflict. Therefore when we are told that "Louie had not been wrong in seeing a distorted sympathy for her in Henny's pretense [sic] of strangling her the night before" (p. 37), we too are not wrong in seeing the reciprocal truth embodied in this; notably the distorted self-hatred implied by Henny's pretence of strangling herself. "Henrietta dropped her arms quickly and gripped her own neck with an expression of disgust...." (p. 20). We note that Henny explicitly states her own self-hatred in one of the great, distressing scenes of the book, after Bonnie has given birth to an illegitimate child and the self-righteous Jo makes an embarrassing scene before the Pollitts:

I've been dirty and low and done things you're both too stupid and too cowardly to do, but however low I am, I'm not so filthy crawling in the stench of the gutter, I haven't got a heart of stone, I don't sniff, sniff, sniff when I see a streetwalker with a ragged blouse, too good to know what she is: I hate her but I hate myself (p. 463).

We might ask, what is this self-hatred produced by, and what are its prime manifestations? The answer is not as obvious as we might expect it to be. That is, it is not the simple product of the sexual nausea, and underlying guilt, hinted at in the above quotation and made more explicit elsewhere (as when, for instance, she refers to Louie's on-

coming puberty: "It makes me sick to think that I have to tell her what's coming to her, what she has to go through ... I couldn't drag her into all the darn muck of existence myself" [p. 126]). It is, all the same, bound up with her attitude towards Louie and, of course, her attitude towards Sam.

What Henny most often holds against these characters, significantly, is what she regards as their faithlessness to the real world, their imaginative indulgence in a fairy-tale realm of existence which cannot, now or ever, represent the truth. She tells Bert:

When I married him [Sam] he had more than four thousand books and not one novel! He lectured me so when he caught me with one of Hassie's library books that I didn't dare read a novel for six months. But like all hypocrites and sneaks, it's all right if it has another label. He lets that child of his read stuff about hysteria - nuns having fits in convents and dreaming the Old One has what he might have for all I know, and animals breeding and old customs on European farms and all sorts of rot he lets that child of eleven read, because it's science! She drives me mad with her reading. She's that Big-Me all over again. Always with her eyes glued to a book. I feel like snatching the rotten thing from her and pushing it into her eyes, into her great lolling head: I'd like to stew the rotten books in one of my jam pans and make them both eat it. The feast of learning he's always talking about! I'd like to see their great bellies swell with their dirty scientific books the way he makes mine with wind....(pp. 90-91)

As is so often the case in this book such a statement is multi-faceted, and here reflects as much on Henny as her own perceptive comments about her husband's scientific pretensions ironize the portrait of Sam. For instance, she starts off by criticizing the absence of a fictional dimension to her husband's reading tastes - there being a sense of complaint in her words, "I didn't dare read a

novel for six months" - before adjusting to a slightly different mode of attack which emphasizes Sam's hypocrisy. The ire directed at his double standards cannot but expose some of her own.

We know from elsewhere that, although cast aside with an impatient cry, there are romantic novels to be found aplenty in Henny's bedroom. And, even shortly before temporarily deserting her family towards the end of the book, in a state of extreme despair, she attempts to read what is presumably a copy of Gone With The Wind - especially popular during the period of the novel's setting - and it becomes apparent that it is not the work's romanticism that upsets her as a fact in itself, but her realization that fate has not provided her with a like destiny. "[She] got into bed, to try and read the saga of upland Georgian gentility, which she had three times abandoned because she, Henny, had 'no fancy big buck niggers to wait on her and lick her boots': but once more she threw it away. Where, indeed, was she to find heroes to succor her and how could she succeed in business with her spendthrift ways. 'I'm a failure all right,' said Henny...." (p. 443). Importantly, Henny does not deny the possibility of leading the charmed life of a Southern belle; she is a "failure" on her own terms because she has not been able to make the possibility an actuality.

This may not seem a major point, but it has wider implications, bringing us back to our earlier assertions about the conflict in Henny between her self-conscious disgust at romance, and her channelling of her own thoughts and visions through a romantic perspective. We need only consider one of Stead's earliest descriptions of Henny's thoughts for an example of the latter:

[S]he could ... feel the sounds and scents of Saturdays long swept away on the long roller of years, when she was a thin-blooded, coquettish girl, making herself bleed at the nose for excitement, throwing herself on the lawns of Monocacy in a tantrum, spitting fire at the servants, coaxing her father, waiting for the silly toys her father would buy her - engagement to a commercial fortune, marriage

to a great name, some unexpected stroke of luck in blue-blooded romance, social fun, nursemaids, two fashionable children in pink and blue. These things surged out of the past, as she sat there ... If she became conscious of these streams on the rainbow fringe of memory, she would bite her lip and flush, perhaps angry at her indulgent father for getting her the man he had got, angry at herself for having been so weak (pp. 11-12).

The key words "these streams on the rainbow fringe of memory," might lead us to expect some indication of Henny's recognition of the falseness of such idealizations, but it is the author's comment only. Again, Henny's anger is not directed at the dream, but at what she regards as the simple mechanisms, her father's indulgence and her own weak will, which prevented it becoming actuality. Deep down, she believes such marvels to be not only possible but desirable. Her Scarlett O'Hara princess-fantasy, although now fraught with the despair and fear of an aging heroine in a Tennessee Williams play, remains stuck in Henny's throat, never completely assimilated into her vivid protestations against romance and illusion, until perhaps the very end, when it is too late.

Henny's attachment to Bert is revealing from this angle too. He is the nearest she can come, in her wretched state, to finding a real Rhett Butler. If this initially strikes us as a peculiar notion, we should consider Henny's view of Bert as she rushes through Washington to meet him in the early part of the book. Despite the inevitable wryness of her outlook, we are struck by the way she stereotypes him as a man capable of making a woman like herself feel young again, who will be attentive to all her complaints, and who will play the roll of rough-hewn, free-wheeling and affluent libertarian, and libertine:

This little preview of Bert Anderson, her stand-by from the Department of Internal Revenue, made Henny smile a little. This red-cheeked, lusty, riotous giant was not a gentleman, but he treated her as a single girl, listened to every word she had to

say, always seemed eager, gave her advice, and was fascinated by money matters. He called her jocosely 'young Henrietta,' too, tried to improve her appearance in his brutal style, behaved like a grizzly-bear cub, and had no morality, character, ambitions, or way of life that she need respect (p. 88).

The fact that we feel obliged to qualify Henny's commitment to certain romantic ideals by emphasizing the wryness of her outlook (for Bert is "her stand-by from the Department of Internal Revenue," and no more glamorous than that), brings us back to the main problem that this character poses for the reader. We perhaps succumb to the character of Henny Pollitt more readily than we do to Sam because of her "self-irony," since this implies a perspective on the self absent from the latter. We know that perspective on the self often forestalls criticism, if it does not actually create sympathy, but the point needs to be taken further than this. For Stead also knows that self-irony is an aspect of human personality which more often than not - because of this inbuilt forestallment of criticism it implies - feeds a defensive, protective attitude towards the self, and may therefore distort or even prevent true perspective. As we will see in a later chapter, her portrayal of Nellie Cotter in Cotters' England, to quote an extreme example, is a frightening instance of how a person's capacity to ironize romanticism, to put across a view of herself that incorporates a measure of self-understanding and the perspective of distance, becomes a harmful weapon in her dealings with other people, an extension of her powerful need to subordinate others emotionally and intellectually, and an actual means of promoting her own dangerously solipsist, romance-based ideology.

This is not to suggest that the figure of Henny Pollitt closely resembles that of the demonic Nellie, but both characters use their assumptions of counter-positions, even to the self, as a pretence to an uncompromising grasp on their own lives. We recall that Sam's use of self-irony in some of the scenes with the children reveals his misuse of power and a genuinely ironic inability to perceive himself. With Henny there is perhaps no wilful misuse of other people (as opposed to the instance of Nellie Cotter, the most rapacious



victimizer in Stead's immense gallery of victimizers), but she does nevertheless become an unknowing victim of her own counter-positions to herself, her husband and her step-daughter.

We suggested earlier that Henny is like a rat which has imagined that the confines of its box are smaller than they perhaps really are. In other words, by imposing upon herself a defensively realist stance, as a means of counter-ing the painful unattainability of her own dreams, without really coming to terms with their illusoriness, she automatically prescribes for herself a world of tail-chasing self-defeat, of which rage and negativism and self-hatred are the inevitable products. When she puts her hands to Louie's throat and makes to strangle her, and then turns the action back upon herself, she unconsciously expresses the deadlock in her own nature. For in hating what Louie represents, this youthful dreamer who spins an endless web of romance and fantasy, she must also hate herself, this person who does not really give way to the ugliness she is forever acknowledging, and who yearns in the final instance to be young again, to have wealth and comfort, and to be the focus of attention, a Baltimore butterfly.

One of Henny's moments of true insight supports this. After leaving her family, she exclaims to Hassie: "Any marriage I made would have gone smash ... I was born for excitement" (p. 445). She has, as she realizes in the solitaire sequence, cheated "the other way" most of her life, blocked her dreams with an exaggerated vision of reality that accommodates enough ugliness to produce a deadlock between the two, because she would prefer this soul-destroying stalemate to the complete dissolution of all her hopes and the total despair that this would bring. And total despair is the consequence of her final inability to continue the game. We recall the key words:

The game that she had played all her life was finished ... picking up the cards again ... [she] started to lay them out in the same old pattern, but she had only laid down nine cards when she was seized with such a violent nausea, such

a feeling of the emptiness and aimlessness of the game.....

That Henny in a sense becomes her own devil's advocate, unable to free herself from the internal world of conflict she has defensively organized as a desperate bid to preserve her romanticism - again the patterning of the "double" patience game comes to mind - is not to deny the pressures exerted upon her from the outside world. These of necessity limit her ability to fight her way to a vantage point beyond despair. We are not forgetting her marriage to an impossible ideologue, her wretched poverty, or the immense task which befalls her of feeding and clothing a tribe of children. But her own mental framework for all this, as Stead reveals with brilliant psychological insight, compounds her inability to make any move in the direction of freedom.

In discussing The Man Who Loved Children it will not suffice to say that such a move is impossible, given the pressures and rigidities of external reality, unless we ignore the figure of Louie, a character with a capacity for suffering that is perhaps even larger than her step-mother's, and who discovers valid, not illusory, imaginative escape within a situation that is conceivably more crushing for her than anything experienced by the other characters, including Henny. Stead wants us to ask why, for instance, the appalling conflicts she describes seem to pave the way to escape for a character like Louie, and yet produce a horrible death for Henny.

It is one of the terrible ironies of Henny's plight that her defensive attitude to the imaginative life causes her to alienate her one potential ally and sympathizer - Louie. Defensiveness, as Stead knows, blurs the human capacity for making fine, even not-so-fine distinctions between things, and despite the "wonderful particular world" (p. 9) Henny sees, she cannot really distinguish between the different imaginative worlds represented by husband and step-daughter - raging equally against both - and constantly ignores the glaring clash between the two, so eager is she to counter-attack that which is so deeply

buried in herself. As Veronica Brady claims: "Endowed with great energy, she nevertheless falls imaginatively."<sup>18</sup>

Henny's becomes the enclosed, internal world of brooding, devious self-attack, as destructive to the self as Sam's world of bland imperviousness is destructive to others. "Despising them [the Pollitts], she despised herself, who had been married to them...." (p. 267). As Bert Anderson tells her, after one of her tirades: "Now the mistake you make, young Henrietta, is that you think about these things all the time...." (p. 91). Like one of the raging, imprecatory, stormy figures in Verdi, she takes flight on the outpouring of her agonies whilst rooted to the spot by the paralysis this creates, the paralysis which is also, ironically, a prior condition of her declamation.

Before proceeding to a discussion of Louie we should once again remind ourselves of the key issues pervading The Man Who Loved Children, and then see their fundamental associations with this character. What we have been describing essentially in our discussions of the Pollitt children, Sam, and Henny, is the "enclosed" nature of their imaginative lives, but also the different applications of this idea in each instance. That is, the imaginative enclosure of the children is a form of protection, but without the overtones both of emotional retardation and manipulateness associated with Sam, or the defensive nihilism of Henny, which conceals an underlying desperate romanticism that eventually drags her under like a tangle of water-weeds tugging at the feet of an exhausted swimmer.

In all cases, though, it affords some sort of shelter, or protection. That Henny destroys herself, whilst Sam blithely continues on his happy path of destruction, does not testify to the former's confrontation of the real world in all its ugly, poisonous garb. Rather it reminds us that self-protection, with defensiveness as its basis, often has a way of delivering the protagonist into its own snares. Sam's luck is that his form of imaginative entrapment manifests itself in explosions of "outwardness," so that others, and not him, are hit by the shrapnel. Henny's mischance, and this is not necessarily any worse in the last instance, is that she implodes.

These notions of "enclosure" and "protection" are, in Stead's analysis, the basis of alienation and the breakdown of communication. Sam and Henny are, essentially, isolated people, no longer able to communicate, although our sense is, ironically, of their immense capacities for vocalization. The latter, however, rarely - if ever - breaks through the internal worlds of power hunger or defensiveness to make real contact with anything outside. Hence Stead's emphasis on so much ritualized communicative endeavour; the absurd collection of books Sam gives Louie to help explain the world to her, or the little notes Henny leaves lying about for her husband. It is ironic that in these instances actual textual exchange is symptomatic of a critical communication breakdown between characters; and it tells us something about the meaninglessness of words when robbed of the real human impulse to communicate, an impulse alive, as we shall now show, in the character of Louie.

Caught between the worlds of childhood and adulthood, Louie represents the stage at which the emergence from the child's state of imaginative enclosure means the confrontation of two, essentially moral, alternatives. We say "emergence," although at first glance it might appear that Louie, not Henny or Sam, is the truly solipsistic character of the book, creating her own private world within an environment that compels her to withdraw and internalize. Certainly Sam and Henny both accuse her of this, ironically. "You only want to think about yourself, that's the truth" (p. 439), Sam tells her, echoing the import of Bert's words to Henny. But Louie is perhaps the only major character in the book who comes to understand what true communication is, and as we hope to demonstrate, it is her awareness of the erosion of its real and vital nature that goads her into serious action. Battered by the misery which afflicts Sam and the despair that overcomes Henny, Louie still manages to grasp something beyond both, although there are inevitable limits to this.

The way in which Stead registers the first stirrings in Louie of an awareness of certain curious, imaginative "significances" intruding upon her child's world, is extraordin-

arily subtle and truthful. Literature is full of precocious adolescents; but Louie's "precocity," if we may even call it that, is authentic to the last degree because Stead knows the most intimate and discomfoting aspects of the adolescent psyche, and with unnerring accuracy places her character's ever-developing vision within the context of the awkwardness, confusion, blind unknowingness and naivete that is to be expected in any young girl her age. This, incidentally, adds to rather than subtracts from the impression we receive of Louie comprehending something that the other characters in the book will never, or only partially, grasp. We are disarmed by the utter lack of artifice.

In a scene we have already quoted from, Stead's absolutely real admixture of adolescent pretentiousness, confusion and genuine insight, in her portrait of Louie, is well exemplified. After Sam tells his daughter that he wants her not "to be" like him, but "to think" as he does, we are informed:

She felt terribly ashamed of herself: why couldn't she be civil, after the four ice-cream sodas for her and Clare? But as sure as he opened his mouth, she knew, she would begin to groan and writhe like any Prometheus; she smiled apologetically, "It's the nature of the beast" (p. 355).

Here Louie is clearly rebelling, intuitively, against the order of oppression Sam represents, but she is beset by confusions. After all, ought not she be deferential to her father because he is "her father," and thus logically wiser and more powerful than she? But her dissatisfaction with this over-simplification of the issue struggles to articulate itself; and, of course, can only find expression in the pretentious, typically over-serious language of the sensitive and hyper-conscious adolescent: "[S]he smiled apologetically, 'It's the nature of the beast.'" Stead compels us to smile too, though without condescension.

The moral alternatives we refer to are, in essence, those which we spoke of at the beginning of the discussion when we stated: "Stead presents the human imagination in her book as a potential source of liberation and moral worth, prov-

iding it is not misused." A necessary precondition of this, clearly, is acknowledgement of the role of the imagination in human life; and in Louie's case this acknowledgement is conspicuous by virtue of the absence of the defensiveness found in Henny and Sam. In other words, whilst it would be both pedantic and inaccurate to claim that Louie actually decides that there is such an issue at stake, the very fact that - unlike her father and step-mother - she is not anxious to prove the absence of one, tells us a great deal. Louie, on the brink of adulthood, revels freely in the life of the imagination, as we repeatedly learn:

She was glowing with pleasure and imagining a harlequinade of scenes in which she, Louie, was acting, declaiming (but not, not like the Pollitts, nor like comic-opera Auntie Bonnie), to a vast, shadowy audience stretching away into an opera house as large as the world, with tiers of boxes as high as the Cathedral at least. She had a leading man, a shade of giant proportions, something like Mephisto, but he did not count, she only counted: she projected the shadow of her soul over this dream population, who applauded from time to time with a noise like leaves bowling over the path....(p. 51)

Louie knew she was the ugly duckling. But when a swan she would never come sailing back into their village pond; she would be somewhere away, unheard of, on the lily-rimmed oceans of the world. This was her secret. But she had many other intimations of destiny, like the night rider that no one heard but herself. With her secrets, she was able to go out from nearly every one of the thousand domestic clashes of the year and, as if going through a door into another world, forget about them entirely. They were the doings of beings of a weaker sort (p. 59).

We should be careful not to associate this "romanticism" exclusively with a biological drive to escape unhappiness, a point we will be taking up in the following chapter in our

discussion of Teresa Hawkins. For when Louie enters that "door into another world" she confronts two more, one opening onto a vista of pandemonium and destruction, the other offering a potential for freedom. The crucial words in the second quotation, "They were the doings of beings of a weaker sort," point us in the direction of the problem Stead is tackling.

Louie, in shedding her cocoon of childish unself-consciousness, automatically brings to her new self-conscious relationship with the external world a sense of imaginative autonomy. And it is this imaginative autonomy, by now so inflexible in Sam and Henny, which can be either harmful or helpful, oppressive or liberating. In Louie's case it first manifests itself in a newly gained sense of power, of superiority; she imagines herself vis-à-vis "beings of a weaker sort." Undoubtedly Sam has helped fashion these attitudes, as we realize from the beginning when we learn of Louie's feelings towards her neighbours: "Though Louie knew them much better than he did, she saw them with his eyes, as ridiculous if not positively touched, filthy and mean-spirited...." (p. 72).

But it is not as simple as this, for Stead also stresses the independent aspect of Louie's new imaginative discoveries, as seen in the following quotation, one of the most central to the novel's underlying themes:

[A]s Louie grew up, she obeyed less and less, not letting things slip by inadvertance or sly disobedience, but refusing to do things in open revolt - "I will not because it is not right!" Now, Louie had her own right and wrong, she was already entering their world of power [emphasis added] (p. 110).

Here the equation of imagined autonomy with the "world of power" is quite explicit. The construction of one's own vision of reality, as Stead knows, does not take place in a vacuum; it belongs with the world of conflict, wherein the struggle for dominance has high stakes. In Stead's vision this sense of imaginative autonomy, whether grasped consciously or unconsciously, is like a dangerous, but potentially valuable drug; in the wrong hands it can cause

considerable destruction, yet in another's be used constructively.

Our essentially melodramatic expression of the issue, however, which drastically reduces Stead's fine and complex analysis to a piece of simple algebra, might lead us to stereotype Louie as the polar opposite to Sam's and Henny's destructiveness; something we warned against earlier. This is not the case. Louie's rebellion against Sam, for instance, whilst clearly a protest against the repressive hold he has on herself and the other children, is only partly so. For it is fuelled as much by the blind and indiscriminate will to power, to domination, which is the basis of Sam's attitudes, and a fundamental aspect, in this novel and other works by Stead, of human life. That Louie transcends the values represented by Sam, as we hope soon to demonstrate, is no mean achievement, but neither is it a transcendence in the absolute sense, for that would be to argue against the author's unfailing grasp of the limits of human endeavour. Stead allows a lot and her vision often seems generous, especially by twentieth-century standards, but she is rarely sentimentally over-generous, and any idealism is most often rigorously tested.

A highly interesting conclusion to the chapter which expatiates for the first time on Louie's passion for her teacher Miss Aiden, helps us to distinguish the character's "moral" rebellion against Sam from the other form of rebellion, which is a manifestation of the power urge cut off from commitment to anything other than glorification of the ego. We consider the following:

The children soon knew all about Miss Aiden, and tried to tease their eldest about her love, but she was too serious, and too enthusiastic, and she would recite to them for hours on end, while they sat with rosy, greedy faces upturned, listening. Then Louie would act, and tell them how it would be done on the stage, thus and thus; and she would try to get them to act with her. Sometimes, Sam would creep in, unexpected, in this verdant theater at the orchard's end, and would stand quietly at



the back, rather surprised at his daughter. On these occasions only did a kind of humility creep into him; and Louie, seeing it, would strike at him verbally, or flash a look which said, plainer than speaking, "I am triumphant, I am king" (p. 341).

A telling counterpoint to Sam's constant spell-binding of the children, this episode would impress us with the relative innocence of Louie's imaginative play, if it were not for Stead's deliberately jarring inclusion of the final observation. Specifically, it is Sam's aspect of "humility" at these moments which feeds Louie's sense of power and domination. It betrays an element in this character of that all too easily recognizable egotism which so often takes its cue from others' loss of face. But Louie's power-seeking has a dimension to it which Sam's does not have. "What it must be ... to taste supreme power!" (p. 17) Sam muses, absurdly, as if "power" is the very last thing on earth he possesses. This lack of perspective on the self, which bespeaks Sam's total imaginative enclosure, is in Louie's instance transformed into a sort of guilty awareness of her own new capacity for adult emotion and action; and her unself-conscious refusal to suppress this awareness leaves her free to make certain important decisions. After Sam gives her copies of Shelley, Frazer and Bryce, for her "enlightenment," we are told (and we note her awareness of her new-found powers): "[T]he more she read of these works, the more she felt guilty of power of her own, and she began suddenly to despise and loathe Sam with an adult passion" (p. 379).

Louie's imaginative awakening constantly points her in two directions; towards an understanding of and ability to communicate life's complexities on the one hand, and on the other towards a condition of Nietzschean superiority so that "whatever she did for herself, on her own initiative, was right and she would defy the world" (p. 177). The first finds its greatest expression in her ability to relate her great passion for literature to her own experiences, and - in a reciprocal gesture - to translate her insights into literary effort. Literature helps determine Louie's out-

look; but we say "helps" only, in case it should be construed, as sometimes it unfortunately is, that the actual attraction of literature for certain individuals and not others, is not at least as important a factor as its effect on them. After all, in her best works, Stead is eager to restore our sense of the individual's autonomy, as much as focus our attention on external factors. And in The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone, particularly, we feel that "external factors" are purely an outgrowth of the human. (Actually some may feel that this is not the case with For Love Alone, but we will take that up in the following chapter.)

More than anything else, literature gives Louie a language for the expression of her deepest passions and beliefs. It renders her articulate, but sometimes more than a little awkward also, whenever there is a mismatching of the weight of the words she uses and the context in which they appear; but again, we attribute this to her age. More often than not we are impressed by Louie's articulateness. And we are especially impressed by her ability to perceive, even from the rag bag of romantic works Sam foists on her to rationalize, ironically, her "unscientific" view of life, the relevance of others' experience to her own. In doing this she makes an important imaginative connection with the outer world, discovering one means, at least, of bypassing that condition whereby she fears that "she only felt what was going on under the ribs of the visible world" (p. 381). We learn:

To escape Sam she would always run away from the house with her book, usually Shelley (she wanted to marry a man like Shelley, only Shelley), and read and learn. The Cenci, a famous piece, she had avoided for weeks because the subject seemed forbidding, but when she at last began to read it, she began marveling again, for it seemed that (eliminating the gloomy and gorgeous scene) Beatrice was in a case like hers (p. 382).

Just as Louie drinks from Henny's "brackish well of hate," as a means of making herself strong enough "to resist the depraved healthiness and idle jollity of the

Pollitt clan" (p. 258), so too does she drink from the well of literature, seeing upon its surface a reflection of her own great imaginative potential. "Then she wished to become great. At present she only read about men of destiny" (p. 135). And as just stated, it helps give her feelings flesh and form, as in the following, much-quoted passage, where her own intense, romantic sensuousness suddenly becomes one with a searing intellectual appraisal of her situation:

... Louie, dragging herself by main force out of those frightful sloughs of despondency and doubt and uncleanness which seemed to be sucking her down, with amorous, muddy lips, saw hours of lightnings, when the universe split from heaven to hell and in the chasm writhed the delirium of glory, the saturnalia of which explained her world to her: she would stand on the beach watching the tall dry grass which stood in the moistest part of the shore and suddenly she would think,

Who can see aught good in thee  
Soul-destroying Misery?

and in this flash of intelligence she understood that her life and their lives were wasted in this contest and that the quarrel between Henny and Sam was ruining their moral natures (pp. 332-3).

With great subtlety Stead makes a distinction between the obvious, superficial appeal of romanticism to the adolescent mind and its potentially more serious appeal to the adult instinct for self-knowledge and the consequent knowledge of others. We never forget that Louie is still part child: how typical that someone her age, and with her interests, should want "to marry a man like Shelley, only Shelley." But we are also compelled to come to terms with the adult nature of her response, which carries with it a whole set of moral ambiguities revolving around the issues of power and individual will; issues so difficult for her - anyone - to resolve.

Before returning to this, we note that Louie intuitively associates the "moral nature" with the human obligation both to understand the self and others, and to communicate this

understanding. This provides the basic drive for her own creativity, through which she often attempts to convey her own realizations about the communication breakdown that is slowly corroding human potential within the Pollitt household. Significantly, she stages her play Tragedy of the Snake-Man in an invented language, an unconscious means of emphasizing or highlighting the desperate gestures contained within, since she now knows that direct pleas are useless. Her point is grimly proved too when she gives Sam the translation and he is still incapable of understanding its message. "I don't understand: is it a silly joke?" (p. 404), he asks.

Louie comes to realize the potential for destruction inherent in her parents' actual, and her own impending alienation. She says to Sam: "But all these quarrels - we don't understand each other" (p. 365). Sam replies: "Yes we do, Looloo girl ... yes we do: these are just little storms in a teacup that will pass over" (p. 365). Sam's "storm in a teacup" attitude and Louie's "stürm und drang" one, are well contrasted. If the latter is sometimes romantically overblown and excessive, it at least thunders its message throughout the book after a fashion that Sam's tinny little response can barely compete against.<sup>19</sup>

For all this, however, Louie's imaginative awakening points her in two directions, as we have been maintaining. Her capacity for understanding merges with a will to power, and in the light of some of the novel's final climactic scenes we cannot help feeling that the two on one level might be interdependent, and frighteningly so. Thus our earlier assertion that Louie's unrepressive attitude towards her own new strength leaves her free to decide between positive and negative action - in a way that Sam, for instance, cannot - is possibly an over-simplification of the problem. In the harrowing sequence leading up to Henny's death it is precisely the intertwinement of the positive and the negative which helps create the tragic deadlock we are presented with; it seems hardly possible to see any clear distinction between the two any more, for although the sequence points towards some form of liberation, the presence of dreadful suffering is nowhere else more starkly apparent.

In Brady's article a good case is argued for the influence of Sam's theories of justifiable murder on Louie's momentous decision to destroy her parents, but there is evidence to suggest that it is rather their mutual exclusiveness which Stead really focuses on, and which presents the real challenge to the reader. We mentioned earlier that some of Sam's initially disturbing notions about the ideal society, where even the "meridian of murder" (p. 130) might legitimately be crossed "for the good of others" (p. 135), really carry no more weight, as a deeply felt ideology, than his own contradictory romanticism: "[W]e must get away from this dry-as-dust system which crushes the inspiration, the faith, dreams, hopes, aspirations of youth" (p. 353). As Stead tells us in the objective narrative: "All the children ... believed that Sam was utterly innocent, which in fact he was, innocent too, of all knowledge of men, business, and politics, a confiding and sheltered child strayed into public affairs"(pp. 334-5).

The ultimate egotism of the child-adult's unknowing egotism constantly shows through in the portrayal of Sam, so that what at first looks like a consistent deployment of brutal irony both at the expense of the character and his presumed ideology, is rather a direct revelation of Sam's dangerous innocence. This is not to dispute the fact that irony is often directed at Sam, as it is at the other characters also; but to regard all of Sam's utterances as evidence of a devastating ironical attack upon his character, or upon the spirit of totalitarianism many regard him as upholding, is to detract from this important point.

Of course this says nothing about the possible effect of Sam's theories on Louie, unless we use it to reinforce our sense of the different nature of the imaginative sources which govern their individual actions and attitudes. For the potentials for dangerous actions inherent in both characters lie in essentially different areas of imaginative experience. Dangerous innocence and dangerous knowledge produce different kinds of suffering, both for the one who inflicts and the one who receives. Thus one of the book's deadliest ironies reminds us that whilst with a dangerously oppressive character like Sam, a theory of permissible murder is merely

an extension of his childish toying with ideas too large for him to understand fully, it can with someone like Louie - given her rhapsodic association of insight with will, yet to be properly discussed - be translated into definite action. Sam, after all his dubious theorizing, reacts with genuine disbelief and horror to Louie's story of how she tampered with Henny's drink: "The truth isn't in you, only some horrible stupid mess of fantasies mixed up with things I can't even think about" (pp. 522-3).

Before taking up all the moral issues at stake in the enigmatic climax of the book, it is necessary to emphasize that The Man Who Loved Children is no bald-faced philosophical tract. With the sort of psychological realism that can almost brush theory aside altogether, the author manages to convince us that it is the most natural thing in the world for a highly sensitive adolescent, under the insupportable duress of extreme familial disharmony, to contemplate murdering her parents. Indeed such things are no doubt more common than would be generally acknowledged, like the events in Dostoyevsky's newspaper clippings, although we are arguing not only for commonplaceness but normality, shocking as this will be to some. And so even in this life-and-death matter we are forced to consider - from Stead's non-hysterical and often wryly comic vantage point - a gauche and naive adolescent perspective, as much as ponder the abstract dilemma with all its attendant overtones of moral ambiguity. For example:

If I killed them both we would be free. The only thing is, I don't want to go to jail, I must get through school and go on the stage, so I have to go to dramatic school. All this quarrelling and crying is just ruining my face for the stage too (p. 501).

To return to the moral dilemma, however - so enriched by Stead's refusal to gloss the rough edges of human experience with academic gravity and laboured point-making - we note that when Louie decides in her mind to kill Sam and Henny, she automatically aligns insight with will. These are the two faces of the new imaginative discovery she makes as she passes from childhood to adulthood. "She saw, with

free lungs and a regularly beating heart, that this was the right thing to do: she should have done it before but had not had the insight nor the will" (p. 503). Louie's passionate refusal to block, as Sam and Henny do, her own capacity to see right into the heart of a situation, gives her power, a power more consciously grasped than Sam's is, and not inhibited through defensiveness, as Henny's is. " ... I never lie. Why should I lie? Those who lie are afraid of something" (p. 522). And because the power this gives Louie is eventually so consciously grasped, so uninhibited, it takes her to the very crossroads of the "right" and "wrong" she is so preoccupied with.

We said earlier that the climax of the book is enigmatic. It is enigmatic because these metaphorical crossroads, far from intersecting at a definite and measurable angle, nightmarishly twist at the last instance into a sort of moral parallelism, so that the fixed point of moral reference in Louie's mind becomes lost when translated into real action. And that is why we cannot with certainty state exactly what happens in Henny's death scene, why we cannot, for instance, refer with absolute accuracy to a "suicide," or to a "murder," justifiable or otherwise. Like one of the many deeply ambiguous scenes in Hamlet, we feel that there are two incompatible truths being played out through two separate, or different, courses of action.

There are a number of key quotations in the relevant scene which reveal to us the essential nature of the tragic deadlock Louie suddenly encounters and partly creates. "She made the tea in a convulsion of trembling, and when it was made, a nausea of fear and doubt came over her - was she doing the right thing? To settle it, she slid the grains of cyanide all into one large breakfast cup...." (pp. 505-6). We observe that at the point of action Louie can find no answer to her question, and to resolve or "settle" it (a finely ambiguous word here, suggesting also willed repression), can but carry out an action which begs the same question. And that is why, at the precise moment Henny becomes suspicious and demands to know what Louie has just done, the latter is struck dumb, not only because she is experiencing fear, but because she knows that to say or do anything, now

that she has been cut loose from the mere moral "question," the abstract in isolation, is to invite inevitable catastrophe. "Louie opened her mouth but only like a fish taking in air: she was struck dumb. She pointed to her mouth, the cup, shook her head" (p. 506). In using an anguished sign language to communicate the danger to Henny, Louie also provides her step-mother with vital information that will actually determine the latter's final destructive action.

However this suggests that the matter is in the final instance completely taken out of Louie's hands, and it is not quite as simple as this. Her action is not clearly and absolutely a warning, but something far less determinate, for when Sam appears on the scene at the crucial point we are told: "Louie looked from one to the other, waiting for what she could not imagine to open before her; but she was unable to speak a word: she just shook her head to them, to herself" (p. 506). This indeterminacy - does Louie's head shake connote a warning to her parents, or to herself for trying to prevent a deed that must be carried out? - is echoed in the terrible moment when Henny "deliberately" swallows the poison; "a look of horror filling her as if she would have stopped herself but could not arrest the motion" (p. 507). The point at which human decision making begins and ends is pursued by Stead with a frightening vigour in this scene, as is the applicability of moral terminology to these events which might appear, ultimately, to take place in a moral vacuum. At least Louie's later private assertion that "she had done the only right thing" (p. 517) is an over-simplification of the problem, and one which is clearly at odds with the tenor of ambiguity pervading the actual scene.<sup>20</sup>

We have discussed this particular sequence in some detail primarily to show the inevitable limits of that imaginative autonomy Louie believes she possesses, especially when it comes to probing ultimate questions of right and wrong. As we have already said, Stead has no romantic attachment to notions of absolute moral transcendence or absolute power, even if her final view of humankind in this novel appears to assert the possibility and desirability of using the considerable power and freedom the imagination



allows to a larger good. That she also explores the reverse applications of this power, not only in Henny and Sam, but also in Louie, the one character who embodies so much that seems positive, testifies to the writer's balance and perspective. She will not shy from the observation that even overtly positive actions and ideals never exist in a vacuum, but are linked to darker potentials and enigmatic capabilities which cannot be ignored.

We should not underplay these positive actions and ideals though, for Stead chooses to emphasize them at the novel's conclusion. To have ended her work at the moment of the murder-suicide would have left a gaping wound in the imaginative reality she explores, and would probably have constituted a major error of artistic judgement. For, as with the instance of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, we feel that there are other issues touched on in the work which still need be drawn together, even though a terrible climax of despair and suffering has been reached.

Louie's emergence into the adult realm of power is, despite her fearful and ambiguous toying with matters beyond the single individual's imaginative comprehension, basically a triumphant one, permitting her more freedom than any of the other characters are allowed. Yet we should not regard this "freedom" merely in terms of her final act of running away from home. We know from the glimpses we get throughout of the world outside the Pollitt family, that it is no ideal society that Louie is rushing into. Rather it is her final attitude which is so important, her ability to combine passion with distance, to experience the real world at first hand yet also to liberate herself from its toils. Imaginatively, she is now in charge.

How different everything looked, like the morning of the world, that hour before all other hours which Thoreau speaks of, that most matinal hour ... Things certainly looked different: they were no longer part of herself but objects that she could freely consider without prejudice (p. 525).

With these words Stead is clearly recording the elation of the moment, but in addition we must realize that she is

also describing the perspective of the true artist; the artist who stands both in and outside experience, and whose imaginative power is necessarily both self-directed and, because it creates anew, outward-directed. Thus whilst the final rhapsodic gestures of the novel create a sense of climax and sudden achievement, they are essentially a crystallization - albeit a heightened, exuberant one - of a potential which we have seen in Louie almost from the beginning. Even her play Tragedy of the Snake-Man, for example, which so obviously reflects very personal experiences, does not possess a personal theme as its only raison d'être. If anything, we are perhaps more struck by the relative absence of concern over the play's actual theme, than we are by the theme itself. For Louie, "with a cheek of burning pride, full of playwright's defiance" (p. 404), clearly though unself-consciously, places as much value on her role as objective creator - or re-creator - as she does on the need to express her deepest feelings and beliefs.

It is no accident, of course, that these are the very qualities which mark Stead's achievement in The Man Who Loved Children. Louie will grow up, we feel, to write a book almost certainly as good as The Man Who Loved Children, a book capable of expanding the aforementioned elation of the moment into that non-transitory, painful and pleasurable, exhilarating and disturbing, experience we have named art.

For all this Stead's great work is not a self-conscious novel in the modern sense. It transcends this, because it is an actual embodiment of the imaginative process which, with immense qualification, it celebrates. It does not need to tell us so. Like all great art it never puts itself in a position of "talking down" to its audience (whilst many post-modernist narrative techniques do precisely this, arrogantly and pretentiously assuming that we are all dupes of a fairy-tale perspective if we are not constantly feeding the grist of experience into the meta-mill of self-self-consciousness). Great art knows that its simplest and most profound truths are self-evident, beyond criticism. When we spoke at the beginning of the tales Louie tells the children and the general ambience of "activ-

ated human consciousness" which is at the core of the book, we did not imply an explicit and artificial mode of self-reference, but rather a completely natural and obvious - so obvious that it might be overlooked - acceptance of the fact of art's place and function in life, entrenched in Stead's and Louie's outlooks. It may perhaps be said of The Man Who Loved Children that it communicates its own nature, without disrupting our instinctive awareness of this by actually making the point.

Activated human consciousness is a phrase which also comes to mind in thinking of Stead's other great novel, For Love Alone. Although it rarely overwhelms us with the same intensity as the book we have been discussing, it shares its general method of exposing and exploring a variable reality composed almost exclusively of characters' differing perceptions. And if it does not come to precisely the same conclusions about the human imagination as The Man Who Loved Children does, it is like the latter a vigorous assertion of its primacy, as we will now see.

For Love Alone

## Chapter Two

### FOR LOVE ALONE

Stead's dramatization of characters' processes of realization and understanding, their visions of reality, is usually impartial and not a little ironic. However, her ironic distancing is rarely designed for the purpose of "setting up" characters as easy targets. Most often it encourages, if not actual sympathy, then a clearer understanding of motivations, actions and their consequences. Her restrained portrayal of Sam in The Man Who Loved Children is a good example of this. In her best works Stead encourages us to question and evaluate the issues in that rarely discovered, well-illuminated region of experience falling between the intense sauna of romantic subjectivity and the isolation of cold cynicism. Judgements inevitably occur, of course, but not until thorough investigation has first paved the way for them. Ironically, this investigation often illuminates darker qualities possessed by the less obviously monstrous characters; thus we may finally decide that Sam Pollitt and Jonathan Crow, for instance, are fictional horrors, but if this means regarding Louie or Teresa Hawkins as their polar opposites, we have overlooked the finer shades of Stead's characterizations.

Stylistically, this distancing provides a necessary balance for the rich, non-naturalistic, declamatory mode of much of her writing. In For Love Alone, like The Man Who Loved Children, there is a distinct emphasis on characters' eloquent and articulate expression, in both speech and writing, of their feelings, beliefs, desires and philosophies. Strangely, this very quality which contributes so much to an overwhelming sense of vivid realism in the earlier book, renders For Love Alone a little wooden in parts. This is not to give the impression that the work reads like an oratorio minus the music, its principals standing at centre-front stage and delivering forth. Although plot and incident are in the final instance enveloped by the charged, reverberatory world created by characters' im-

passioned reflection, particularly in the second part where there is virtually no action to speak of, Stead does not present us with personages that are simple abstractions, airy effusions of thought. The more abstract drama of For Love Alone proceeds naturally from skilful and accurate characterizations. All the same, that slight sense of woodenness we complain of would probably have been eliminated had the declamatory quality been placed more in the service of vividly realized incidents, as it is in The Man Who Loved Children.

Thus it is no wonder that when operatic expressionism merges with startlingly natural incident in For Love Alone, as in the wedding scene, everyone takes note; we feel, happily, as if we are back in the very complete world of The Man Who Loved Children. Melville at his best also conveys this remarkable quality, as so often does James Joyce. Malfi's wedding in Stead's book incorporates colloquial, naturalistic dialogue and quaver-short bursts of realistic action into a "perpetuum mobile" sequence remarkable for a visual, filmic quality that breaks most definitely with photographic verisimilitude and approaches Felliniesque expressionism and grotesquerie. No single quotation can do it justice, but the following is a reasonable sample:

The sun was going down behind the buildings opposite, so that the glaze on the plates shone and blood-red spindles went through the drops of claret in the jugs. The velvet air, full of moisture and dust, clung to their faces and was palpable when they moved their hands. The seats were hot to their bodies. The bride rose and the crowd with her. A fuss began round her and as she jumped up she found the tall heel of her white satin slipper caught in two rungs of the chair. Impatiently, she wrenched it and suddenly the slipper itself flew out into the room with a devil-may-care swoop, while the heel remained in the chair. Several were bending down, pulling it out, one ran for the slipper and while the bride stood one-legged by the chair with a grimace, her

father and husband worked over the heel, wedging it back into the slipper.<sup>1</sup>

To return to the characterization, we observe that as in The Man Who Loved Children, what the characters say and think in For Love Alone inform the novel generally, accounting for why a not inconsiderable amount of space is taken up by letters, lectures, sermons, the retailing of academic group discussions, storytelling, passages from a novel being written by Teresa and excerpts from Crow's thesis. These generally support the writer's dramatization of characters' perceptions of reality. Given the relative absence of meaningful incident in the book, by comparison with The Man Who Loved Children, we will logically be more concerned with these highly revealing phenomena than we were in the previous chapter.

These phenomena also naturally represent Stead's attempt at incorporating her characters' expression into forms which can better take the full weight of rhetorical declaiming. And since this establishes a mood of overt self-expression and meditation anyway, more credence is extended to those scenes in which the dramatic interplay of perspectives is conveyed in torrents of lofty intellectual dialogue, or monologues.

Throughout the remainder of the thesis we will be making several references to Stead's handling of monologue, as it is one of the most notable features of her style. Oddly enough we are not so aware of it in The Man Who Loved Children, since nearly everything is so perfectly integrated in that novel that to speak in terms of the "devices" we detect in other works would be to detract from its nature. This does not mean that the presence of "device" is always a by-product of Stead's inability to integrate her other works. Sometimes it is and sometimes it is not, as we will reveal. To expect all the works to operate in the same way (as distinct from "on the same level") as The Man Who Loved Children, would be to impose limitations on an artist who, in breaking free of such restrictions, has created an oeuvre of great variety and diversity, as we remarked in the Introduction.

All the references to characters' perceptions so far

might lead one to ask: what of the theme of love, seen to be so central in critical interpretations of *For Love Alone*? For it must be made clear that other commentators, by and large, have tended towards the view that the central theme of the book is love, and love alone. For instance, Laurie Clancy in his illuminating study of Stead's two great novels asserts that the "single-minded concentration of theme in *For Love Alone* can be gauged even from the title,"<sup>2</sup> with the implication that the words "for love alone" are a clear and straightforward statement of Stead's central theme, rather than perhaps having a relationship - and partly, at least, an ironic one, as it will later be argued - with another issue in the book. Michael Wilding claims that the work is "organized thematically around love-sex-sensuality,"<sup>3</sup> and R.G. Geering finds that there "can be no doubt that love is the real as well as the apparent theme."<sup>4</sup> A smaller number of critics have seen the love theme within the context of a larger whole, or at least balanced and complemented by themes of equal importance. Ian Reid, for example, finds it to be part of the heroine's "larger quest for personal freedom,"<sup>5</sup> and Brian Kiernan discovers in the novel a poetical and dramatic relationship between Stead's "critique of society" and her presentation of "Teresa's quest for self-fulfilment through love."<sup>6</sup>

① It is one of the primary suppositions of this argument, however, that Stead's representation of the love theme provides her mainly with an armature upon which to rest issues that are part of, yet distinct from and ultimately more comprehensive than the subject named in the work's title. In order to appreciate this we must move away from the more readily perceptible problems posed by individual themes considered in isolation, and enter into that more elusive stratum of the book which presents love, and other issues, in relation to broader human problems associated with perception of self, human understanding and the determining of reality.

Throughout *For Love Alone* these problems are interwoven, in a somewhat paradoxical fashion, with the aforementioned emphasis on characters' constant outward and inward expression of their feelings, philosophies, theories and general



observations; their respective visions of reality in fact. For through her shaping of a larger, often ironic perspective on these, Stead reveals certain faults embedded in characters' perception of reality which, when not actually retarding the development of a full intellectual comprehension of the problems besetting their lives, can inhibit the fusing together of this understanding with actual experience. As with The Man Who Loved Children, these are the central dilemmas of For Love Alone, subsuming the variously graded and complicated themes of love, personal liberation and the social question, into a larger human scheme.

The difficulty characters have with truthfully perceiving themselves, and by larger implication with determining an actual reality, lies at the centre of the destructive relationship between Teresa and Crow. It also underlies the later, more equivocal relationship between Teresa and Quick. (We will barely touch upon Teresa's relationship with Harry Girton, and this for two reasons: one, because most of what can be said about it will be covered in our discussions of the other two sets of relationships, and two, because Girton is a rather unreal fictional stereotype, and there is little in the text of For Love Alone with which we can flesh out an analysis of his character.)

The problem of the relationship between Teresa and Crow, first of all, is dependent on faults of perception, reasoning and evaluation on both sides; not, as it is frequently asserted, mainly on Crow. A tendency amongst critics to berate Crow, and to lay upon his shoulders the full weight of the blame for the unhappy consequences of his relations with Teresa, presents us with the same problem we have with certain views of Sam Pollitt. It reveals a judgemental bias that is not present, at least not in such a simplified form, in Stead's writing, and can deflect a consideration of some of the more important concerns. As we maintained at the start, the writer provides us with a necessary distance for evaluating all the main characters in For Love Alone. Examples of her lapsing into a mode of simplistic subjective identification are relatively rare. When R.G. Geering writes of Crow that he "is a thoroughly nasty, but perfectly credible fellow whose true nature is gradually revealed, first

to us, then to Teresa, in his proper colors,"<sup>7</sup> we cannot help feeling that whilst the real issue does rest partly on this character's so-called "true nature," his alleged nastiness, it also rests at least equally on the question of why it takes Teresa so long to see Crow as she does by the end of the novel, and why it is that she attaches herself so strongly to him in the first place.

Such questions, and the issues to which they should be directed, might serve as a useful focal point for our discussion of the character of Teresa, before we move on to consider Crow and Quick. This will hopefully lead us to see how Stead's central themes take root in what is specifically human, and extend outwards touching almost all aspects of the novel.

We have suggested that many appraisals of For Love Alone place a somewhat misleading emphasis on the absoluteness of the love theme and of Teresa's preoccupation with love, as in D.R. Burns' comment: "Teresa develops the will to put all else aside in allegiance to love."<sup>8</sup> This is to take a too simple view of her character. More seriously, it is to align a critical interpretation of this book too closely with this and other characters' own assumptions, and subsequently to blur the carefully preserved distinction between these and the writer's observations. For it is the case that when Teresa does display a commitment to her quest for love above all else, or what she first thinks is love, as in those final words of the first part, "Johnny first and the rest nowhere" (p. 290), we are not given a complete vision of her motivations. Rather it is Teresa's own essentially reductive view of the processes of her consciousness and of the motives which do lie behind her larger actions, particularly her impending embarkation on a journey to England.

Teresa does not leave Australia on a quest "for love alone." Sometimes she thinks she does, undoubtedly, and therein lies something of the irony of the book's title: its connection with ill-formed perceptions. Opposed to this reductionism in Teresa's character, her frequent acceptance of the fulfilment of her own romantic impulses as the supreme

and exclusive aim of her actions, is a more questioning and analytical vision which gives her the ability to develop an imaginative overview, to expose imaginatively, possibly even resolve, problems afflicting her own existence. This brings us round to what was proposed as one of the central dilemmas of For Love Alone presented through Stead's dramatic interplay of perspectives: the difficulty of drawing together and fusing imaginative understanding with human action. This particular problem will be returned to at a later stage in the argument.

At this point we should consider Teresa's romantic impulses and the nature of her attitude towards them. It is interesting and significant that Stead presents all of Teresa's most powerful initial impulses as dependent on a merging of fantasy and idealism in her perceptions. Whilst the word "love" is undoubtedly a key term appearing in constant association with Teresa, there are other key terms such as "fantasy," "ideal," "real," which recur frequently, their significance lying in the underpinning they provide for the heroine's developing awareness of the "dissolute splendours of the insolent flesh" (p. 77) and also, just as importantly, for impulses related to academic learning, personal ambition, and the desire for freedom.

For example, in a scene shortly after Malfi's wedding, Teresa's mental re-enactment of a number of her favourite gruesome fantasies, directly and naturally leads her to a contemplation of her dissatisfaction with life at home and work, and her desire to break free from this:

She believed all these things existed from time to time, if they were not daily occurrences, 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 (pp. 84-5).

Teresa's desire to transfer her real existence to the domain of these "shapes of fantasy" may be superficially

related to the impulse for a dulling of painful reality by projecting the self amongst the amorphous shapes of distant, fantastic and alluring vistas; hence the simple association of "understandings" with "pleasures." But it is not as simple as this. Stead is hardly concerned with pure biological necessity, as we pointed out in Chapter One. If she were, then she would not have taken the trouble to show that this psychological mechanism of Teresa's is deeply rooted in almost all her early impulses, and not just those partly based on a desire to escape unhappiness.

The girl's belief that her imaginings are not "black shapes of fantasy" but represent an attainable reality that she is "struggl[ing] towards," should also be related to her new-found sexual awareness and her impulse to find a lover. For these, as the critics rightly stress, lie at the centre of her consciousness at this stage, although we will see that they are not necessarily representative of her deepest and as yet largely unrealized motivations. By symbolic association, Stead aligns the "black shapes of fantasy" with one of Teresa's sexual fantasies in which she quests after the ideal lover:

But will I begin with men like those down at the Bay, or at work, poor beachcombers, so to speak, schoolboys, failures, that lop-eared doctor on the boat, ugly men, broken-backed child-whackers trembling before a Mr Prentiss, a headmaster? No, no. Never venture, never win. I'll have to go out and look for a man. The hands, dark, passionate, clawlike but beautiful, firm, long and muscular that move over my body, like a crab moving over the sand, a big spider and his shadow moving over a whitewashed wall, are no schoolmaster's, no fisherman's hands (p. 94).

Although Stead lapses into half-comical fancy over this, the "black shapes" in Teresa's idealistic fantasy form an actual symbolic prefiguring of the man she does look for, and whom she initially idealizes. Jonathan, the "black Crow" (p. 171) who is dressed "always in black" (p. 121), takes his place alongside the dark, clawlike shadows of the

crab and spider in her imagination. In fantasy he is a figure who embodies the ideal of erotic fulfilment, but already suggests something destructive and predatory. We will see other, essentially ironic implications in this slightly unfortunate whimsy when, in discussing the last section of the book, we come to evaluate James Quick, and note his curiously melodramatic, sinister view of Crow, which corresponds surprisingly closely with these early mergings of fantasy and idealism in Teresa's perceptions. (We might also keep the image of the spider in mind for our discussion in Chapter Five of Stead's short story "A Russian Heart," for this particular Salzburg tale seems to prefigure some of the themes and images of For Love Alone.)

As previously suggested, these mergings of differing orders of reality in Teresa's vision of an attainable ideal, are directed not only towards her sexual imaginings and her impulse "to break the iron circle of the home and work," but also desires connected with the spheres of academic learning and ambition. "In a reasonable way, her trip overseas, the halls of learning, were part of this grand life that she lived without restraint in the caves, taverns, woods, colonnades, and eel pools of antiquity and the night" (p. 85). Even more relevantly, Stead informs us: "The university seemed to her a suburb of Oxford, Jena, or the Sorbonne. If she could get the fare to that suburb, she too could spend glorious days, full-blown hours teasing out the ideal and the real" (p. 123). Importantly, the last words already suggest some understanding on Teresa's part that her projected quest will involve, indeed will centre upon, the sorting out of different levels of perceptual experience. But they are also ironic, since Teresa's images of "glorious days" and "full-blown hours" are themselves an idealization of the process of "teasing out the ideal and the real," and therefore undercut the value of her understanding.

This notion of the sorting out of different orders of imaginative experience, so important to our understanding of Teresa's so-called "quest," transcends the more readily observable factors connected with her break from the restraining influences of home, work and the social environ-

ment. No doubt certain problems spring from these very factors, but in this novel ultimately appear dependent on enigmatic, underlying faults of imaginative reasoning and understanding, a failure to grasp the reality of the whole human complex.

Nowhere does Stead simply suggest that the ability to oppose an obviously destructive familial and social situation, is enough to ensure an individual's welfare. She makes this point a number of times. For example, consider the portrait of the minor character Mrs Percy, who at first seems a mere extreme contrast to the extreme Teresa, representing the twisted social and sexual mores the latter is attempting to escape from. But, ironically, Mrs Percy is quite closely aligned with Teresa. Although her present connection with reality is tenuous to say the least, her distorted views on sex, marriage and religion being fully expressed in a letter to the young girl, she was once, according to Teresa's Aunt Bea, "quite a modern woman ... a bit eccentric, I gather, she went in for Darwinism, free-thinking, women's movement" (p. 53). The parallel with Teresa is obvious, as it is again when we read Mrs Percy's letter and discover her urging the girl to "get away from soft dream-fantasies & touch realities" (p. 105).

Stead wryly implies that those whom conservative, middle-class Aunt Bea would consider "eccentric" for ideological reasons, might still be eccentric - and worse - for other, more profound reasons. She suggests that individuals such as Teresa in this book or Catherine in Seven Poor Men of Sydney, may in fact turn out as psychologically disturbed as Mrs Percy, despite their initial standing apart from damaging, prescribed modes of behaviour (this is certainly the case with Catherine, though not with Teresa). In For Love Alone we are thus urged to look beyond purely ideological and sociological factors when attempting to determine the causal factors behind characters' distorted and often destructive perspectives on reality. We are compelled to examine, once again, the inner human realm: the "Lawrentian dimension," in fact.

A clue to the nature of Teresa's problem may be discovered in one of her long, speculative letters to Jonathan.

Here she expresses with extraordinary articulateness the need to synthesize different levels of imaginative experience into a single vision of reality, and in so doing unconsciously reveals aspects of her own perceptions which contribute to her inability to come to terms for some time with her actual experience:

Poets, mystics, addicts of drink and drugs, young turbulent children, seem to have a different world from ours, something like we remember vaguely from our childhood ... I attribute much of the inexplicable longing for childhood joys, which of course never existed, as they are imagined, to a longing for this general, easy, undifferentiated inward sensation which gives the greatest pleasure, that sensation of crawling, living within, of having a fire within, which poets and mystics have. A professor once asked me ... how I told the difference between vivid dreams and reality. I did not know how to answer. I suppose it is in the greater activity of the senses and the power to differentiate in so many more ways. Professional dreamers, hoping for a great synthesis, shed these differences. They are the ones who develop what we abandon, the sensation called coenaesthesia. It is wrong for us to lose this....(pp. 253-4)

The key words, "A professor once asked me ... how I told the difference between vivid dreams and reality. I did not know how to answer," refer us back to Teresa's confusion of her "shapes of fantasy" with what she regards as an attainable reality. There is a difference between the two attitudes, however. Here she has developed an imaginative overview of her confusion, and speculates about it philosophically. Her speculation leads her, ironically, not so much to an awareness of the possible dangers of this confusion, but to an approval of those "professional dreamers" who hope to synthesize diverse perceptions of reality through coenaesthesia; that is to discover the totality of existence through the sum of bodily impressions.

Teresa's "vigorous discontent" (p. 85) which compels her

to make the avowal, "[l]ove, learning, bread - myself - all three, I will get" (p. 87), is therefore cocooned by that romantic impulse to tap, in so doing, the mysterious essence of that "different world" inhabited by "the lunatic, the lover, the poet and the nervous child" (p. 254). She will flood her senses with the totality of experience registered on multiple, though "undifferentiated," imaginative levels.

But it is this underlying desire to avoid differentiating perceptions which prevents Teresa for so long from distinguishing between the ideal and the real, or between imaginative fancy and imaginative truth. It is thus of ambiguous value, particularly if we consider it in relation to her perception of love, the reasons for why she attaches herself to Crow for so long, and the consequences of this attachment. For Teresa, in channelling a number of her desires through ideal, romantic love, attempts to make love function as coenaesthesia. (This link between sex, love and coenaesthesia is perhaps suggested quite early in the book by the striking image which heads the second chapter: "The Countless Flaming Eyes of the Flesh.")

Therefore when, in her search for ideal love, learning and freedom, Teresa makes the larger, more determined and emotional commitment to her vision, wilfully acts on her romantic impulses and follows Crow to England, she is unable to disentangle readily the warp of idealism from the woof of actuality. We learn that the "complete ideal life which everyone dreams of alike in his vices and virtues ... she tried to get in Jonathan; love, learning, fervour, and the flush of success" (p. 314). Crow offers to Teresa's perceptions not only the possibility of her finding love, but also the possibility of her aspiring to his level of learning, and to the condition of freedom which he, already in England, seems to represent.

One of the main reasons for the emphasis on love, especially romantic love, throughout the novel, lies in its connection with the whole problem of undifferentiated sensations, and the undifferentiated perceptions to which they lead. For one of the problems of ideal, romantic love, as Stead sees it, is its destructive power to reinforce a distorted way of seeing; to allow, if not compel, the individual



to ride the turbulent Tristanesque wave of possibly faulty emotional perceptions; to ride it away from the world of actuality (however indeterminate that might be) and towards imaginary shores of fulfilment, where the lover may be cruelly dashed upon the rocks of disillusionment.

Teresa is to a not inconsiderable extent aware of the problem also, as when she writes to Crow: "The greatest sensations become the most general and the least concerned with that particular adjusted interlocking which is any kind of relation to the outside world. If the greatest sensations become hooked on to any outside thing or person, our heads are turned: our heads are turned by confusion" (p. 253). As Stead is concerned throughout the novel with problems related to "distorted ways of seeing," the whole emphasis on powerful human emotions such as sex and love - these having a particular capacity to disrupt what Teresa calls that "adjusted interlocking which is any kind of relation to the outside world" - is, without being the single main consideration of the work, none the less logically integrated with its thematic entirety.

However, the problems associated with Teresa's perceptions of reality as set forth in For Love Alone do not rest on a point as simple as this. Instead they mainly rest on the paradoxical nature of her awareness and understanding of them. On this level there is something of a dramatic conflict between the character's romantic impulses, and a larger imaginative reasoning which enables her to speculate, often accurately, about the problems underlying her perceptions and actions. But because this is a dissociative, speculative reasoning, it does not necessarily permit her to see the connection with her own life; or when she does see the connection, she is not necessarily able to find a way of fusing it with meaningful action. Consequently when Teresa writes about the professional dreamer's synthesis of perceptions through undifferentiated sensations, and adds that some people "develop too much towards this joyous feeling of general expansion and confusion within" (p. 254), she seems not to realize fully the implications for herself. This leads to a curious and very subtle contradiction in what she

goes on to say:

Perhaps the so-called crowd instinct is nothing more than a desire for this general confused and relaxed feeling which is obtained by the multiple vague sensations of contact, sight, sound, smell, fear, expectation, hate, blood-lust, all at once, in the crowd. For it is true that the lunatic, the lover, the poet and the nervous child have no use for the crowd (p. 254).

Earlier she has equated "general, easy, undifferentiated" sensation with the vision of poets and mystics; here it is equated with mere crowd instinct, something for which the aforementioned poets and mystics "have no use." This is also aligned with the paltry instincts of Jonathan Crow who, we are told, occasionally loses his despair, "but only with a crowd, and this he called a phenomenon of crowd psychology ... he gave up his personality blissfully and became an atom of the crowd" (p. 200).

The subtle contradiction Stead creates between Teresa's Jonathan-like attitude here, and her passionate romantic identification, in the same letter, with the poet's or mystic's "undifferentiated inward sensation," exposes her almost unconscious ambivalence towards it. On the one hand she strives to perceive reality through coenaesthesia, but on the other is dissociatively aware of the need for the particular, the sharply differentiated, the disentanglement of confused perceptions. She writes:

[L]earning is too general, there are not enough particular sciences ... Again, sensation is vague, the five senses boiling in the brain, a stew of insight, confuse us farther, that is, given nothing definite, and so ... can produce a hundred or more sensations; also feelings of joy, melancholy, despair and sensations without form or which have not yet borrowed a form, such a simple poignancy which exists by itself without any human relation attached to it, until we run into sorrow, pain (pp. 252-3).

The declamatory style of much of the book, noted earlier, contains such articulations. Their non-naturalistic elevation also conveys their necessary partial dissociation from the actualities of the characters' worlds, and, more centrally, their partial dissociation from characters' understanding. Thus we see developing alongside, and sometimes in contradiction to Teresa's inclination to accept and act upon her romanticized perceptions, a broader grasping of truths about herself, others and her larger destiny. The first is given impetus by the surging power of sexual passion and leads her sometimes to see her future or quest in essentially reductive terms; that is, as being for love, or Jonathan, alone. Her destiny, which is to transcend undifferentiated and wayward perceptions without losing her deep passion, is not always completely grasped on the level of consciousness, but occasionally shines through even in her early impassioned assertions to Crow. "If you think my life is real to me - it's only a passage" (p. 192), she tells him, sensing that this "passage" will become a "voyage of discovery" (p. 193). Similarly, though related more closely to Teresa's eventual love union with James Quick, we are told that "at times she thought that her affair with Jonathan was only a step to the unknown man; she would use him for that" (p. 228).

Teresa's journey to England, and the consequences of this, becomes an enactment of the tearing apart of the conjunction between false perceptions and impulse, and the gradual and painful drawing together, possibly not fully achieved, of the disjunction between truthful realization and fruitful action. We have seen that this is anticipated all along. The shedding of the husks of romantic idealism and the undifferentiated sensations which encase her perceptions for so long, brings her to the realization that she has never really loved Crow at all, that he, despite his cruel and egotistical machinations, has to some extent been the object of an obsessive, misdirected quest for the fulfillment of false expectations. "Love him!" she cries to Quick at the end: "I never loved him at all. I thought I did, though" (p. 450).

But how does Teresa come to this realization?

The answer perhaps lies in what we referred to earlier as the paradoxical nature of her perceptions, her deep-seated ambivalence towards her own assumptions and basic drives. For whilst Teresa's most dangerous impulses are at first inextricably caught up in undifferentiated inward sensation and perception, the richly romantic imagination which encourages this also, paradoxically, encourages her to develop the speculative aspect of her nature for the purposes of a larger good, as with Louie in The Man Who Loved Children. Her constant imaginative and reflexive re-assessment of her situation, her frequent though often dissociative self-analyses which uncover her ambivalence or uneasiness, do eventually take her closer to the truth.

In an important scene in the second part of the book, shortly after Crow has decided that Teresa will come and visit him only on certain nights, the pair are discussing a number of minor issues when Teresa suddenly raises the whole problem of perception of self, and by implication, perception of reality. This occurs in stages, beginning with her words: "I have been a child and thought as a child ... I cannot now condemn liars wholesale ... Yet, when I was a child ... I recognized a law higher than the absolute honesty" (p. 352). Then a little later she adds: "And I realized another thing this morning, in the office ... Whatever I want to do, becomes a higher law with me. I am a very moral being, you see. For the first time I understand what is meant by calling puritans and the like, English people, hypocritical. Of course, they are not hypocrites, it's the singular corset of Protestantism, which forces them to invent religious law even when there is none...." (p. 352). After Jonathan's response to this, she concludes: "The whole thing frightens me, how many things do I completely misunderstand then? Imagine that I had come to England to find that out!" (p. 352).

Here Teresa makes an imaginative leap from an abstract consideration of the whole problem of lying, self-deception and hypocrisy, partly relating this to the invalidity of national stereotyping, to an almost frightened self-appraisal in which she seems to have realized that her own "higher laws," her questing after false ideals, may exist - like

Protestant religious law - even when there is no valid reason for their existence.<sup>9</sup> The crucial words, "Imagine that I had come to England to find that out!" cast retrospective light on the purpose of her journey, aligning it more with imaginative understanding than with a simpler desire for a love object. Importantly this prompts Crow to say: "We don't know ourselves ... Is it worth while finding out?" (p. 352). When Teresa replies "Of course" (p. 352), there follows a most revealing exchange:

"Is it worth while going to the end of the night, digging in deep and finding what we really mean, our needs?" said Crow.

"What is worth more?"

"And so you are getting to know yourself?" Johnny said and to Teresa he appeared to be shifting ground. She said listlessly: "Yes."

"Know thyself, a difficult injunction. We don't like what we find."

"I do," she said.

"Yes? And what do you find?"

"Don't ask me, you don't want to hear that, Johnny" (p. 353).

A developing awareness of the truth about herself, a sense of the larger necessity underlying her journey to England - that is, the need to extricate herself from a tangle of confused perceptions - eventually culminate in her rejection of the man to whom she has attached a number of false ideals. Subsequently in the novel's great climactic scene in the deserted sawmill (a sequence comparable for emotional intensity to the overwhelming electric storm and marlin-boiling episode in The Man Who Loved Children), Stead emphasizes a change within Teresa's attitude, indicated by the crucial words: "Teresa, looking at him [Crow], released him from her will...." (p. 408). The writer is careful not to depict Teresa as influenced by any overt change in Crow's manner; rather, the new attitude comes from within the girl herself, when she stops willing their union.<sup>10</sup>

This should immediately be compared with Teresa's other major point of realization earlier in the book. After acting

on her romantic impulse to find freedom, she sets out on her first journey to Harper's Ferry, an actual and symbolic pre-figuring of her later journey to England, believing that "[a]lone, she found the way out, which alone does not lead to blindness, years of remorse and hungry obscurity" (p. 137). But she confronts, ironically, the very blindness that impels her on this course of action: "It seemed to her that she was just willing without knowing what it was she wanted [emphasis added]. She was out here with her will only and no plan, no intelligence" (p. 163). Both here and in the scene in the sawmill, Teresa releases herself from blind will and the false perceptions with which it is co-joined.

Indisputedly Crow to a certain extent represents an external manipulative factor in Teresa's life, which is partly outside her own control. But this only reflects an aspect of the situation, as may be seen by Stead's decision to have Teresa receive a letter from the cruelly treated Alice Haviland - a letter informing the girl of Crow's megalomaniac sexual manipulations - after her own moment of realization. This again helps place the personal factor over and above external forces.

The nature of Teresa's realizations is more clearly articulated later when she transmutes her experience into artistic endeavour. She writes a testament which symbolically traces the development of her perceptions and actions through various stages. The first of these is "naive joy"; here love and coenaesthesia are again united when she writes: "Say the word 'love' and receive all floating ideas" (p. 420). The next stage is romantic imagining, producing "scenes of festive and dark violence" (p. 420); we recall Teresa's early gruesome fantasies, composed of "Sabbaths haunted by flying corpses," "cannibalism from Grimm," "brothels from Shakespeare," and so on. (p. 84). Then there is "yearning lust" leading to "[r]elation with a single human being" (p. 421), and finally a condition of

... knowing everything truthfully, admitting everything, beauty as horror, tyranny, skull-crushing idol, love as hatred, and humiliation. The innocent made drab; no one is admissable to heaven

under this searchlight, not one is less than an angel. Devise a means of explaining all human beings in this way.

The last star. To die terribly by will, to make death a terrible demand of life, a revolt, an understanding, such as rives life, blasts it, twists it. To die by the last effort of the will and body. To will, the consuming and consummation. To force the end. It must be dark; then an extraordinary clutching of reality [emphasis added]. This is not understanding, not intellectual, but physical, bitter, disgusting, but an affirmation of a unique kind (pp. 421-2).

It was previously suggested that the painful drawing together of the disjunction between seemingly truthful realization, embodied here in Teresa's testament, and fruitful action, seen in her break with Crow and later attachment to Quick, is not necessarily at the complete expense of false perceptions and dangerous impulses. It is thus possibly not fully achieved. Perhaps even in this last passage Teresa's "clutching of reality" once again signifies that imaginative, visionary speculation which is partially dissociated from her actual understanding; or, at the very least, from the spheres of human endeavour and her own human experience. This will be discussed presently when we come to consider the nature of her relationship with Quick.

We have dwelt at greater length on the character of Teresa than we will on Crow and Quick, and this not simply because she is the most clearly developed personage in For Love Alone, but in order to break away from the notions that "love" is the central theme of the book and that the heroine's suffering is to be blamed almost exclusively on Jonathan. Now some observations should be made about the perceptions of reality, and the faults underlying them, of the novel's two other main characters, so that we may see the consistency of Stead's treatment of this theme throughout her work.

The character of Jonathan Crow presents us with a complex example of self-delusion arising, ironically, from a painfully accurate but quickly suppressed perception of

the self. His repressed self-hatred reminds us of Henny in The Man Who Loved Children, but his subsequent imaginative enclosure is as thickly blanketing as Sam's. Again Stead is concerned with the problematical nature of human perceptions, their capacity, even when highly developed, to extend yet pervert an individual's awareness and understanding of himself and his relationship to the outside world.

Importantly, Crow is not simply placed before us by Stead to receive our contempt. He is a well-rounded character with his own measure of self-awareness. Stead's irony comes into play mainly when Crow's self-analyses, and other theorizings, become his means of defending himself against others and himself, and against the larger reality he necessarily distorts in the process. This is the crux of Stead's portrayal of Crow, and marks one of the major differences between this character and Teresa. In other words, if we feel that we must make a point of Crow's irredeemable qualities, then we should do so at one remove, after we have made some effort to understand his character.

In an early scene in the novel which takes place in the university common room, Stephen Rasche, whose sister Clara has fallen victim to Jonathan's manipulations, bitterly and openly satirizes Crow's intellectual pretensions and sexual posturing. After Jonathan leaves the company, haggard and wounded, we are told: "Who knew better than himself that he was but an ordinary man who had got to the top by observing and following the rules? What they knew about him, he had himself said a dozen times" (pp. 172-3). This sort of self-awareness, which reveals an aspect of Crow's character that might be all too readily overlooked, later compels Jonathan to become, like Henny in the earlier book, his own devil's advocate. But even more drastic than Henny's suppression of her self-loathing, is Crow's artificial assumption of a nihilistic vision of reality to disguise his own acknowledged poverty of emotion and intellect. For instance, shortly after his first confrontation with Teresa, we discover:

[I]n the paroxysm of horror that the sight of Teresa's joy had given him, estranged from human-



ity by his meeting with Clara, he saw his bareness [emphasis added]. He not only wanted nothing but he had nothing ... J'accuse! A fire was lighted in him. All right, he said to himself, all right, from this out, from today, I am alone and all the others are scrambling for the largesse, I will teach myself to want and to take. Let's see what I want.

... He felt miserable. He had a mental misery which came back at intervals. He would feel grit, see glare, all sounds would be raucous, the world hopeless and full of oppressors and haters; and everything, with thick outlines, in crude black and white, stood out like figures in a stereoptican.

This vision to him was reality; when it came, he felt horror, but when it passed he knew he had been [sic] reality; but he did not expose it to anyone, it was a mystery known to him. 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 (p. 199).

Stead traces the various stages of Crow's perceptions: his initial self-awareness which enables him to see his own "bareness" and the estrangement from humanity this produces, followed by his retrogressive decision to remain estranged and to fight for the "largesse" that he imagines the rest of the world is hungering after, and finally the connection between this and his underlying vision of reality which is a special "mystery" known only to him. (Stead is one of the rare modern writers perceptive enough, or honest enough, to reveal that human nihilism depends just as much on the same "secret insight" into reality that is commonly held up to ridicule when it is associated with theories of hope and salvation.) The "mystery" known only to Crow is supposed to be a glimpse of the proverbial void; the glimpse that renders all meaningless. Stead subtly suggests that Jonathan forces a union between a larger, supposedly truthful vision of reality - this prompting his concern with the necessary

development of a "knack of biological survival" in the face of the world's horrifying meaninglessness - and his own egotistical decision to fulfil selfishly his personal desires in order to survive, as he maintains, in his aloneness.

Crow's coming down to "brass-tacks" as he calls it, is surely as deluded as Teresa's earlier construction of crystal palaces; both are opposite sides of a counterfeit coin. However Teresa's way of seeing includes, as we have shown, a potential for a larger good. Jonathan's perception of reality is tailored to suit his own needs. By egotistically imagining that he has seen into the heart of reality, that Hamlet-like he has walked and talked with "the horror," Crow is able to defend himself against his own "bareness" and against the unattainable, antithetical reality that is suggested by "the sight of Teresa's joy." He has, so to speak, constructed for himself Roland Barthes' onion, peeled away its layers, and then congratulated himself for being man enough not to cry when assailed by its pungent fumes of nothingness.

Although Crow's character is warped to some extent by extreme poverty and hardship, to attempt to explain it mainly in these terms, as a number of critics have done, is to miss the essential nature of the contrast between this character and Teresa. For the girl has suffered at least equally at the hands of poverty and destitution and yet is still able, in her testament, to write of the unique, if bitter, affirmation she discovers in her imagined "clutching of reality." Crow's vision of reality entombs him as Henny's does herself; he becomes his own victim of tail-chasing negativism, and this as a means of expanding the ego, in Sam Pollitt fashion, in direct proportion to the reducing of reality. It is the only way he can conceive of coming to terms with his impoverished "self" and with any aspect of reality that suggests the virtues of the positive. The fact that his needs never change or become modified as Teresa's do, prevents him from developing his own self-awareness and understanding of others to anything beyond the limitations he sets himself when he attempts to justify or defend his actions and impulses. He is, as Teresa observes at the end of the book, "like a sea-anemone which suddenly sees something wrong and falls

into itself" (p. 500). We recall also the revealing exchange with Teresa in which he says: "Know thyself, a difficult injunction. We don't like what we find." Teresa fearlessly replies: "I do" (p. 353).

Whilst quite early in the book we have Teresa desirous of "the truth above passion" (p. 76) and only at the end, after much weary struggle and defeat, claiming an "extraordinary clutching of reality," it is the reverse with Jonathan, who "knowing what he knew, reality, and seeing those illusions go past" (p. 200), avoids commitment to anything but pretence and self-delusion almost from the beginning. When near the close of the book Teresa finally exposes his vicious sex experiment, which has involved the misuse of a number of unsuspecting women, including herself, Stead carefully underlines Crow's manipulation of an assumed vision of reality as his means of justifying his craven actions:

He took her sleeve again, and began to talk fervidly, explaining his meaning. She combated him, but he went on eagerly, delightedly, and she felt the fragments of food, the tumbled contents of the bins, pelting at her, covering her with decay and smut, but all the time he pretended it was reality [emphasis added], the truth about men and women, that he was telling her (p. 427).

And finally there is Crow's unwitting self-indictment before Quick, his impossibly pedantic and even comic nihilism, which he wears like a cloak to be put on and taken off at a whim: "No beliefs, no illusions, not even heaven! In my second year, I tried to believe in God again. Read The Foundations of Belief - all the regulation stuff. No, couldn't do it. I never could fool myself, worse luck! The world seems pretty flat to a man who's found out where he stands" (p. 436).

This and our other observations about Crow no doubt read as a quite damning portrait of his character. It is hoped, however, that our understanding of the impulses behind his attitudes qualifies both the implied and the direct criticism, and that we have steered the argument away from any simplistic

linking of the emotions raised by his cruel sex experiment with the inevitable dislike many readers obviously feel for him. Also we intimated at the start that Stead's thorough investigation of her characters' mental lives often illuminates less than desirable qualities in the apparently "good" characters, and we still have a few things to say later about the Jonathan-like tendencies exhibited by Teresa Hawkins.

If the faults underlying Teresa's vision might be related to romantic idealism, and Crow's to a specious nihilism, then James Quick's imaginings are associated with the melodramatic vision. The entrance of Quick in For Love Alone has proved something of a problem for the critics. Despite the general acknowledgement that the novel does not have a fake, fairy-tale ending, it is felt that Stead idealizes Quick, presenting him, to use Brian Kiernan's words, as a "deus ex machina" who magically provides Teresa with both "love and money."<sup>11</sup> R.G. Geering takes a more moderate stance, suggesting that the sense of "dissatisfaction" some people might feel could primarily be caused by Stead's anxiousness to find some sort of "counterbalance to Crow," this producing "an overplaying of contrasts in the interest of theme."<sup>12</sup>

Quick, we note, seems to enter the story in a series of inter-chapters, which alternate with those chapters depicting the final stages of Teresa's and Crow's relationship. He has no real place in the narrative as somebody interacting with the other characters for quite some time; what we see of Teresa and Crow in these passages is taken very much from Quick's perspective. From the point of view of perspective, therefore, he is a potentially very interesting figure, since Stead allows us to observe him observing. But for this to be meaningful it need be established that there is no breakdown of ironic distancing at the point of his entrance into the novel. If Stead were in fact idealizing Quick, her structure would partly collapse; she would be giving her seal of approval to a number of surprisingly shaky, often patently simplistic observations made by this character about what has been taking place in the rest of the novel. We will look at some of these shortly.

Quick's unsatisfactory view of the relationship between Crow and Teresa is given considerable emphasis by Stead, and we could say that it is an ironic emphasis because the writer wants us to reject the glibness inherent in the melodramatic perspective. However, many will feel that there are not enough "signs" in the book to permit us to take this line, that the presumed irony has no definite enough point of reference. This may readily be sympathized with, because the problem is not an uncommon one. Most of us have probably been involved with works of art we personally enjoy and value, but which slightly embarrass us in places where they appear to "lapse." If we like the work very much then the tendency will be to rationalize these awkward spots, to find a critical explanation that will validate them. This is quite easily done in most instances, but feelings of uneasiness will probably lurk beneath the surface of the explanation all the same.

Those who have read Robin Wood's intelligent essay on Hitchcock's controversial film Psycho will readily appreciate the difficulty. It is generally known that the critics who make great claims for the film's seriousness (Wood likens it to Macbeth, which is surely going too far) are more often than not disturbed by the glib, indeed quite embarrassing speech made by the psychiatrist near the end, which seeks to explain the foregoing incidents in the light of drastically simple psychoanalysis. The big question becomes: is the director ironically distancing us in this scene, or himself lapsing into crude melodramatics because he is not always in control of his material? Wood takes the attractive view that the scene "crystallises for us our tendency to evade the implications of the film ... crystallises this for us merely to force us to reject it."<sup>13</sup> But upon reflection we can rhetorically counter any sequence of dubious intention with this sort of argument. For example, we could keep it in mind as we wincingly read the sunny conclusion to the very great Little Dorrit. It is the sort of line which allows us to think of the swaggering march tune in Aida as "ironically" revealing "the emptiness of imperial triumph,"<sup>14</sup> when secretly we probably believe it to be a rattling good show-stopper which would have been better placed in a less obviously

great work - a work more intent on just thrilling the senses, rather than most often overwhelming us with its tragic power.

Obviously not all instances are alike, and in cases where the issue is really open to dispute, as it is in For Love Alone, the best policy is probably to give the artist the benefit of the doubt, whilst acknowledging some feelings of dissatisfaction. The ensuing discussion of James Quick therefore rests upon the assumption that Stead's ironies are obvious enough for us to comment on them directly, although it will be admitted that the present commentator's own response has varied considerably from reading to reading. Sometimes the final phase of the book has seemed extremely well constructed and telling in its effect; on other occasions it has appeared disappointing, too simplistic in its portrayal of Quick, and quite lacking in tension. It will also be admitted that the seeds of scepticism were sowed in the first instance by other critics' comments; the initial response was completely favourable.

A point of reference for Stead's ironic portrayal of Quick lies, as it does for Teresa and Crow, within the area of the book which allows us to register the import of characters' imaginings, and the effect of these on their attitudes towards self, others and reality. One of the main problems of the later part of For Love Alone becomes how to evaluate Quick's view of Teresa's and Crow's relationship, and this again brings us around to the distinctive manner in which Stead presents him, as someone we observe observing. Quick's concentration of so much energy on an attempted analysis and understanding of the problems besetting the other couple's relationship can be regarded as ironical, since the very nature of his own imaginings, his melodramatic vision of life, inhibits his full comprehension of the issues confronting him.

Before looking at this more closely we might note the gradual accumulation of certain melodramatic leitmotifs specifically associated with this character. One of these is the "mystery motif," first introduced quite obliquely, when we learn that Quick's apartment is "decorated with two sporting prints and two detective novels" (p. 387). Later, he "shadows" Teresa and Crow along a London street, thinking:

"[T]his was, after all ... the city of Jack the Ripper and of many a horrid drama ... It was the city of unhappy, tortured men and women, it was the city of evil loves" (p. 394).

Elsewhere he is puzzling over Teresa, and Stead achieves a slyly comic effect by telling us, after Quick receives some "simple idea," that he "walked up and down with a Sherlock Holmes expression" (p. 418).

These moments inform the way Quick thinks about Teresa: "There's a mystery about her, a personal mystery. I can't make it out" (p. 392). It also informs the more obvious melodrama of his initial view of Crow: "He had not been watching long before he noticed a shrewd and unscrupulous-looking man in his thirties, who strolled round the stands and looked sharply at him, perhaps a private dick, he thought. The man was swarthy, oak-complexioned, with a hammered-out distorted and evil face and a syncopated rolling walk which looked like the business stroll of the second-rate spottable spy" (p. 429). We recall from earlier in the argument the fanciful, melodramatic prefiguring of Crow in Teresa's "black shapes of fantasy," and note the concordance between her immature vision then and Quick's immature vision now. (It must be admitted, though, that there are traces of fancy in Stead's writing in these parts also, so we should not think exclusively in terms of the characters' melodramatic perceptions.)

Quick, in attempting to fathom the underlying problems of Teresa's and Crow's relationship and to win the woman for himself, melodramatically casts himself in the role of detective and rescuer, a handsome prince whose kiss is a guarantee of wealth and happiness ever after. But his melodramatic vision is inadequate since it depends on simplifications, clichés, reductionism; we cannot quite accept his view of the situation, it is too pat, too formulaic, it touches on too little of what we ourselves come to see as the central dilemmas. The relatively light-hearted inter-chapters neatly play off his shallowness against the terrible and painful final phase of Teresa's attachment to Crow.

Obviously he grasps something of the truth when he speculates: "Intelligence, energy, idealism ... don't help

a woman at all to pick out the criminal or even betrayer of the other sex, in fact they peculiarly indispose her to suspect anything...." (p. 394). But this is as far as Quick's imaginings can take him, so that he concludes with the facile and trite observation: "[T]he sexes are made to be deceived by each other. Love is blind" (p. 394).

Significantly, Quick sees the main problem of Teresa's and Crow's relationship simply in terms of his perception of Crow's supposedly "evil" nature, a trap easily fallen into by readers of the book. He thinks: " - Nancy loves Bill Sykes. There you are! That type of sex criminal naturally picks out his victims anyhow among the unsuspecting. There is something very attractive to him, juicy, fantastically enjoyable in seeing the paroxysms of goodness, the imbecility of the victim" (p. 394). After reading segments of Jonathan's quite obviously sham thesis, he cries, as if making a great new discovery: "I know all ... I see all" (p. 416). But he cannot grasp the subtler implications of Teresa's testament, which he reads shortly afterwards. He remains simply "overwhelmed by her strange expression" (p. 422), unable to appreciate the extent to which the girl herself has seen beyond the immediate problems posed by her partially unwitting receipt of Jonathan's manipulations. For all his association with mystery and problem-solving, Quick barely approaches the truth; his imaginings dance fancifully on the periphery of the issue, without ever penetrating.

But Quick's vision of reality is integral to his own character and to the problems of the ongoing drama as well. Far from idealizing the relationship between Quick and Teresa, Stead immediately brings to the fore aspects of their attitudes which partly undercut any sense we might have of their being able to establish a wholly satisfactory future existence for themselves. For instance, Quick's inability to understand fully Teresa's reasons for attaching herself to Crow - reflected in his tendency to regard the latter as the monster who all but totally destroyed his beloved - and subsequent inability to acknowledge that to some extent she has transferred a new, partly destructive ideal onto himself, climaxes in a disturbing moment when

... in unchecked intimacy, Teresa began to tell him about herself, what her feelings really were



✱

in this honeymoon and how she felt now that she had the whip and check-rein in her hands - he went cold, so cold, that she felt the warmth dying out of his breast; he lay like a dying man. She realized her mistake, with a pinching of the heart, and at once abandoned the thought of telling him the truth about her love. There were a thousand sides to it ... but he only wanted "a woman's love," the intensely passionate, ideal, romantic love of famous love affairs (p. 459).

This has implications for Teresa too, and brings us round to a consideration, finally, of the question of whether or not her own larger realizations are completely brought into line with positive action in the final stages of the book. Crow and Quick, as we have observed, remain essentially unchanging in their perceptions of reality, but Teresa, by contrast, develops to a stage where she can claim, after apparently liberating herself from her own rigid will and a confusion of imaginings, an "extraordinary clutching of reality."

Yet if we accept this as some sort of ultimate stage in her progression towards truthful realization and understanding, we should remember that it is abstracted, transmuted into artistic achievement, and that the real nature of her relationship with Quick and some of her final attitudes, possibly indicate a partial regression. For example, we mentioned the new ideal which she appears to be seeking at the end of the book, partly realized when she forms a relationship with Quick; it is suggested by the words, "she felt now that she had the whip and check-rein in her hands." Power becomes Teresa's new primary aim, the goal beyond love. Again we have a possibly ironic comment on the novel's title, the sense that it is inadequate for describing the larger movement of the central personage's motivations and actions, and that it corresponds rather to Teresa's own initial half-formed perceptions about the object of her quest and desires. We consider her attitude after marrying Quick:

She did not revel in the physical pleasures of marriage, but her secret life became more intense.

She was like a scientist who has had many failures and who, once he succeeds, thinks that all his previous researches were not wasted; he regrets his dullness and the fumbling of the mind which is more like the fumbling of instinct, and yet he is proud of the blind sight that led him to this. She began to think that she could master men. She wanted to penetrate and influence men, to use them, even without aim, merely for variable and seductive power (p. 464).

Again, after her brief affair with Harry Girton, we are told: "[S]he possessed him absolutely ... She wanted to possess Quick too, to grasp him and weave him into herself cunningly, by practising the arts of love in every form ... No one would hold her prisoner, Harry did not, and even James would not, but she would hold them both prisoners" (p. 493). Although seemingly a "new ideal," Teresa's desire for power is something which can be associated with her earlier impulses and fantasies. This is reinforced by her present retreat into her "secret life" which she sets up in opposition to "the physical pleasures of marriage." Even as early as the wedding scene we learn: "She felt she had only to command and men would kneel at her feet" (p. 40). When Jonathan suggests that she become the group leader of the university discussion group he says: "Why not you? ... You have the power." Startled, she replies: "I sometimes feel I have, but I don't know enough...." (p. 186).

Teresa's new-found power ideal possibly also casts a different light on her earlier vague graspings of a larger destiny beyond love, particularly the words: "[A]t times she thought that her affair with Jonathan was only a step to the unknown man; she would use him for that [emphasis added]" (p. 228). Despite the maturity of Teresa's vision in the final stages of the book, there is an unsettling sense of regression conveyed through such associations; a sense that the attainable ideal that lies beyond her supposed "clutching of reality" is not really an extension of that eloquently expressed abstraction, but rather a more determined and specific version of the basic impulses stated early

in the book. The desire to assert her will is now realized as an end in itself almost, given predominance over a need for "love, learning, bread" because these have in some measure been provided for. Previously Teresa felt she did not "know enough" to assume this role, but now she can use her larger understanding to compel others to serve her, and to gratify the adolescent fantasies which have, far from disappearing with her unhappy experiences, only remained dormant.

However, having admitted the Jonathan-like potential in Teresa, we should not exaggerate it, just as we should not exaggerate the Sam-like potential in Louie in The Man Who Loved Children. The novel For Love Alone, like the earlier book, presents us with two major characters rigidly locked into inhibiting ways of imagining and feeling; but it also presents us with another, dominating figure who, whilst prone to these same inhibitions, transcends them and finally places rather more than one foot in the realm of self-determined freedom. That this self-determined freedom may pose a threat to others is not an idea Stead refuses to confront; but neither does she let it overwhelm and dampen her celebration of human autonomy.

Both The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone therefore come to positive conclusions, but the latter work definitely poses an uneasier resolution. For example, the final words of the book are quite ambiguous in their import. We recall that Teresa unexpectedly comes upon Crow in the street, and turns to Quick saying: "I can't believe I ever loved that man." Then she adds: "It's dreadful to think that it will go on being repeated for ever, he - and me! What's there to stop it?" (p. 502). On the positive side there is Teresa's implied grasping of the enigmatic, destructive warping in her own perceptions, but on the negative side a sense that she realizes this dissociatively, and is unable to foresee its possible implications for herself and Quick, given his obvious limitations and her own darker impulses which are now free to surface.

All the same, a sense of overriding doom for human relationships is but a shadow on the horizon at the end of For Love Alone. Basically, the reality of the inner human realm has triumphed in the positive sense, as it does by

the end of The Man Who Loved Children. In the next Section, however, we will be discussing two very difficult works by Stead which focus more absolutely on the darker potentialities of the human ego, whilst also placing them in relation to certain, sometimes enigmatic, external forces.

SECTION B

Seven Poor Men of Sydney

## Chapter Three

### SEVEN POOR MEN OF SYDNEY

In our brief foreshadowings of the novels discussed in this Section we have mainly emphasized three things: their strange similarity; their displacement of some of the issues we have developed specifically in relation to The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone; and the difficult nature of their respective forms. The first will hopefully become evident in due course, particularly when we come to discuss Cotters' England and note the recurrence there of images, themes, and structures central to Seven Poor Men of Sydney.

The second touches on a displacement of two of the issues we have explored so far: Stead's optimism (qualified as it is) and her concern with the inner human realm or "Lawrentian dimension" of character as the centrepiece of reality. We will see that although Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England are dominated in each instance by one quite overpowering figure, they also introduce forces that appear to conflict with what is particularly human, whether these forces be mundane or otherwise. This has the effect of diminishing our sense of the human in places, although it would not do to over-emphasize this. Stead's real displacement of the human ego occurs in works like The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek; yet even here, as we will see in the next Section, it is often paid considerable attention before it is recast in a larger, seemingly deterministic context.

However, the novels discussed in this Section do lack that vein of optimism we have detected in The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone. They are dark, pessimistic works and whilst not possessing a grandiose tragic conception, manage to unleash scenes of anguish and violence that place a powerful stranglehold on the reader, such as the build-up to Michael's suicide in Seven Poor Men of Sydney or Nellie's demented nocturnal attack on the ailing Caroline in Cotters' England, alternately insidious and ferocious in its effect on character and reader alike.

Our third issue, the novels' difficult and disorientat-

ing schemes, might serve as our starting point for a discussion of Seven Poor Men of Sydney. In the Introduction we noted Adrian Mitchell's implication that works like this one and Cotters' England are a bit confused and confusing because of their "imperfect adjustment between inner and outer realities." This is an issue which has quite strongly divided critics in their reaction to Seven Poor Men of Sydney. Some have found the book's interests too divergent to form a comprehensible whole, whilst others have implied that it is this very quality that works in its favour.

On the more positive side we have R.G. Geering, who states that the novel "at first sight might seem scattered and fragmentary" but in actuality possesses "real structure, a structure determined by the themes and their treatment."<sup>1</sup> Rodney Pybus also makes some illuminating comments along this line, understanding the book in terms of an implied reconciliation of its diverse elements. For example:

In the conventional sense there is virtually no plot in Seven Poor Men of Sydney, the development and unity lying in the interacting relationships of the characters, and their refracted view of each other (though here again the "background", the printing works, the docks and harbour area of Sydney, the communist newspaper, are an important part of the novel - the cumulative detail and atmosphere, the precise descriptions, help to balance the passages of surreal fantasy).<sup>2</sup>

We will be arguing that there is more than "balance" at stake here, but Pybus is clearly attuning himself to a unifying poetical dimension in the work that has failed to strike certain other commentators. Anthony Miller, for instance, finds its "heterogeneous" scheme to be one of the novel's "severe faults"<sup>3</sup> and Michael Wilding writes that "there is not a strong enough structure of action, plot or image to make a total unity of the disparate elements of Seven Poor Men."<sup>4</sup> (Wilding, interestingly, finds the book's non-naturalistic realm more successful than its realism; for him the latter is an intrusion, whilst for some others it is the phantasmagoric which proves to be the disruptive element, in

a negative sense.) Brian Kiernan also argues persuasively about an apparent lack of unification in Stead's first novel:

[T]he lyrical impulse to relate the characters to a total cosmic setting ... conflicts with the dramatic presentation and the characters tend to become antiphonal voices rather than actors. The dramatic structure strains under the energy and conviction with which different viewpoints are put by the characters ... [T]here is, as Michael Wilding says, "a disjunction ultimately between the overall theme and organization of the book ... and the individual successful imaginative passages, between the Romantic and the low-life caricature."<sup>5</sup>

We remarked in our discussion of For Love Alone on the merging in that novel of vivid characterization with Stead's interest in dramatically opposed ideas, and maintained that in spite of this the work does not become purely an "oratorio." Kiernan complains of "antiphonal voices rather than actors" in Seven Poor Men of Sydney, and there are parts of the novel which bear out his claim; but there are other parts also which are fine examples of subtle and complex characterization. In fact both these aspects of the novel are interdependent, and although some of the oratorio-like sequences quite definitely fail (as we will later show), their non-naturalistic undercutting of other, more realistic dimensions is not in itself evidence of a wrong-headed procedure; rather it is evidence of a procedure which could have been executed with less awkwardness, as it is in some of the subsequent works. This negative point made, we should stress that we find the good passages in Seven Poor Men of Sydney far outweigh the bad in terms of overall effect, and that its underlying impulse is a strongly ordering one which is combined with some interesting reflections on the ambiguity of that order.

What might be termed "evasive logic" pervades Stead's skilful synthesis of diverse, often conflicting elements, in this novel. Generally this disallows the sense of a random and haphazard juggling of these elements, despite their diversity, and permits genuine thematic unity and coherence.



As the title of the book suggests, Seven Poor Men of Sydney is largely concerned with people; a study of human relationships is integral to its structure and will be our first concern.

The structure of the book is highly stylized, and for important reasons. Throughout, Stead employs what might loosely be described as different "modes" of characterization for certain characters and incidents. As the characters attempt to articulate, or at least apprehend, a set of problems and happenings pertaining to the reality of their own human existence, we see that they possess different degrees and types of awareness. These depend on and are modified by individual personality, intelligence, social background, personal beliefs or biases, and so on, as well as, in this instance, the author's larger, more abstract and stylized conception of the novel. This last, Stead's creation of a world that partly acts on character from without, slightly decentralizes the ego, as we will observe at various points throughout the discussion.

The writer's different "modes" of portrayal are a product of her desire to represent characters, events and ideas realistically - in the sense that she gives us what purport to be accurate scenes of everyday life - and yet also non-realistically, so that the larger conflict of styles, moods and attitudes subsequently created within the novel both mirrors those conflicts experienced by the characters themselves and creates gradations, or different levels, of reality; a reality composed of seemingly disparate elements, but also revealing, usually through the medium of special "conventions" or "symbols," a purposeful design. This last idea constitutes one of Stead's more complex themes, but its significance can only be revealed later in the discussion.

The mode of social realism in Seven Poor Men of Sydney is historically based. Essentially it revolves around descriptions of "ordinary life" - a term frequently employed throughout the work - in Sydney in the 1920s, with Chamberlain's printing works and the Workers' Education Association providing the main background for the depiction of working-class existence in this period, amidst strikes and stop-work meetings, the proletariat struggle against capitalism

and so forth. It is particularly well portrayed in the sub-plot dealing with a scheme by Montagu to take over Gregory Chamberlain's printing works.

Such sequences become Stead's basis for scenes of everyday life involving general humanity; but when she focuses more specifically on various characters and their relationships, the novel seems partly to break away from this structure, becoming more evasive, fragmentary and disturbing in both mood and theme. This mode of Seven Poor Men of Sydney complicates and counterpoints the novel's realism, for it incorporates essentially non-realistic elements and devices into its structure; among these will be included the strong overtones of romanticism which Stead introduces for special reasons throughout the book, the complex and intrusive symbolism, her emphasis on what one character refers to as "the inenarrable night sessions of dreams"<sup>6</sup> which enigmatically link key figures in the novel, and the persistent use of monologues or speeches as a replacement for characters' natural dialogue.

The resonances evoked by these different modes of representation extend outwards into the novel and overlap, appearing to clash, yet also to form some sort of poetical identification with one another. And this is the central tension produced by the book, the simultaneous movement towards and away from interrelation, or what we termed in the Introduction the tension between concepts of continuity and discontinuity. Just as the powerful theme of love informs the gradations of imaginative reality in For Love Alone, so is Seven Poor Men of Sydney filled out on this level by the numerous considerations about the diversity and perhaps apparent meaninglessness of life's elements, and the human need, as Stead sees it in this work, to ensure that these elements "only connect" in the Forsterian phrase.<sup>7</sup> However in order to discuss the way in which this larger theme or idea of the novel is integrated with the portrayal of character, and thus discover how Stead manages to synthesize the various elements of her work, something must first of all be said about the characters of Seven Poor Men of Sydney, their relationships, and how these are presented.

We may divide the characters of the novel into two

broad categories: those who are presented through the basically realistic mode of narrative - that is, those characters belonging essentially to the world of everyday actions and events, or in other words, the world as most people probably see it - and those who, whilst undoubtedly having connection with this world, are also presented through the non-realistic, more abstract modes, in which the interplay of symbol and metaphor (or other device) reveals relationships and ideas not so apparent in the other.

Relatively minor or subsidiary characters like Chamberlain, the Follits, Michael's and Joseph's parents, Tom Winter, even the flamboyant Withers, belong to the first category; centrally more important figures like Michael, Catherine, Joseph, Blount, and perhaps Baruch Mendelssohn, belong to the second, and are logically given greater depth of treatment than the former, since they are, by virtue of this dual presentation, directly linked to the larger themes of the novel, which arise from the overall merging or synthesis of these disparate and divergent modes.

The central character of Seven Poor Men of Sydney is Michael Baguenault. Although this figure does not occupy time and space in the world of the novel any more than certain other characters, we feel that he does dominate throughout, because all major relationships in the work can ultimately be traced to him, and because within his character we find the most complete and explicit expression of the book's larger concern, especially the theme of the problem of interrelation. For example, in one quite early scene in the novel, taken from a series of brief episodes depicting Michael's childhood and first years of adulthood, we witness this character challenging his headmaster's assumptions about "[d]octrine, constitution, order, duty, religion" (p. 17). He states:

When I see order I am amazed, it seems unnatural, I feel uneasy, as if I were looking at a thing artificially perfect like a china doll's complexion. You know how astonished you are when you turn a kaleidoscope and see a perfect design fall together by chance. As if harlequins, a drunken mass of masks and ankles, fell tumbling together into a

colour wheel. I wish to watch the ordinary movement of life and I see only a succession of dead, shed moments without interrelation: like a man walking through a hall of mirrors and seeing a thousand reflections of himself on every side, each one a shell of himself, and insubstantial. Time, tide, order, I cannot understand; I would go mad; I would rather believe in fairies (p. 17).

Michael's claim that perfection and order are contingent elements in a disparate universe, often produced by artificial contrivance, is to be linked with what we referred to earlier as the special conventions or symbols Stead uses in exploring that aspect of reality which may or may not reveal a purposeful design. Again, as this is a complex, abstract issue, and one which can really only be appreciated after a more complete analysis of the characters and their relationships has been made, it will be returned to later. What is important for the moment is Michael's anti-Thomistic sense of the disparateness of life, of the absence of any genuine "interrelation"; for just as he sees life as a jumble of disparate elements, "harlequins ... tumbling together into a colour wheel," so is he as a character a combination of irreconcilable elements which tear him in all directions at once, helping to create a condition of despair that ultimately drives him to suicide. He is without substance and integration, a "thousand reflections" of a man.

Significantly, this aspect of Michael's character is connected with the concept of the novel's possessing different, often conflicting modes of representation, for these enable Stead to give form to the disparate elements warring within this character's psyche. For instance, although Michael moves in and belongs to the "ordinary" world of the novel, outlined earlier, it does seem valid to claim that parts of the novel surrounding this personage possess an aura of full-blown romanticism, and that this romanticism is opposed in tone and meaning to the realism of the book. This does not mean that Stead wishes simply to create a romantic figure as an extension of her range of characterization. Michael has too much in common with the other more "ordinary"

characters in the novel to fit comfortably into that mould; he seems too commonplace, too contemporary. And yet, paradoxically, he does exhibit, as we shall see, strong romantic tendencies that associate him with the larger-than-life attributes of certain 19th century romantic characterizations and which seem to belie this very commonplaceness and contemporaneity. More interestingly, he often seems to exist in a dimension of the novel which also belies this same commonplaceness, so we are not dealing with an issue that is tied exclusively to character in the first place.

This seeming paradox is one aspect of the problem which lies at the heart of the book. The irreconcilable mixture of realism and romanticism, present in the portrayal of individual character, goes beyond character to suggest connections and relationships existing in the larger, more abstract sphere of the novel. This is a depiction of the linking or interrelating of those aspects of reality and human experience most frequently disjoined. Stead's original idiom thus injects new life into what can often seem like "those tired old binary oppositions": ordinary life and the extraordinary, order and chaos, reason and passion, reality and illusion, the concrete and the abstract, the normal and the grotesque, and so on. These are aspects of existence which Michael, and some other characters, find difficult to draw together and make meaningful. "An ordinary life," says Michael in one scene, "'is like that crack in the floor, mine is like this,' and he wavered up the crack, sometimes treading on it, sometimes wide of it" (p. 235).

Stead carefully establishes the romantic mode in the first chapter of Seven Poor Men of Sydney, before suddenly switching to realistic scenes of city life and the workaday world. Thus the novel opens with a series of episodes from Michael's childhood (an emphasis on childhood is important in romantic characterization), and these episodes appear designed to function, if not aesthetically then at least emotionally, rather like the "spots of time" in Wordsworth's The Prelude. Episodes which are imprinted on Michael's consciousness for life are described briefly and with a stark clarity, like the terrifying incident on the cliffs

of Fisherman's Bay, which perversely gives him his strange, morbid fascination for the ocean. Childhood determines many of Michael's mental attitudes for life, so that when on the brink of suicide much later in the novel, he is able to say that he lost his notion "that life was worth living" many years earlier, "On the seashore. When I was a little boy" (p. 209).

Examples of Michael's romanticism abound throughout the novel. There is the emphasis on imagination and extreme states of passion and emotion: "[P]owerful visions would pass through his head; he laboured automatically to increase and perfect these visions, to make them logical, grandiose. He believed in intellectual miracles. He suffered states which were ecstasy, although they were not joyful but rapt and inhuman" (p. 16). Reference is made to "his mysticism of the past" (p. 23), another feature of the romantic spirit. In one scene Stead portrays him walking along a cliff-top, a solitary, almost prophetic figure, romantically projecting his sense of despair and destiny onto external reality, or nature:

He climbed up to the flagstaff at the signal station. It stretched up beyond its normal height into profound heavens where mists now bowled fast and dimly. In its mast and yards he saw the sign of his future, a monstrous pale tree, bitterly infinite, standing footless in the earth and headless in the heavens, a splinter sterile and sapless, a kind of scarecrow, a rack for cast vestments, a mast castaway: underneath the sea ran (p. 40).

The romantic desire to exploit, often gratuitously, a sense of the bizarre, the exotic, the mysterious, the sensational, and the sentimental, is evident in his nature also. After his death his half-sister Catherine tells Baruch: "[H]e didn't like anything modern. He bought a wooden replica of a peasant Christ found in the Tyrol, a most grotesque thing, to have in his bedroom, which he had painted white. But it wasn't to pray, it was the grotesquerie, the bizarre monastic flavour, a shock in a suburban bungalow" (p. 263). Michael's romanticism of death and suffering is stressed in a number of scenes as well. In one sequence Stead pointedly

tells us how he "looked with affection at the morgue with its gloomy motto, and trailed past with melancholy delight the houses in Raymond Terrace" (p. 237). Numerous other examples of this sort of thing may be found throughout the novel.

It was mentioned earlier that Michael's character is made up of a combination of irreconcilable elements, so that his vision of life as something "without interrelation" is largely a reflection of the disunity present in his own being. The intense mood of romanticism which Stead establishes around Michael as a kind of aura illuminates the "harlequin" in his nature. To employ his own metaphor, he becomes the "drunken mass of masks and ankles" hurtling through "the ordinary movement of life." This notion of Michael as harlequin is important, because in various sequences of naturalistic observation in Seven Poor Men of Sydney we are shown him trying to come to terms with the more ordinary aspects of life, attempting to make sense of them, but always painfully aware of himself as the alien in their midst. He tells Baruch:

I never thought of a joke in my life that went off. Yes, I think of wonderful jokes and laugh at them myself, but when I tell them, everyone stares at me anxiously or lugubriously. I go home and repeat what I have said to myself; it sounds perfectly good, and then I repeat the things other chaps palm off, and they don't sound half as good. That makes me simply despair. It means there is something else, a sort of animal success which I haven't and can't get (p. 243).

Michael's feelings of alienation spring from the basic differences he assumes exist between himself and the majority of other people. But they also heighten or intensify romantic tendencies already present in his own nature, since it is only by deliberately augmenting them, ironically, that Michael can find some solace; solace through suffering and solitude. He announces to Catherine:

I resolved to become less human, then I should not miss people so much. I called up the brutish spirit of solitude, saying, Put all sound out of my ears,

drive me out with pricks and salt to walk the streets at night, let me wound bitterly my only and dearest friend, start with affectation at his simple words, suffer slight from his unintended innuendoes, give me a dry sharp voice, so that I will be entirely alone (p. 272).

The novel's conflicting modes of representation which portray Michael divided between two spheres of existence, neither of which he can reconcile with the other, so that he becomes "footless in the earth and headless in the heavens," serve to illustrate the central ambivalence of his nature. Michael may abhor "the succession of dead, shed moments" of ordinary life and embrace with abandon a romanticized empire of the senses, in which all experience and emotion is magnified, but he feels compelled to integrate himself with this ordinary life, to conform with the norm which he senses it upholds, and cannot. Hence his self-acknowledged sense of "despair." The problem becomes how to link the normal and the supra-normal, ecstatic passion and calm reason, the ordinary and the extraordinary. Michael is brought up against a brick wall because he lacks the basic conventions - what he calls "a sort of animal success" - that other people possess, and which allow them to create the desired impression of wholeness and unity of being. We say impression because one of the concerns of this book, as we intend showing later, is the question of whether or not "conventions" for the outward appearance of order and inter-relation simply mask natural or inherent disorder and disparateness, as Michael maintains in his speech to his headmaster.

The nature of Michael's relationships with his crippled friend Kol Blount and his half-sister Catherine is intimately connected with these key concerns also, and is central to the formation of the novel's main themes. Our sense of the special quality of these relationships arises from the fact that Stead's treatment of them is a largely symbolic one, so that they belong essentially to her non-realistic mode of representation, in deliberate and puzzling contrast to the clearer, less mysterious and more easily discernible



lines of the novel's realism; for example, Stead's straightforward depiction of the relationship between the Follits. (It may be felt that we are concentrating on the non-naturalistic aspects of Seven Poor Men of Sydney at the expense of the realistic ones; but this is because the latter, taken on their own, are fairly self-explanatory, whilst the former need considerable interpretation. This interpretation, however, is mainly a preliminary to showing how all the parts of the work co-operate as a whole.)

In her symbolic portrayal of the relationships between Michael, Catherine and Blount, Stead shows how these characters consciously and unconsciously attempt, through love, to transcend their inability to interrelate the diverse aspects of human personality and experience. Michael especially seeks transcendence through love, and yet the nature of love - particularly romantic love - as Stead often sees it, the apparent sovereignty of passion over reason, of a supra-normal state of consciousness over the more ordinary consciousness which permits conventional action in a more or less conventional society, may block the process of realization. In the previous chapter we saw that this was one of the concerns of For Love Alone.

Michael not only romantically turns in upon himself, using his own personal experience as a means of general reasoning; he also gravitates towards two other individuals, Blount and Catherine, who, like himself, are extreme instances of individuals proclaiming the anguish of their disunity of being. Michael finds his image in these people, and perhaps also, at least in his relationship with Catherine, an imagined complement to that which he feels is missing in himself. Baruch Mendelssohn tells Catherine that Michael "could have found no one but you and Blount amongst all his friends" (p. 275). Conversely, these individuals gravitate towards Michael, and for the same reasons.

If we look at the relationship between Michael and Blount first of all, we should take note of the symbolic significance of the emphasis on "paralysis." We observe that Michael persistently aligns himself with his crippled friend. "I spoil everything I touch," he says to his mother, "because I was born without hands - like poor Blount,

for all practical purposes. To act is for me to do something awry, to stop the machinery, stick my heel through the scenery, gaff in the acting, forget my lines" (p. 220). Blount, like Michael, cannot function normally in the everyday world; he is isolated from general humanity. But Stead makes a point of emphasizing that it is not so much his physiological condition which sets him apart, but his extraordinarily passionate nature, which is much like Michael's and the wellspring of Blount's own intense spiritual love for him. This has paralysed his ability, and more significantly his desire, to participate in "ordinary life." Blount claims: "To love you must dissociate yourself from humanity, as with all great passions" (p. 62). In the symbolic mode of the novel Blount's actual physical paralysis becomes emblematic of the same paralysis Michael speaks of; a paralysis of all the usual or commonplace methods of human communication and intercourse, caused by what Baruch refers to as "a disequilibrium of passion" (p. 154). Blount says of Michael: "I have found a brother ... he has the same emotions as myself. Thus, I know that my state of mind is not solely due to my inertia" (pp. 60-61). Both men, in their extreme states of passion and turmoil, partly choose and are partly forced, to dissociate themselves from humanity; to become "less than human," in fact.

Blount seeks an image of himself and his actions, not in general humanity or the ordinary course of day to day living, but in his friend Michael, just as we will later observe Michael seeking an image of himself in his sister Catherine. "Michael is like me," Blount asserts, "paralysed, armless, a brother. Who does not wish to spend his life in communion with himself?" (p. 60). Baruch's desire for an image of the self in the loved one, and his use of this image as a receptacle for his huge passion, by his own admission prohibit any attempt at integrating this self with the surrounding world. Yet he views this as a means of transcending such a necessity. "What is this virtue in company? Why should a man have to like mankind, if he has a universe at home, or in his imagination?" (p. 61). The opposition to this romantic notion is put by some of Blount's acquaintances who claim that it is "no more than a perverse love of death

and negations, a prolonged womb-life, a Brahmin self-extinction, a desire to be lapped once more in one's own excreta, an onanism...." (p. 60).

But for a maturer creation of this dialectic, and deeper exploration of the "love of death" motif, we should turn to Stead's portrayal of Michael's and Catherine's relationship. A disturbing and mysterious undercurrent to the bond between brother and half-sister is hinted at well before Catherine reveals their love for each other in her "Narrative" to Baruch and Joseph, near the end of the book. But by "disturbing" we do not imply anything about the supposed "incest" theme. It is difficult to find a single commentator who does not make some reference to the "incestuous" union between these two characters, but Stead hardly gives us any cause to suppose that incest is the phenomenon she is exposing. No mention of sexual feeling is given, and it is difficult to presume incest without it. In fact, had not the writer conspicuously steered us away from distracting speculation about the physical, one of her most obviously metaphysical themes could barely have liberated itself (for good or bad) from her mode of realistic representation.

We are referring to the characters' own abstract and elusive suggestions that they are mysteriously linked on the plane of spirit, perhaps like Cathy and Heathcliffe in Wuthering Heights,<sup>8</sup> spiritually bound to one another in both life and death, each complementing that aspect of the other which seeks the sense of interrelation missing from ordinary existence. We are given some clues about the nature of this special relationship in the comments of other characters. For example, Heinrich Winterbaum enigmatically says of the pair: "They are like twins. They are shadows of each other, close shadows, warm shadows...." (p. 132). Clearly, the concept of a special bond linking Michael and Catherine is something which largely arises from their own attitudes towards one another, and can therefore be rationalized in the light of individual personality. But we must keep in mind that Stead does not intend Seven Poor Men of Sydney to function purely as a psychological casebook, all its problems revealed in the elaborate mapping out of characters' psyches. As we have implied already, the human ego is not

always the centre of the problems in this work. In considering the next couple of pages, therefore, it will do to keep in mind that Stead gives her theme of "spiritual bondage" a supernatural as well as a psychological application, often removing it from the context of Michael's and Catherine's relationship altogether (which is partly a supernatural one anyway, as will be shown). The question of "animism in nature," well discussed in relation to Stead's novel by Tony Thomas,<sup>9</sup> is often raised by characters as if it were as logical a topic of discussion as the Sydney docks or the printing works run by Chamberlain, and we will see that in Michael's suicide scene it becomes an actual - as distinct from symbolic - phenomenon, incorporating the notion of "bondage" in a quite sinister sense.

To return for the moment to the strange bond linking brother and half-sister in Seven Poor Men of Sydney, it is important to examine Michael's long speech about light and darkness, and love and death. This is spoken before Catherine and later related by her in her "Narrative." Key passages from it are set out as follows:

... I have come to love my sister as myself, for you are myself, but everything appears in you with a greater perfection, and all that is dark and light in you is the very reflection of my own thoughts, my mind and my desires. A man cannot love himself, but all men do, and so there is no satisfaction in the world, for we must clasp another body, informed by another spirit to ourselves.

... and so I am in love with you; not you, but that which is like you in me. I am lost because part of me is sundered from me for ever.

... Put your face in your hands. Because you are not beauty, you are terror, you are destiny, what is destiny but death, and what else are you? If I ever kissed you, what would I have under my lips but the very substance and moment of death and dissolution?

I have no meaning in ordinary life, and this is what releases me from being silent about my love,

and it is what makes me love, perhaps, the image of myself: it is a hunger and lust for death at root (p. 274).

Several aspects of this speech are integral to the themes of Seven Poor Men of Sydney. They might briefly be summarized as: Michael's discovery of an image of himself in the loved one; his romantic externalization of this personal experience and application of it to all humanity; his metaphysical claim that part of himself is lost forever because he is Catherine; his notion that Catherine, as an image of the self, represents destiny, and thus death; his sense of this sort of love as having its roots in an inability to find meaning or interrelation "in ordinary life"; and finally, his conviction that his attempted transcendence of ordinary life through his love for Catherine represents a form of liebestod, "a hunger and lust for death."

The parallels with Blount's and Michael's relationship are obvious, for again we have the onanistic love and acceptance of the fragmented self only when its reflection can be found in another person. Similarly, the love of another person can only take place after this discovery of the self has been made. This is the meaning of love for Blount, Michael and to a lesser extent Catherine. It is paradoxical, because it at once represents some sort of movement away from inner life and towards the meaningful integration of the self with another being; yet it is ultimately regressive, since the demands of this kind of love, which centres on the alienated individual's need to accept himself rather than be accepted by others, compound the problems associated with the inner life. The individual has only himself, and what he sees of himself in others, with which to formulate a response to life.

This helps to explain Michael's, and also Catherine's conviction that each complements the other in nature and spirit. We remember that earlier in the novel Catherine prefigures her half-brother's claims by saying things like "he is positively an abstract personality," or "[h]e was my alter ego" (p. 154). As individuals these characters are fractions of a whole, unable to interrelate the diverse

elements of human personality, unable to integrate themselves with the surrounding world. When each sees a reflection of the self in the other, the claim is made that the missing self has been discovered. But this is a linking of types, not parts of the whole.

However, when Michael says to Catherine "you are myself," we are dealing with a more complex progression in the argument altogether. Perhaps it is that his half-sister represents a more idealized view of himself, as when he says: "[Y]ou are myself, but everything appears in you with a greater perfection." But this projected view of himself, if we recall his earlier avowal to the headmaster that "perfection" does not exist in life except as something artificially contrived, represents the ultimate and unattainable ideal; that is, the transcendence of "ordinary life" and its "dead, shed moments without interrelation." This too cannot exist, except as an ideal. Michael's words, "I am lost because part of me is sundered from me for ever," come to convey a sense of this unattainability. The disjunction between what he is and what he should be cannot, and will never, come together.

In addition, his imagined bridging of this disjunction through love is a beautiful romantic dream anyway; a dream on his own terms. By this we imply that it is not simply unattainable, but desirably so; the agony of real existence is therefore dulled by the pleasurable-painful opium haze of romanticism. Catherine displays her awareness of this, after revealing her reciprocal love for her brother: "I tried to make plans to go to some other country where they would not know we were related, but all these fantasies went up in smoke; besides, Michael would never have done it. It would have made the thing too real to him, he only wanted to play with the idea" (p. 275). (Admittedly a passage like this one may convey to some readers the presence of incest, but in the light of so much abstract talk and yearning for the metaphysical it is not too likely that this is what Stead is getting at. Conceivably, the characters' exiling themselves in a distant land would remove the threat of social interference based on a misinterpretation of their non-sexual desires, and permit them to live, on their own terms, in peace.)

Michael does not only play with ideas, though. He does

perform one concrete action, finally; he takes his own life. Before expanding this, it is interesting to contrast the two views on suicide which the novel affords us in maintaining the "tensions between different concepts of reality."<sup>10</sup> In some of the early naturalistic passages suicide is seen as a simple by-product of unavoidable social evils. We note the matter-of-fact tone of the following: "A suicide at the Gap was a commonplace affair. Everyone knew why a person committed suicide: if it was a man, because he couldn't pay his bills or had no job; if a woman, because she was going to have a baby" (p. 70). In contrast to this matter-of-factness there is the poetical, non-naturalistic dimension of the work, which depicts Michael's suicide as his ultimate realization that the only transcendence of "ordinary life" comes not in love but in death; or rather, love in death, a perverse liebestod with the self as central love object.

This partly accounts for why Michael transmutes his view of Catherine - the unattainable self, the ideal self as loved one - into a vision of destiny or death. We recall the words quoted earlier:

... you are destiny, what is destiny but death, and what else are you? If I ever kissed you, what would I have under my lips but the very substance and moment of death and dissolution?

I have no meaning in ordinary life, and this is what releases me from being silent about my love, and it is what makes me love, perhaps, the image of myself: it is a hunger and lust for death at root.

Importantly, Stead's description of Michael's suicide provides us with the most "outward" depiction of a metaphysical reality, as if to give it a substance that will enable it to transcend the limitations of individual viewpoint. This brings us to our earlier claim that certain characters in Seven Poor Men of Sydney are not just psychologically atypical of other more ordinary personages, but occasionally seem to inhabit a different realm altogether; a realm that they not only help create, but one which they

sometimes break into, and which may have been operating on them from without all along. The book's deliberate merging of realism with romanticism therefore seems, at times, to go beyond character, suggesting larger, more abstract and less explicable relationships between different gradations of reality. No doubt this sort of thing can sound quite gauche in paraphrase, but any reader sympathetic to Stead's peculiar style in this first novel will be struck by the discomfiting conviction with which she brings off the whole venture, and how she expertly shuffles her planes of reality with a naturalness and ease that deceive the reading eye, bewildering and disorientating us.

Consider the description of those few moments preceding Michael's suicide, as he stands on the edge of the cliff, and then some key words following the act itself:

The wind sways him like the rooted plants and grasses, whistles through his hair as through the pine trees opposite: he is already no longer a man but part of the night. The pine trees crowded him to the ledge, the light wheels, down underneath is the howling parliament of waters deciding on his fate. The gusts on rock and ledge as spirits hold his heart in their shadowy hands and squeeze the blood out of it; darkness only runs through his veins now ... [After his death:] It is done; all through the early morning the strings of the giant mast cry out a melody, in triumph over the spirit lost (pp. 249-50).

The images of animism in nature, particularly the reference to "the howling parliament of waters deciding on his fate" (perhaps a deliberate echo of Wordsworth's natural "consistency" in The Prelude<sup>11</sup>), contribute generally to the sense of a larger reality that has Michael in its grip, a reality curiously at odds with the one perceived by the novel's more "ordinary" characters. And the final words in the quotation refer us back to the scene where Michael climbs the flagstaff, surveying the scarecrow mast in which "he saw the sign of his future." Now, after his death, he is in bondage to this same "giant mast" which gloats "over



the spirit lost," like the death ship in the Flying Dutchman legend snatching away the souls of the living and forever withholding redemption or salvation.

On a less mystical level, the claim that Michael is "no longer a man but part of the night" and that "darkness only runs through his veins now," can be linked with the symbolism of his speeches to Catherine. He asserts that she represents the "dark and light" of his own nature, and later that "darkness is the condition of man, and light is all he thirsts after...." (p. 273). Therefore at the moment of Michael's death we witness the symbolic supremacy of the night over the day, of the darkness over the light. Michael's condition, the "dark," has won out over the attempted transcendence of the self through love alone. And this is because his love, in seeking to attach itself solely to the ephemeral shimmer of the "light" - in other words, the image of the idealized self as it is discovered in the loved one - must also inevitably be bound all too solidly to the real self; the fragmented, disjunctive self. It can never be free; it is tied to darkness and death.

Catherine, likewise, is tied to darkness and death for the same reasons. But as Stead presents their relationship more from Michael's viewpoint than Catherine's, it is difficult to judge to what extent the woman's experiences mirror those of her half-brother. This is perhaps a weakness in Stead's structuring of this relationship; a weakness which in the next chapter we will see corrected in the writer's more all-round and balanced portrayal of the mysterious link between the brother and sister in Cotters' England. In Seven Poor Men of Sydney there is not really enough substance given to Catherine as a character, and this tends to inhibit our analysis of parallel attitudes in Michael and Catherine, although it is obvious from the evidence we possess that they do exist. It must be observed that here we quite strongly differ with H.M. Green's view: "Catherine shares many of her brother's characteristics, but is a stronger character, more alive, though not less tormented."<sup>12</sup>

The woman's ritual suicide attempt before Baruch in the asylum workshop most closely links her with Michael. For Catherine too, death becomes the only means of transcending

her fractured existence. "Nothing can satisfy my spleen but to fall into the terror beyond death, but let me only escape the terror of living through so many unhappy loves" (pp. 310-311), she says in her lengthy monologue before her suicide attempt.

This monologue or speech, like many others of its kind appearing throughout Seven Poor Men of Sydney, raises some points that have not yet been discussed about a major aspect of the modal switches in this book. This is Stead's frequent replacement of characters' natural dialogue with stylized speeches or soliloquys, as a means of attempting to thrust her ideas into a loftier symbolic realm and of simultaneously creating the necessary larger clash between scenes incorporating this device and scenes of a more realistic nature. For instance, in the realistic mode of the novel it may be emphasized that Catherine is an "extremely simple" (p. 176) individual, and yet in a different mode she may soliloquize at length about ideas far beyond the scope of her natural expressiveness, as when she asks of Baruch:

Are my lips black? They feel black, as if the  
venescence coiling the ambushed snake, Terror,  
which is eternal and circles the world, in the  
ocean as the ancients thought, for the ocean is  
also bitter, black and encircling, had already  
shot into my blood through its black fang (p. 310).

But this particular convention for the exploration of a variety of realities is probably the least satisfactory aspect of Seven Poor Men of Sydney. In Chapter Two we mentioned that sometimes Stead fails to integrate certain devices satisfactorily into her writing, but stressed that this is not a hard and fast rule; often her use of speech and monologue, for instance, is one of the best features of her style. In her first book it serves well to heighten the impact of the transition from one mode or dominating mood to another, but often the ideas set forth within such monologues - usually excepting those of Michael and possibly also Blount - in themselves signify too little that can be related to the deeper structure of meanings in the work, or else fall completely flat because they read like bad

poetry. Anybody familiar with the later films of Antonioni may also complain of this phenomenon; for example, the speechifying in The Oberwald Mystery (based on a play by Cocteau), quite definitely weighs the film down, because it is not guided by the same imaginative impetus that governs the director's innovative approach to colour, his interesting juxtaposition of video filming with movie-camera photography, and the beautiful use of Richard Strauss's Death and Transfiguration. (In places too, the pretentiousness of the language unfortunately draws out latent pretensions in these other virtues which otherwise might have been forgiven or overlooked.)

It is not difficult to see what Stead is trying to achieve in parts of her book, however. Through the convention or device of the extended monologue in which characters speak quite unnaturally with an articulateness they could hardly possess, she hopes to make them reveal things about themselves that they do not know or cannot yet understand. In Michael's case she partly achieves her aim, especially in the speech we have been examining. This is something like the way in which poetry functions in the plays of Shakespeare, or music in an opera, for these serve not only as supports for the characters as they talk or soliloquize, but reveal those larger implications about a character's state of being which he must be unaware of, not only by dramatic necessity but because there are natural limitations to any person's awareness, and it is conceivably one of the functions of art to be able to show us these limitations and yet also take us, and sometimes the characters, beyond them. The astounding beauty and power of great poetical drama or great opera, for instance, are most evident in those triumphant and disturbing moments occurring when the larger implications of action and thought, borne respectively by the poetry and the music, ultimately coincide with a character's own individual awareness: Lear on the heath, Othello kissing his murdered wife before taking his own life, Don Giovanni gripping the Stone Guest's hand in a joint comprehension and defiance of his terrible fate, Parsifal realizing his divine mission at the conclusion of the exultant Good Friday music, and so on.

Stead's attempt at using monologues as vehicles for ideas which transcend the limited awareness of individual characters is therefore the most ambitious aspect of Seven Poor Men of Sydney. But we do not wish to diminish it simply by referring to those lofty sequences in art which so readily become burned onto our consciousness forever. Generally it fails on its own terms, for the reasons set out earlier, and also because the monologues often break too definitely with character - as in the passage quoted from Catherine's speech - so that our attempts to formulate appropriate critical connections between characters and their "meta awareness" are frustrated.

A non-naturalistic mode which functions more satisfactorily in Seven Poor Men of Sydney, and which directly pertains to our discussion of the relationships between Blount, Michael and Catherine, is Stead's ability to make characters' dream states overlap with the "real" world. Again we are partly concerned with psychological phenomena within a relatively explicable social context, and partly with a reality for which no rationale is easily provided. This last seems designed to support Michael's statement that "the ranges of human experience go beyond human belief" (p. 270), or at least to beg his question, "is the world full of spirits, as the mind?" (p. 17).

In one sequence Catherine dreams that she is in the Folliotics' home gazing at a photograph of Marion Folliot, a person whom Michael loves for a time and of whom his half-sister is subsequently jealous. There is an uncanny correspondence between this and a climactic scene that takes place much later when Michael, sick and despairing, seeks refuge in the Folliotics' house and falls asleep after gazing in a dream-like trance at the same photograph his half-sister had dreamed of. Significantly, he has a vision of two women coming towards him, whom we take to be images of his two different loves, Catherine and Marion. Catherine later tells Joseph and Baruch: "[Michael] said he walked with me in dreams" (p. 263). The bond between the two, despite all attempts at explanation involving psychological analysis of character, is designed by Stead to evoke something larger than character, and larger than society. Particularly

difficult to explicate is Blount's account of a dream he has which clearly foretells Michael's death:

At the same moment the gondolier pushed the other ship angrily forward ... the drowned man at our prow fell into the depths of the canal. We rushed on into the dark but he had long outdistanced us. Underneath in the canal, now become clear, I saw Michael smiling at me. I told Mother that, I was so impressed, and she burst out crying (pp. 259-260).

Dreams in Seven Poor Men of Sydney come to represent those tensions lying just below the surface of "ordinary life" which, on the terms of the novel, are not readily interpretable. Michael makes the point that "the greater part of our day is spent in internal dark," and asks, "what of the inenarrable night sessions of dreams?" (p. 273). In accordance with the structure of the book, Stead uses dreams specially to fragment its tone, without losing that sense of poetical interrelation which holds the parts together in strange harmony. We note that the Folliots or Chamberlain, for example, do not dream, being very much associated with the "enarrable" events of daily life. This separates them from characters like Blount, Michael, Catherine, and even Joseph, who appear to inhabit two worlds (we will say more of Joseph presently). But because such characters indeed inhabit two worlds we must seek, as we have been doing, at least some explanation of the work's contradictions in terms of complex human personality. In particular Stead brings together some of the diverse aspects of Seven Poor Men of Sydney in Michael Baguenault, the harlequin dancing in the hall of mirrors which is the novel itself, composed as it is of different planes of reality reflecting various and diverse elements.

Therefore the larger sense of conflict produced by the novel's different modes of representation at once gives form to conflicts experienced by the characters themselves. It is useful to state the issue in this way because it also implies a sense in which Stead has slightly "displaced" the human ego, in addition to exploring some of its complex-

ities. The book's poetical conflict of mundane or social forces with occasional transmundane ones, is in places seen as larger than character, acting on it from the outside. On the social side, for instance, we have the capitalist overthrow of the individuals struggling for the future of the printing works; or the aforementioned reasons given for suicide at the Gap - economic pressures, socially determined sexual mores and their damaging consequences, and so on. On a less realistic plane there are enigmatic forces at war with these; forces which appear to control events and subvert their explicability. How to interrelate or synthesize these conflicting realities is not only a problem for character, therefore, but an abstract dilemma which, whilst never absolutely divorced from character, has its own partial autonomy.

In a critical episode in Chapter 6 Stead makes a definite and clearly stated progression from concern with character in this sense, to concern with the larger idea governing the book. This last, as we will show, is a form of meditation on her own problematic linking of different aspects of imagined reality through special conventions. We must say in advance, though, that this meditation does not place Seven Poor Men of Sydney in the category of the self-conscious novel. It will be recalled that we had some things to say about this at the conclusion to the discussion of The Man Who Loved Children. Stead's work is not self-conscious in the modern sense because she always allows us, the readers, to make the often difficult connection between symbolic passages that seem to contemplate the whole structure, and the whole itself. Many post-modernist works, for instance those of Coover and Barthelme, engage these elements in a too explicit and self-conscious game of hide-and-seek, thus rendering the element of seeking redundant. Granted that one has to spot the game in the first place, and that it may be a very clever one, when this is done everything may seem too patly mapped out for us. But let us not stereotype post-modernist fiction too severely; the novels of Nabokov and Pynchon, for instance, are examples of sophisticated trickery placed within the context of a meaningful and serious survey of the (often destructive) games people play with language, love and reality. Our

assumption, of course, is that art transcends gaming. And if we are inclined to regard this viewpoint with scepticism it is worth noting that post-modernist "anti-art," or the sort of literature that exists simply to tell us how meaningless literature is, invariably creates its own meanings (no matter how unintelligible or question-begging) and desires to be taken very seriously, or else it could hardly imagine itself opposing anything in the first place.

To return to Stead, the episode we are thinking of in Seven Poor Men of Sydney is the scientific lecture given by Professor Mueller at the university. This is a climactic scene because it represents a supreme moment of triumph for one of the characters, Joseph Baguenault. It also rises above character, as we stated earlier, but we will depart from that consideration for the moment to place it briefly in its initial, fundamental context of the human ego.

Joseph Baguenault is in many respects diametrically opposed to his cousin Michael and some of the other characters, being the most ordinary and guileless of individuals. And yet he, like them, is confronted with a set of problems revolving around the question of interrelation. Almost the reverse of Michael, who feels he cannot integrate himself with "ordinary life," Joseph is quite at home in this sphere of existence but frustrated because he feels he is unable to come to terms with the larger, mysterious events and issues which surround him, and which he holds in awe.

He is an "ordinary" figure with much potential for cultivating an "extraordinary" sensibility. An exchange between Catherine and Baruch mid-way through the novel provides us with an interesting comment on this aspect of his personality. Catherine claims that "he sees ... no shifting of the natural order, no obscurity, gleam and veiling of the plain world in fancy...." (p. 153). But Baruch maintains: "I sense in him a sombreness and passion which I have never yet seen exhibited, but expect to. The quietest and simplest man can develop endlessly: even the lifelong sleeper can be awakened...." (p. 153). Each character is partly correct in the light of Stead's characterization of Joseph. As an ordinary figure who sees "no shifting of the natural order," Joseph is placed in a number of situations that make some

demand on his potential for discovering and coming to terms with a larger conception of reality. It is this potential, this latent "sombreness and passion" in his nature, which initially activates his desire to overcome his limitations, to conceptualize the possibility of life's diverse elements having some meaningful interrelation.

One of these situations we mention is the key lecture on light given by Professor Mueller, which is in many respects the novel's binary opposite to Michael's "lecture" to his headmaster about the chaotic nature of reality. After observing the professor's demonstration of "the prismatic distribution of light into elements" (p. 185) and related concepts, Joseph, who is hitherto unable to grasp the deeper perplexities of life, least of all attempt to resolve them, suddenly realizes his latent potential for coming to terms with a larger reality and experiences an overwhelming sense of revelation:

His heart throbbed: "All can be seen, discovered: it is not chaos." He saw ... chemical affinities resembling human love, the universe in the electron resembling the solar system. The universe seemed more perfect and orderly than it did to the lecturer. He breathed quietly and joyfully, the world fell into order and the furniture of his mind moved mysteriously into the proper places.... (p. 186)

But according to the professor this vision of perfect interrelation is essentially produced by the stimulus of artificial or contrived conceptualization. He therefore stresses that any contemplation of "interrelation" should incorporate this basic awareness into its structure. Consequently he addresses his audience on the subject of the "definitive" scientific models he has drawn on the blackboard:

Not to mislead you, I am rubbing out these diagrams, which are symbols and do not represent any existing thing. They are a convention for something not understood ... these things have never been seen, they have only been divined by rods, screens, jets of metal and vanes in vacuums ... I am not dogmatic,



do not you be.....(p. 186)

Mueller's emphasis on "symbols" and "convention" in a sense aligns him with the writer of the book. For Stead has constructed Seven Poor Men of Sydney in such a manner as to convey poetical synthesis through the overlapping of its various tensions and conflicts, but also to make conspicuous the underlying conventions, the different modes of representation, that are its precondition. Her "rods, screens, jets of metal and vanes in vacuums" take the form of monologues, the manipulation of romantic and naturalistic "auras," the documentary-like passages, the fantasy sequences, the actualization of dream states and so on. Like the professor's diagrams, these are conventions for "something not understood" and symbolic of things "divined"; they may be misleading, seeming thoroughfares that in fact turn out to be culs-de-sac, or they may exist to prod the "furniture" of the mind "into the proper places." Stead's linking of poetry with scientific method is an effective (though some would maintain also crude) metaphor for an "ambiguous reality"; it at once contains or reconciles two apparently different phenomena by exposing their fundamental dependency on human "divination," and at the same time reveals the possibility for both order and chaos which is at the heart of this "divination."

We are told that Professor Mueller speaks "with a clear dry passion" (p. 185). There is something of this "dry passion" in Seven Poor Men of Sydney, a co-presence of passionate involvement and objectivity central to its thematic tensions, both on the level of character and that of ideas. In the ideal, Stead casts herself as the scientist who is not above considering human emotion or feeling, and as the artist who rightly sees no threat of subversion in the objective structures which might "explain" it; she knows that these last are simply a re-statement, in a different language code, of things which can never be explained in a single absolute sense, but which find suitable expression in a variety of forms that have been created by humans. (Stead, fortunately, is not a victim of that primitive mode of thinking which obscurely regards science as the enemy of art - or as the enemy of anything, for that matter. But neither, since her

vision is such an open-ended one, does she convey the notion that everything, whether it be "scientific" or "artistic," is trapped within language, and therefore reducible to the structures of language. The conception of language as a totally confining strait-jacket - a knowledge preventative - is apparently favoured by a number of modern literary theoreticians, but in its implicit disregard for an external molecular world it is surely solipsistic, even - despite its pseudo-rationalistic pretensions - vaguely mystical.)

But since Stead is not really at her best as a metaphysician in the purist's sense (her symbolic conceptions of the abstract are highly simplistic, as even the most rudimentary text on metaphysics would reveal), her work lives or dies by its insight into character psychology. And because the character psychology in Seven Poor Men of Sydney often expertly contains so much of this abstractness and (perhaps tolerably) bad metaphysics, it "retains the upper hand," as we stated in the Introduction. It is the fundamental mode of Stead's first novel - if not the exclusive mode - and also the basis of the partner work Cotters' England, which we will now turn to.

Cotters' England

## Chapter Four

### COTTERS' ENGLAND

There are certain obvious resemblances between Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England: for instance, both share an enigmatic brother-sister relationship and both have a working-class setting. However the two novels are more subtly bonded by the re-introduction and development, in the latter, of images and symbols first appearing in Seven Poor Men of Sydney which are significantly related, as we will show later, to the style and themes of Cotters' England. At the beginning of Chapter Three we also briefly touched on the pessimism of the works discussed in this Section. Any real possibility for order in Seven Poor Men of Sydney is mainly conceived of abstractly. The central experience of the ego in Stead's first novel is that of suffering and disorder; the most important male character commits suicide and the main female one interns herself in a lunatic asylum. Cotters' England is even grimmer because it focuses not only on the ego's self-destructive capacities, but also on its capacity for wreaking havoc in other people's lives. Of course we saw that this was important to the novels we discussed in the first Section too. But in Cotters' England there is something relentless and single-minded in the main character's pursuit of destruction absent even in Sam Pollitt and Jonathan Crow.

The "evasive logic" we spoke of with regard to Stead's first novel applies here also, synthesizing many disparate and apparently irreconcilable elements into a single unified entity. Of the critics, Michael Wilding most clearly expresses this unity of disparateness in Cotters' England when he writes of the book as "a weird, disturbing, memorable mélange of what seem, listed, to be quite disparate elements. They are elements recurrent in Christina Stead's writing: poverty, socialism, pressures exerted on its members by a family, intense brother-sister relationship, sexual involvements and exploitations, fantastic anecdotes. Realistic properties - concerns with jobs, with food, with economies -

are presented in combination with the grotesque and weird ... Yet the combination of these strands surprisingly and mysteriously results in a unity and coherence."<sup>1</sup>

Wilding does not really expand this, but simply goes on to observe: "What the unity is - in terms of theme, or plot - is elusive of paraphrase."<sup>2</sup> Similarly Clement Semmler speaks of the need for the reader to be able to "survive the torrents of words, the almost incomprehensible psychologies,"<sup>3</sup> but allows for the presence of ordering strategies in the work; once again, though, it is not made absolutely clear what constitute these. However these critics, and a couple of others, do take account of an aspect of Cotters' England which has been apprehended a little too crudely, or else not at all, by other commentators. For example, a reviewer in Time writes of the book: "It purports to be a novel of British working-class life, but its overt socialist propaganda and its covert hints of dark doings in sex and some sort of spiritualism make it the queerest mixture of the publishing season...."<sup>4</sup>

As with Seven Poor Men of Sydney it is doubtful that the elusiveness of the thematic logic underlying the later book is totally beyond critical paraphrase. This does not mean that the novels are completely soluble in critical terms either; if literature could be "worked out" like algebra it could hardly be said to arouse any emotion in us at all. That it does rouse complex and often irreducible emotions is an indisputable fact; those who choose to ignore it (as is currently fashionable) may of course reserve that right, but there is no point in denying it altogether. Insolubility in Stead is also often associated with an element of the mystical, but usually this is not of the sentimental sweet-mystery-of-life variety. Nor does it appear to have a religious bias. Rather it is more closely aligned with the "secularized" mysteries that similarly disrupt some of the novels and stories of that (often) worthy successor to E.M. Forster, Francis King.<sup>5</sup>

For all the thematic and stylistic similarities between the two novels discussed in this Section, it would be misleading to discuss Cotters' England specifically in terms of the schematic "modes" and "special conventions" we spoke

of in the preceding chapter. These terms are deliberately incorporated into the poetical language of Seven Poor Men of Sydney, and any employment of them on the critical level is continuous with the work itself. In discussing Cotters' England we should only use such terms very generally to help us describe the strange merging and juxtaposing of the book's apparently irreconcilable elements. This last work has an altogether more "seamless" aspect. Those who can see the articulated relationship between poetry and schematism in Seven Poor Men of Sydney as justifiable thematically, may complain that it is still wanting in aesthetic appeal. For this reason Cotters' England may to many seem a more satisfying proposal, since the tools of critical explanation are not too obviously planted in the language of the text. We still maintain, however, that the earlier book is not as obvious as it might appear to be when paraphrased, whilst acknowledging that slight maturation of approach to theme and style in the later work that we spoke of in the Introduction.

Speaking very generally then, the "mode" of social realism in Cotters' England is evident mainly in the scenes of the Cotters in Bridgehead. These roughly parallel, from stylistic and structural points of view, the function of the sequences in Seven Poor Men of Sydney dealing with Chamberlain's printing works and the Workers' Education Association. And in the later work too, when Stead concentrates more specifically on the psychology of various central characters and their relationships, the effect is of an enigmatic and disturbing fragmentation, or dislocation of style, which releases the themes and moods of the novel into a not unrelated, but definitely more elusive and transmundane sphere.

The two broad categories of characterization that were mentioned in Chapter Three may be applied here too, though again very generally. There are characters who, like the senior Cotters, Peggy and Simon Pike, are presented through the essentially realistic mode; they belong to the sphere of commonplace and everyday actions and events, insofar as we might use such words - without condescension - to connote attitudes and occurrences determined by a grim, poverty-stricken and restraining social environment, which in the world of the novel seems ever-present like hanging veils of

smog seen over industrial areas. And then there are the more central characters like Nellie and Tom, and to some extent their victims also, who despite obvious connections with this commonplace sphere, are also presented through a mode partially dissociated from it; this mode is more open to symbolic and metaphorical interpretation, exposing ideas and relationships barely even hinted at in the other.

But these generalizations only serve to link Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England in the crudest manner; there are more important and complex relationships than these. In Chapter Three the point was made that Stead conveys a sense of unity in her work by drawing together many of its diverse elements in single visions of character. The same is true of Cotters' England. It is also true that the later work inevitably displaces its concern with character in places, to make way for Stead's interest in dramatically opposed ideas and for aspects of reality apparently operating on the "Lawrentian dimension" of character from without. Also the imagery and symbolism employed in both works to bridge the gap between character and the larger idea of each novel, again reveal Stead's concern with a sense of reality that seems capable of multiple applications.

Nellie in Cotters' England, even more than the character of Michael Baguenault, is at once "real" as a fictional creation, but also a little unreal or symbolic, as an embodiment of the gradations of reality she is associated with throughout the novel. As with Michael, specific examples of Nellie's conflicting responses to reality arise from her inability to coalesce inner and outer realities; that is, her vision of herself and her vision of the external world. Her idiom constantly reveals this. Let us consider, for example, the first quite lengthy dialogue between Nellie and Caroline, in which much of the groundwork is laid for the sequence culminating in the latter's death.

"Among ordinary people there isn't any wickedness, is there? [said Caroline]. I've never seen any."

Nellie was silent for some time. She suddenly said, in a rough tone, "You see slums full of rats and you don't believe in evil? That's weak, isn't

it? There's your rose-painted specs again. You see? How you're tainted to the bone with the fairy-tale pink? It's weak, it's selfish, it's wrong."<sup>6</sup>

Compare this with an earlier snippet from the same sequence, in which Nellie seems to be aware of the sentimentality suffusing a realist perspective of this kind:

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

And in a much later scene, between Nellie and Eliza, the former, in her endless dance of opposites, apparently endorses the previously scorned "rose-painted" perspective of Caroline. The recurrence of the word "rose" helps us to make the connection. Nellie proclaims: "How do I see life, Eliza? With a rosy tender veil. It's the palpitating heart of life, I must put in, with the language of love. I feel it, the rich thing like a rose" (p. 344).

We might compare this clash of sentimental realism and sentimental romance, with the opposition between Nellie's constant talk about "destiny" as the arbiter of all actions and circumstances, and her belief in the transcendent power of the human will to determine absolutely a course of events. She tells Tom and Camilla: "You've watched the lonely black sky together, and felt adrift. And you know that destiny is individual. Destiny is loneliness. It's mysterious and no one can share it ... It's the final truth" (p. 154). In this instance her claim that the force of destiny forbids human unions and companionship is the reverse of what she says to Caroline, when asked for reassurance of their friendship: "It's early for an ordinary companionship, aye; but where there's a genuine basis, it ought to begin at once. It only needs the act of willing and knowing" (p. 41).

Similarly, there is a conflict between statements reflecting a despairing "overview" of the destruction caused by human egotism, and statements which in essence



imply the very opposite. In one scene Nellie says to her brother:

It's vindictive and selfish and cruel to pretend to work for the world when you're only satisfying yourself. Ah, man is only a small whirling atom in a universe which itself will perish, and here we all are fighting and struggling and satisfying our petty passions or mangling our sacred true perceptions to suit a Juggernaut and calling it the higher life, the higher perception. It's an ugly picture, Tom. Isn't it all hopeless? (p. 157).

We should contrast this with Nellie's spiritualism, her own "higher perception" as it were; for she believes herself to be magically attuned to special metaphysical signals capable of homing in, like radar, even on some of the most apparently mundane aspects of existence: "You can't teach socialism, Camilla; it comes to you. It comes to one, not to another; it comes by mysterious ways. It is the way...." (p. 237). Nellie's egotistical desire to penetrate other regions of awareness that lie outside the scope of the ordinary faculties, is, for reasons which will be more fully discussed at a later point, presented by Stead as the ne plus ultra of her existence. For at the very end of the book Nellie becomes "interested in the problems of the unknowable" (p. 352) and joins a fringe group determined to solve metaphysical questions.

Terry Sturm envisages Nellie essentially as an individual who makes an "intensely personal commitment to abstract (especially, Romantic) theories of life, which she never pauses to examine because she is never aware of them as abstractions."<sup>7</sup> Allowing for deficiencies in Nellie's capacity for perceiving herself, and for what superficially looks like her blind hypocrisy, we must return to the point made in Chapter One about her ability to manipulate an awareness of the abstractness underlying her dogmas. The sort of person Terry Sturm describes would be fairly unintelligent and probably not especially cunning; Stead is here interested in the dangers of intelligence, the human ability to use self-irony and self-awareness in a negative capacity. Stead is no novice in moral philosophy; clearly she realizes that self-awareness

is not inherently virtuous, but that it can be put to conflicting uses. Consider Nellie's method for gaining the confidence of the most un-cynical Caroline:

Ah, no, none of your cynicism. Don't tear down my illusions and my loves. I love London because it's all trial and error like my life; terrible mistakes and blind turnings, beautiful prospects and when you look at some stony reality you can glance aside at a beautiful broken dream (p. 37).

Here Nellie quite knowingly embraces the abstract, the romantic, the illusory. She does so for basically two reasons: because she cannot help exposing the contradictions in her own nature (the reasons for which will be investigated later), and because she knows that the soft-hearted Caroline will respond positively to any sign that even tough-minded Nellie has an emotional Achilles' heel. It is useful to separate in one's mind the pathologically intentional and the pathologically unintentional; Stead's is a very complex creation indeed.

The unintentional contradiction becomes apparent if we contrast Nellie's passion for London and her avowal that her life is "all trial and error," with an earlier claim to Camilla Yates: "I never liked it here [London], pet. They still make me feel like an invader from the north. But I had to come. It was my destiny" (p. 20). And on the subject of her necessary illusions she later contradicts herself to Caroline, saying that one should not "dress" things up "in romantic illusion or disillusion. You want to give stark staring reality, straight in the face" (p. 38). Her own ambivalence towards romantic "illusion" and "disillusion," however, erupts into calculated swipes at her friend. After using surreptitious means to gain the other woman's confidence she suddenly upholds the negative side of her ambivalence like a gleaming knife and proceeds to back Caroline against a wall:

"You're sticking your eyes in a bookcase [said Nellie], you need eyes like a crab on stalks and you'll see nothing but the bottom of the sea. I'm disgusted with you!"

Caroline turned round in frightened anger. But Nellie had not moved; she said, in a melancholy voice; "And the truth's right beside you!"

"What truth?"

"Sit down, love; and I'll explain to you" (pp. 51-2).

Some of the other characters in Cotters' England sense the mixture of conflicting elements in Nellie. Tom speculates about her concern for the working class, which he feels is genuine, but into which he senses she melts "all kinds of incompatible ideas" (p. 269). And the conflicting points of view from which Nellie is presented reinforce our sense of this irreconcilability. In one scene we may have her presented as curiously ineffectual, almost defenceless against the world around her. For example: "It was she who was the pitiful waif, the stray, the strange elf, all the things she saw in others ... and her weary old reporter's drawl, her perpetual outlandish chick, pet, sweetheart, and northern affectations, set her apart, a draggled peacock in a serious busy barnyard" (p. 269). Yet in another sequence we might be afforded a glimpse of the powerful and sly demon within: "Nellie's expression of curiosity was just changing to a devilish triumphant cunning. It flashed into her face and disappeared, leaving its trace in the impish smirk, the first thing that Eliza ever remembered of Nellie, when she had been a woman of twenty and Nellie only seven" (p. 342). One of the most notable passages accentuating a clash between Nellie and the world she moves around in is also connected with the imagery of Seven Poor Men of Sydney:

But it seemed to her [Nellie] that her story was the most important of all, the real truth about humanity. She exclaimed, waved her cigarette, danced a lanky step or two, hovered in patch and color, like a harlequin among the desks and girls in plain blouses and men in shirt-sleeves (p. 150).

Like Michael in Seven Poor Men of Sydney, Nellie resembles, if we note the re-application here of an image introduced in the earlier work, the harlequin patterns tumbling together in a kaleidoscope, a jumble of elements, "a drunken mass of masks

and ankles." This idea, crucial to Stead's psychological analysis of Nellie and to the larger idea of Cotters' England, will be further discussed presently. Briefly recapitulating some of the material covered in the last chapter, we recall that Michael destroys himself because, as an alien passing through the movement of "ordinary life," he is unable to bridge the gap between his inherent romanticism and what he sees outside himself as a drab and meaningless common reality. His suicide is at once an expression of this nihilistic despair and yet a final romantic gesture, the symbolic climax - if we remember his projection of his love for Catherine into a notion of transcendental death, or liebestod - of his internal instinct that he can rise above it. Michael's nihilism and belief in romantic transcendence are finally paradoxically entwined, so that they negate one another and yet still exist in a strange state of union.

In Cotters' England Nellie is a victim of not dissimilar unresolved conflicts, as we will show in more detail shortly. But she does not commit suicide. Clearly this last point would hardly be worth making if suicide were not one of the book's issues, and if it were not connected with the character of Nellie. Of course Nellie ultimately avoids self-annihilation; but somebody else dies in her place. A close examination of this will be made after we have considered some of the underlying reasons for the divisiveness in Nellie's nature, these being partly accountable and also, necessarily, partly unaccountable.

Nellie's conflicting responses to reality hinge on a twin sense of despair or helplessness and a near pathological belief that the self or ego is linked to the impulses of "larger forces" which she can manipulate in the service of her own happiness - and that of others, as she constantly maintains. Stead alludes to a number of influences in Nellie's past which appear to provide the information needed for a larger understanding of her character. But the writer is also careful to ensure, ultimately, what Judy Barbour aptly phrases Nellie's "freedom from accountability."<sup>8</sup>

Deep insecurity and guilt connected with social, economic, and familial oppression seem quite obviously to have contributed to Nellie's sense of reality as something reverberating with

"despair, endless despair" (p. 160). For example, we recall her nightmares that reveal her terror of ever having to return to Bridgehead (p. 123) or Eliza's reference to her own and Nellie's "childhood and youth of semi-starvation" (p. 211). And the shadowy Jago circle appears to have given direction to her belief in the transcendent power of the ego. This egotism directly opposes Nellie's sense of overwhelming despair.

But these external stimuli should not be seen as absolutely determining Nellie's condition. When her brother Tom provides us with a connection between Nellie's unbearable feelings of guilt and trauma-inducing experiences precipitated by a tyrannical mother, he significantly adds: "And Nellie believes everything. We all cried and felt guilty; but Nellie never grew out of it" (p. 241). (In passing we should point out that the mother, with her endless prying and questioning, her insistence on constant avowals of love from others, and persistent desire to compel those around her to confess their guilt, clearly suggests an earlier model for Nellie.) Nellie's inability to free herself of such influences, or her powerful receptiveness to them, is at least as important as the influences themselves. In a different context this is also implicitly remarked by Eliza, when she explains to Caroline the effect of Jago, a young radical partly responsible for the release of Nellie and other adolescents from the bonds of family and society by initiating them into a "new" way of perceiving reality through the ego: "Nell's told me all. They were very much excited about it; but most of them settled down. Not Nellie. And he [Jago] convinced Nellie she had greatness in her...." (p. 230).

That Nellie, unlike most of the other members of Jago's circle, cannot cast off his influence, is as significant a detail as the fact that even before she meets him at the age of sixteen she clearly exhibited tendencies which we later associate with the powerful, destructive hold she has over others. Tom remembers her as "seducing children to love; out of her great vanity wanting to be the only one to show them love" (p. 106). Later he speaks of how Nellie "led" himself and Peggy as children, this making the mother "jealous" (p. 240). Eliza recalls Nellie's expression of "devilish triumphant cunn-

ing" from the occasion of their first meeting, when Nellie was "only seven" (p. 342). And by her own admission Nellie says that she was driven to Jago not so much by hunger, but because "he understood that there were bigger impulses working up in us and great aspirations" (p. 211). The implication is that pre-existent "impulses" were only to be given direction by Jago, not actually created by him.

Ultimately there is in Nellie, like Michael in Seven Poor Men of Sydney, conflicts for which no really definitive origin is given. And the conflict is between what are quite compellingly received as the external realities of life - for Michael, chaos and ordinariness, for Nellie, the despair of social hardship and inter-personal relationships - and the opposing products of the inner life which appear equally authoritative.

The way in which Nellie attempts to resolve the conflicts within her nature provides Cotters' England with its core of psychological drama. Unlike Michael, Nellie does not ultimately attempt to co-join the disparate elements of the self through the act of suicide, but seeks rather to displace them. This is a complex manoeuvre, portrayed by Stead with remarkable subtlety, consistency and much psychological truth. Nellie comes to see her problem as one needing to be resolved in the lives of those around her, at one remove from the reality of her own ego. Whereas Michael's struggle becomes so internalized that it can only end at a point where the self exists no more, Nellie's is projected outwards until it can but destroy other people.

Significantly, Nellie posits two "cures" for what she terms the "strange disease" of life: "love" and "death" (p. 39). Love and death become for her the polarized abstractions upon which she pins, in the case of the first, her ego, and in the case of the second, the external realities as she perceives them. This is elsewhere expressed in her belief that the way to self discovery is through an understanding of "the good and the evil alike" and through the experience of both "sacrifice" and "joy" (p. 40). Underlying this dialectic Nellie constantly creates is a powerful egotistical desire to subvert the conflict and to place, in the terms of her own abstract reasoning, love above death. In other

words, Nellie strives to manipulate those around her as a means of re-ordering the oppositions within herself. She wants to create a system of reality that will permit her conflicts to be arranged hierarchically, this allowing for absolutes and also, by implication, a godhead: Nellie.

This is the point where we must consider Nellie's interaction with the other characters in Cotters' England, although for the purposes of this discussion we need only examine in detail her relationships with Tom and Caroline, as these represent in the most concentrated form what is actually taking place on a more superficial level in her relations with George, Eliza, Camilla and others. On the one hand, Nellie's complex relationship with her brother Tom reveals symbolically the connection between her ego and her particular view of love; and on the other, her relationship with Caroline shows Nellie projecting her reception of the ugly realities of life onto the other woman. This last becomes Nellie's means of deflecting her own despair, and precipitates Caroline's act of self destruction - her "cure" by death. Caroline's suicide is in a sense Nellie's vicarious suicide, the climax of the latter's desire to confront, at one remove, the horrific realities of existence. And simultaneously it allows her, since she has compelled another to act upon her own dark vision, to reinforce the indomitability of her self, the supremacy of her ego and its untrammelled freedom. For in order for Nellie to place love or the self above death, death must first be dispatched. And it must be dispatched without physically harming the self that wants so desperately to rise above it.

Before having much contact with Nellie, it is clear that Caroline "believes in the world" and "wants the world to be beautiful" (p. 15). But Nellie wants her friend to see the world otherwise. Yet in painting a darker picture of the universe for Caroline, Nellie emphasizes those aspects of reality that have precipitated her own despair. She wants Caroline to admit to the ugliness of life, the horrors, the injustices, the infidelities, the poverty, the inequalities, the deathliness - as she herself has experienced them. For instance, what she says about Caroline's relationship with her family largely mirrors her own past experiences: "The

parents are the innocent cause ... Aye, she tried to escape. But can the bird break the iron bars by fluttering? You are likely to see bloodied and broken wings; and the close tendrils of parental love were in this case iron bars" (pp. 15-16). Significantly, it is Nellie herself Stead most often associates with bird images: "Nellie was a strange thing ... her beak and backbone bent forward, her thin long legs stepping prudently, gingerly, like a marsh bird's...." (p. 13).

All the disturbing impressions that the social realities of her own past and present existence make upon Nellie, are bullishly conveyed to Caroline as definitive examples of the world's great evils. We recall the sequence quoted earlier: "You see slums full of rats and you don't believe in evil? That's weak, isn't it? ... You're sticking your eyes in a bookcase, you need eyes like a crab on stalks and you'll see nothing but the bottom of the sea. I'm disgusted with you!" (p. 51). Elsewhere, in the middle of a speech designed to force Caroline to acknowledge her own loneliness, Nellie insists: "Haven't your friends dropped off from you; like him too, like Barry?" (p. 52). Yet we feel that Nellie's own situation is the one really being described; her alienation from her husband George, and at this point also from her brother Tom, have aroused both her fury and a sense of helpless, lonely despair.

Most important of all, however, are Nellie's feelings of guilt. These produce a desperation so intense that in her "mania for confessions" (p. 81) she actually connects expiation with suicide; that is, the darker of the two "cures" for life that she proposes. These feelings are also displaced, passed onto the weaker willed Caroline to whom she says, with an emphasis on the sense of "deathliness" from which she dissociates herself:

Your life is moving in circles now to a certain end and you can't escape it; though you run howling and bawling through the universe that's closing in on you. No, it's a fateful thing you went to Rose-land; it's a fateful thing you met me; it's fate you lost so many. For haven't you, pet? ... They feel the death in you [emphasis added]. Don't give



up, Caroline. Know it; face it. It's been well said, if you don't confess, you must commit suicide and suicide itself is a confession; and not to commit suicide is a terrible confession [emphasis added]. But you haven't the strength to confess, have you? (p. 52)

It is Nellie who will not "confess," in her own sense of embracing death. This is not because she is unaware that there is something desperately wrong with her own life - she is all too certain that there is - but because her ego is a stronger force than her awareness of worldly suffering. Ultimately she makes her awareness of suffering instrumental not simply to the survival, but to the triumph of the self. Thus her concept of a fateful universe trapping people in cycles and impelling them forth on a course of destruction, has two meanings. It is at once the confirmation of her despair, her "acceptance" of reality as she sees it, and yet also her justification of any act - for instance her bombardment of Caroline - that will set her above this reality. Hence the following words, spoken almost in passing to George, but so suggestive of what must be the inevitable outcome of her relationship with Caroline: "Supposing I am predestined to commit a crime! ... We don't know what has us in its hand" (p. 224).

Importantly, when Nellie does make what seems an outright attempt on Caroline's life, and strives in full view of Tom and Camilla to push her out of a window, we are invited to make the connection between this and the fact that shortly beforehand her sense of an ugly, fateful universe has just been reinforced by the news of Venna's death. (Venna is a friend who in turn has helped impress on Nellie the view that society is but a wheel to break the individual upon.) Nellie cries: "It is pain! Struggle and pain - and now I feel what I never felt before: everything is repulsive that isn't struggle and pain; for that's the real world. And I can't submit [emphasis added]. Ah, leave me ... What is here is too real" (p. 248).

The climactic conflict between Nellie's inability to "submit" as she calls it, and what is for her "too real" not to be acted upon, can only be resolved through an action

such as her attack on Caroline. The complex connection between the two incidents is later made explicit during the harrowing sequence in which Nellie torments her bed-ridden friend for hours continually, encouraging her to take her own life. "And gradually it began to come out, the story of Venna and the satanic world she had seen. 'I'll tell you all - you must know everything'" (p. 265). Thus she embarks on another night of verbal bombardment, culminating in the horrifying moment of victory for Nellie when Caroline weakly responds: "Yes, I will die. You are right. That's the thing. You've torn the world away from me. There's nothing else" (p. 265). The tussle between the two women in Caroline's sick room thus concludes, one of the most draining and intense passages in Stead.

(This grim "set piece" in Cotters' England gives rise to a couple of points about Stead's style which we have only touched on so far. In Chapter One we digressed to say something about the importance of the endless tiny details in Stead; now we might relate these to those powerful sequences in which the detailed description of incident is suddenly and dramatically elongated, with great dramatic effect. Some artists seem to excel at suddenly producing sustained and extraordinarily taut set pieces within the context of a deceptively relaxed, even rambling, structure. One's impression is of having somehow been caught unawares in a world admittedly threatening but apparently not too dangerous, this making the subsequent tension of the set piece all the more powerful; the noose is loosely cast over one's head, as it were, and tightened at the right dramatic moment. The ominous build-up to the sawmill scene in For Love Alone is another good example of this; the developing storm and growing tension between Teresa and Crow suddenly explode, finding concentrated expression in the great images of release as the sluice gates of the mill give way under years of relentless pressure.

Again it is useful to find parallels with other artists and other art forms to help clarify these sorts of general observations about style. Yet another operatic parallel seems reasonable in Stead's instance, since her arioso-like monologues, larger-than-life characterizations, and almost

overwrought emotionalism in places - balanced by carefully restrained sequences - seem to invite the comparison.<sup>9</sup> Consider, for example, Giuseppe Verdi's operatic technique in his middle-to-late phase. Here a certain erratic and episodic quality is not simply attributable to dubious libretti - an often exaggerated charge anyway - but seems calculated to get the spectator involved by degrees, before overwhelming him with one of those lengthy set pieces which collect all the scattered tensions in a masterly concentration of forces. The build-up to the extraordinary meeting of King Philip and the Cardinal in Don Carlos seems a good example of this, as is Act III of the magnificent Otello; in the latter the elements of the drama unwind slowly and provide a variety of strands, but coalesce in a complex ensemble, the binding aspect of which is Desdemona's pleading, signalled by a mere snatch of melody that develops into a voluptuous, all-encompassing, yet infinitely poignant outburst.

Some critics might simply label this rising to the occasion when the occasion so demands, but with artists of great stature it is not as straightforward as this. After all, it is possibly the most "calculating" of all great artists, the film director Stanley Kubrick, who also consistently deploys this method from film to film, though admittedly his far greater elegance of style and Mozartian attention to endless tiny details make it easier for us to spot an intention behind the numerous episodic sequences which preface his awesome set pieces. Consider the build-ups in Barry Lyndon to the expansive gambling scene or to the violence of the music-room episode and later duel. Better still, think of the erratic-seeming glimpses of Jack Torrance's madness we are afforded in the first half of The Shining; these unexpectedly bloom into long, revealing, and indeed quite physically jolting sequences, such as his interminable ascent of the Overlook staircase in pursuit of his terrified wife, accompanied as it is by the disturbing Penderecki music, Torrance's vicious semi-metaphysical monologue about a husband's "duty," and the desperate pleas of the tormented woman - all orchestrated by the uncannily exact timing of Kubrick's hand-held camera movements, which manage to convey a sense of terrifying

vertigo through perfect phrasing and control.)

Having examined Nellie's negative "cure" for life, which finds its expression in a relentless set piece of emotional harrassment and Caroline's subsequent enforced suicide, we should now concern ourselves with her other proposed cure of "love." This means looking at her enigmatic and abstractly defined love relationship with her brother Tom. Nellie conceives of love as a force outside herself onto which she attaches her inner self or ego, as a means of transcending external reality. As she says to Eliza:

That is what hasn't been expressed, Eliza love, and it is hard to express: love. If I could express it, for that's the message in me, I'd be far beyond them with their rule-of-thumb explanations of the universe. What can Marxism say to a lover, or to a mother? Or what can Einstein? Aye, he can say more, for there's something wonderful and beautiful in the idea that we have an attic window only, open on the swamp of stars (p. 344).

It is especially useful to consider the relationship between Nellie and Tom rather than most of the other so-called "love relationships" Nellie attempts to set up with herself as the dominant force, since its origin, like the bond between herself and Caroline, lies most specifically in the aforementioned externalization or displacement of the oppositions within her nature. Nellie speaks of Tom as her "shadow self" (p. 256), in much the same fashion that Michael sees Catherine as his alter ego in Seven Poor Men of Sydney. But whereas Michael's un-earthly love for his half-sister rests on a belief that through love he might partially transcend painful earthly reality, for Nellie there is the additional desire to triumph over the other at all costs, to make love the ultimate expression of her supremacy. And whereas Michael in the earlier book clasps to himself someone who is in fact only a more idealized image of himself and thus unattainable, Nellie in attaching herself to Tom confronts something of the ugly reality of her own self, which she refuses to accept. She projects or externalizes in order to escape from the conflicts within her, only to be faced with her own mirror image.

Before expanding this we should note that the character of Tom, like Nellie, is not entirely accountable either, representing a force which is as powerful as it is elusive. The concept of the divided self is central to Stead's portrayal of Tom also, and is most evident in the mysterious scene in which he stands naked between his friend Frida and a long mirror. We discover:

"In the morning I am full of passion: why is that? I am two men; one doesn't fit the other. Do you want to see me as I am? I don't mind. I'd like that."

There was a long mirror between the two windows ... he took off everything and with a serious expression, stood in front of the mirror for her to look at him. He was two men, as he said. One was a man all silver in the silvery light, an old man, thin and bony though straight, a wasted hungered man, with the expression of one delivered from hope. The other was a gold man, skin and hair youthful, red lips and a hopeful smile ... a stone man and a flesh man (p. 243).

Tom's external mien, that of an ardent tempter, the eternally youthful man of flesh, masks his stony frigidity and withered passion, his inability, beyond playful courtships designed to place himself in a position to receive pity and attention, to commit himself emotionally to any woman. If Nellie is an active manipulator, then he appears to be her complement, a passive one who instinctively spellbinds women with his endless fantastic stories. These last are mainly (though not exclusively) products of his ego which, as Terry Sturm astutely observes, appear to be his passive equivalent of Nellie's impassioned monologues, "part of ... an attempt to present himself as a vulnerable innocent in a malign universe, in need of sympathy and understanding."<sup>10</sup> Nellie herself obviously senses the influence of Tom's storytelling on Eliza, Caroline and Camilla, for she says jealously to the latter: "He could never have with anyone else what he had with me. We don't have to talk or tell anecdotes" (p. 153).

As Eliza imagines, Tom is "another curious being with a

floating soul" (p. 342). He fastens onto those more emotionally dependent individuals around him, drawing on their humanity in order to complement his own insufficiencies. As with Nellie, he has been influenced by social, economic and familial oppression. Interestingly, Nellie tells Eliza that she sees much of their mother in Tom, she being "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" (p. 208). We noted earlier Tom's similar comments about his mother's influence on Nellie, except that he represents the older woman as an active force, like his sister, whilst Nellie characterizes her as curiously passive, like Tom.

Tom has also been dangerously affected by Jago: "[W]e were in the tar pits, all that Jago corruption together" (p. 209), says Nellie to Eliza. But again as with Nellie, the forces behind Tom's condition remain ultimately unaccountable and mysterious. We are reminded of this by Eliza who, although supposedly regarding everything from an "earthy point of view" (p. 231), remembers Tom long before the days of Jago as being like Nellie "another curious being ... neither man nor woman, and not human; neither of them human ... the fatal brother and sister" (p. 342). The conflict between Tom's ego, his "floating soul," and his receptiveness to the harsh external realities of life, produces a "wasted hungered man" who is at the same time seductively golden-haired, red of lip and eternally youthful.

Nellie's projection of her love ideal onto her brother, which again is a means of displacing the conflicts within her, paradoxically forces her to confront her own complementary image, which she must reject. "I didn't think about loving him," she tells Camilla at one stage: "It was something deeper, a communion; that comes only once in a life, if it comes at all" (p. 153). But because this ideal is tainted by something of her own image, Nellie develops a deeply ambivalent attitude towards Tom. Terry Sturm senses this ambivalence and attributes its origin to a "deep sexual attraction which underlies the conflict in Nellie's behaviour towards him - which makes her see him as both innocent and corrupt...."<sup>11</sup>

However, our view is that this is not primarily a sexual issue, a point we made in relation to the bond between Michael and Catherine in Seven Poor Men of Sydney also. In Cotters' England Nellie attaches herself only to that in Tom which will sustain her ego, but when reminded that her brother is "black ... as black as me" (p. 209), she must speak of him as the perverse and twisted "weaker" version of herself. Therefore on the one hand she attaches herself, to re-apply the mirror imagery we quoted earlier, to the "gold man"; for he promises her ego the eternal youth and vigour necessary for its survival in the battle against mortality. Consider the following significant quotation: "Tom had a trick of satisfying her love and although they quarreled [sic], she could never lose him. Her boy! He never changed, never grew older, and from him she got the illusion of being young [emphasis added]" (pp. 316-7). On the other hand her hostility towards Tom's relationships with other women, far from being based on a simple possessive jealousy - although there is an element of this all the same - is rooted in her fear of the "stone man" in him. She is terrified of the rift which they both share and which is brought to the surface in Tom's casually cruel dalliances with Camilla, Caroline, Frida and Eliza. Here she finds, importantly, the very opposite of the eternal youth and satisfaction she requires, and claims that Tom "brings you old age, sickness, despair, I don't know what" (p. 87).

Nellie attempts to rationalize the darker half of her mirror image by actually acknowledging Tom's imitation of her own behaviour, but suggests also that since it is imitative, it is but a pale, distorted shadow of the original force. She tells him: "There's a parallel in everything we do, but mine is reality and yours is the shadow" (p. 132). And to Eliza: "He makes contact with reality, he can't make a go of it ... it's not his fault, Eliza, but he has caused suffering and misery ... and it's all a shadow show, pet" (p. 204). A little later she adds: "Poor lad, he's like a child playing with things he doesn't understand, releasing terrible forces: like a child that opens a sluice and lets the flood waters pour through. It's imitating me" (p. 207).

But this imitativeness helps to alienate Nellie, and

perhaps accounts for why she feels the need to attach her love ideals onto numerous others, as a means of getting even further away from her destructive self and ensuring the survival and triumph of the ego over all else. This is made clear towards the end of the book, when she makes a victory over Eliza Cook and proclaims:

I've had terrible experiences, no one can ever know. I've had strange things happen to me, strange loves that nothing can explain, that can only be explained in their own terms, in terms of themselves. Yes, darling, I can express it all to you, it's strange, you're my only friend. We only go two by two and my brother is not as fine as you, Eliza, sweet angel....

... Do you believe in me pet? ... We'll be all right together. You and me armed to the teeth with understanding, facing the bitter mocking world (p. 344).

Shortly after this there occurs an eerie moment, commented on by a number of critics, when Nellie's inner self soars in easy and effortless flight over all: "She felt greatness in herself, limitless possibilities: 'Me great black and rosy wings'" (p. 345). The conflict within her appears to have ended; her ego has been appeased by Caroline's suicide and her new conquest, although there are still shades of her old terror, suggested particularly in the moment when Eliza awakens her screaming from a nightmare. But Nellie affirms that "in the depths of my dream it was quiet, safe and peace, peace" (p. 345). And at the very end of the book we find Nellie and Tom briefly together again, photographed at George's funeral, "Nellie gay with success as a hero's widow and Tom smiling, hand in hand" (p. 352). It is implied that Nellie, now triumphant, must seek some ultimate even beyond love onto which to pin her ego, and so begins, in the concluding words of the novel, to become "interested in the problems of the unknowable" (p. 352). The pattern of destruction in personal relationships will be ongoing, we feel; the cloud we spoke of as being on the distant horizon at the end of For Love Alone, is here directly overhead, an ever-present threat.

We mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that there



is a recurrence and further development in Cotters' England of images and symbols introduced originally in Seven Poor Men of Sydney. These link the psychological drama we have been discussing with the larger structure and idea of the work, both of which displace the ego a little. The symbol of the harlequin is a recurrent motif, as is the mirror imagery, both of which we have already mentioned in passing with regard to the central characters Nellie and Tom. We remember from the speech on order and chaos at the beginning of Seven Poor Men of Sydney Michael's claim that to observe reality is like watching "a man walking through a hall of mirrors and seeing a thousand reflections of himself on every side, each one a shell of himself, and insubstantial." And we remember that in the larger world of that novel Stead represents Michael as a hybrid character, a harlequin dancing in a hall of mirrors, surrounded by different reflections of reality. Similarly in Cotters' England there is an important symbolic sequence in which Stead, through the objective narrative, depicts Nellie and Tom dancing in a hall of mirrors at a circus sideshow. This scene has larger implications for the work as a whole.

[Nellie] began to gesture, posture and then dance a strange dance, her own, with knees bent and wobbling, arms akimbo, tufted head going up and down and sideways, like "a crawling creature" she said. Aside and forward she went in the figures of her dance, smiling to herself, beckoning to herself, putting her arms on her breast and with a strut turning the circle. She saw Tom there, stretched out her long thin arms and he came forward in his heavy shoes, took both hands; and they danced a few steps ... She stopped a moment, eying a mirror which showed them side by side, shredded, a bundle of dark reeds and a wisp of hay, both with long beaked faces, split like seaweed.... (pp. 189-90)

The images here of the brother and sister "split like seaweed" and as fragmented as the reflections in a hall of mirrors or a "bundle of dark reeds," symbolize the rifts within the pair. In order to give outward expression to

the internal condition of Nellie and Tom, Stead presents them not only realistically, in the conventional sense, but also through her distorting mirror. When Nellie catches sight of herself in the glass and cries, "Tom, look at this black raven! Why, thank god, Tom, it is not the Hall of Truth" (p. 189), we are given, since we know that the distorted image has indeed reflected something of the truth, a clue for our further understanding of how for Stead images of truth and reality often exist in multiform dimensions; they may partially be revealed through a straightforward perception of the visible world, but also through an awareness that there may exist beyond this an infinity of the new and unexpected, a world of unfamiliar, possibly incomprehensible forces and relationships.

The novel is thus constructed like a hall of mirrors, with ordinary reflecting surfaces, these giving us images of the realistic, the rational and the documentary-like; and also distorting surfaces which depict the unaccountable, the grotesque, the phantasmagoric. And as in a hall of mirrors, its central images are reflected endlessly, weaving a tangled web. The central image of Cotters' England, that of people locked in deadly conflict with themselves, others and the realities outside them, bounds and re-bounds from surface to surface throughout the maze.

Thus we have conflicts such as the one between Peggy Cotter and Simon Pike, which are given force by their specific and realistic social observation. And then we have the conflicts explored within the relationships formed by Nellie and Tom and which illuminate more fully the darker regions of inner realities. In passing we note that the book's two titles, Cotters' England and Dark Places of the Heart, provide an interesting and relevant comment on this dualism.

In keeping with the mirror imagery we also have the "shadows" of these core realities endlessly reproduced, flickering elusively, barely glimpsed, throughout the twists and turns of the intricate network. Mysterious references are made to another sister and half-brother, Constantine Ilger and Patrick Hall who, like Nellie and Tom, appear to be enigmatically attached. We are told that Patrick

Hall like Tom "used to be an airman" (p. 74). Reference is made to yet another airman called Cotter, a friend of Tom's, who met with violent death during the war. Elsewhere we learn of a family of Cotters across the river from the Bridgehead Cotters; Thomas Cotter senior enigmatically holds the other family responsible for what he sees as the shameful behaviour of his own children. Tom tells two purportedly true supernatural stories in which it is implied that he has lived this life once before: in the first he enters a café and is mistaken for a dead man; in the other he registers at an unfamiliar hotel in the country and is told by the desk lady that he had done the same thing a week earlier - she even shows him his name in the registry book to prove it. Most outstanding of all, however, is the astonishing string of Nellie-type figures we catch a glimpse of in the maze: Mrs Cotter, Jago, Venna, Nellie's grandmother, Johnny Sterker, and the actual Joanna Southcott.

But since Cotters' England is largely about conflict it does not "reflect" passively. It is a dramatic work also. And as its central conflict involves the externalization of the rift within Nellie, we witness in the larger movement of the novel the gradual subversion of the social realism and naturalism by the presence of Nellie herself. Therefore in the book's great crisis, the moments leading up to Caroline's death, Stead externalizes and objectifies the imaginary and phantasmagoric until they appear to us as actual reality. Nellie, "dressed in an airman's suit" and smiling "like a clown in the moonshade" (p. 291), forces Caroline up through the skylight of her room to gaze upon a hideous, fantastic spectacle, which is presented quite objectively by Stead in the terms of some unfathomable liaison between the real and unreal.

A number of naked women were rounding, breaking, wrestling, weaving together in the back yard between the brick walls, the high fence and the tree. The moonlight showed that some were rosy in the daytime, others were the colors of night-lighted fish and they were like queer fish, a seahorse, an old man snapper, a gar, a toadfish, a puffball and one rather awkward and hesitant was as yet, only a

woman: and what was more ludicrous, partly dressed.

Nellie laid her beak and her chin over her shoulder with a sharp penetrating smile, her face wore its highest look of animal intelligence (p. 291).

Once more this is carried over from Seven Poor Men of Sydney where, particularly in the suicide sequence, we are made to feel that disturbing forces essentially located in human nature have their correlates in some supra-normal reality. In Cotters' England Nellie herself anticipates this grotesque sequence with her words: "The world is not what it seems. Does an airman, up above the low atmospheres, see what we see?" (p. 264). Wearing her brother's flying outfit, and elevated above the roof of the house, Nellie is determined that she and Caroline see the world differently - and they do.<sup>12</sup> It is as though in certain extreme moments Stead displaces the ego by objectifying its products, subverts apparent reality with apparent unreality. But like the lecture sequence in the earlier work, the mirror imagery of Cotters' England reminds us of the ambiguity of this; for a hall of mirrors, whilst reflecting reality to some degree, presents a reality that is also the product of trickery, the cunning juxtaposition of images for a special effect.

Again Stead balances an interest in ideas about reality with an interest in character psychology in such a manner as to allow each to illuminate aspects of the other. Nellie's "hybrid character"<sup>13</sup> both helps give rise to and is dependent upon the hybridism of the novel itself. In the final analysis, though, we must again make the point we made in the Introduction and in Chapter Three, that Stead's exploration of character psychology is in the dominant position. It is brilliantly complex, original in all sorts of unexpected ways, and the key to much of the writing. In the final Section of the thesis, however, we will be considering the writer's preoccupation with a more explicitly supernatural reality, and one which markedly displaces the human ego in a fashion that we have found to be relatively rare in her work.

SECTION C

The Salzburg Tales

## Chapter Five

### THE SALZBURG TALES

The merging of styles in Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England might encourage us to think of these works as cross-sections of types of novels. Their structural similarity is striking, and crucial to the development of theme. Similarly, The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek are strongly linked by a recurrent structural principle; most notably that of the story-within-a-story, which again is closely associated with the dominant themes of both works. Though let us say now, this division of theme and style in our discussions is for the purposes of analysis only; poems and novels are "whole" things and not reducible in any final sense to the abstract parts we necessarily conceive of for criticism. However, if we use these abstract divisions to help ourselves see the whole a little more clearly, then the conceptual contradiction which dogs this method can readily be placed in the service of a larger intelligibility.

In the four novels discussed up to this point we have traced some of the permutations of Stead's reality theme. So far we have looked at her examination of a variety of psychological realities, and also the decentralization of these in places to permit an opposition of social and possibly even supernatural forces. In The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek the bias is more definitely towards the inhuman and fantastic. Even so, and this will be most evident in the discussion of the novella, human psychology can play an important part in Stead's unfolding of the scheme, and should not be overlooked or brushed aside.

It is this human element that gives weight to the theme of determinism. As we have shown, in The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone the central female characters set out to determine their own existences and largely they succeed. The dominant characters in Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England belong to a slightly different category; they influence powerfully the human environment about them, but sometimes appear dominated by destructive forces beyond

human control existing both within and outside their personalities. In The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek the ego is finally subordinated to more powerful deterministic forces, and as we emphasized in the Introduction, these are rarely explicable in the light of orthodox social determinism.

The sombre cast of pessimism settles over these works, but it would be misleading to equate this directly with the sort of pessimism we find in Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England. These last contain a raw anguish that we sense is deeply felt; although it is, of course, rendered without hysteria and with that dispassionate quality of Stead's that so remarkably escapes being callous or cold. The volume of short stories and the novella are generally more muted in effect. Although probably the most difficult of Stead's works to discuss critically, brimming with barely penetrable enigmas and ingeniously complicated narrative manoeuvres, they are not as deeply felt as the other works. Undoubtedly they have their powerful moments, however, and it is these we hope to highlight.

In addition a streak of black humour may be detected in parts of The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek which seems to make an ironic comment on their deterministic concerns. We will say something about this low-key humour at the conclusions to both this and the next chapter. Now, in passing, we might take the opportunity to make the point that humour is not at all alien to Stead. The Man Who Loved Children, particularly, contains quite lengthy sequences of grim hilarity, such as the scene in which Henny drags her step-daughter about Washington on a whirlwind shopping expedition, crossing swords with prim old ladies in a butcher's shop, coping with the mortification of Louie's awkward fall in a public street, battling self-righteous housewives on the streetcar, and so forth. And in For Love Alone there is of course the wedding and the later comic-pathetic monologue by Aunt Bea about Malfi's trousseau.

The Salzburg Tales has strong links with almost all of Stead's novels because of its emphasis on storytelling. It is a common enough occurrence in many of the writer's works that characters should gather and tell stories, and that the content of these stories should often be bizarre and of an

extraordinary, even supernatural, turn. We have mentioned Louie's tales to the children in The Man Who Loved Children and Tom Cotter's weird stories in Cotters' England. Another obvious instance of this sort of thing occurs in Seven Poor Men of Sydney, when the main characters assemble in the grounds of the asylum and exchange several fantastic stories.

However, as with The Salzburg Tales, we would be mistaken if we claimed that Stead uses narrative-within-narrative purely to distance us from her fantasy. In such works as the novels discussed in the preceding Section, for instance, the distinction between the fantastic and the realistic is not always dependent on the distinction between tale-telling and the world of the narrative which enfolds it. In these works Stead does not always keep the enigmatic at a rational and unambiguous distance. She does not confine it to anecdotes which could, within the world of the novel, be true or false, but permits it occasionally to overlap the boundaries of these internal narratives, thus to encroach very subtly, though often disturbingly, upon a more mundane sense of the real.

On some fundamental level The Salzburg Tales is designed to dissolve the usual distinction we make between teller and tale, between reality and fantasy. To discuss it in the way we are accustomed to when dealing with, say, The Canterbury Tales or The Decameron, could be misleading. Indeed what Ian Reid calls the "perfunctory gesture towards realism"<sup>1</sup> hinted at by the inclusion of a Prologue and by the elaborate introduction of the Personages, is deliberately swallowed up by that same creative impulse which breathes fictional life into the stories themselves; that is, the writer's preoccupation with the fantastic and enigmatic. These are as evident in Stead's descriptions of the storytellers and in the fabulous landscape setting she conjures for them, as in many of the tales themselves.

For example, it is difficult to attribute the sentiment of realistic documentation to the author's description of the surrounds of Salzburg, or to her description of the Centenarist and various other Personages. These deliberately evoke an atmosphere of the marvellous, of the fairy tale for adults, which perhaps reminds us of the work of Maeterlinck and Hoffmann, or even the contemporary Roald Dahl.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly,



we should be reminded of the world of the tales themselves. We will return to this shortly. Let us consider, first of all, Stead's description of Salzburg:

The river Salzach, swift and yellow from the glaciers and streaming mountain valleys, flows between baroque pleasure-castles standing in glassy lakes, and peasant villages pricked in their vineyards, and winds about to reflect the citadel rising in its forests, single eminence in the plain.<sup>3</sup>

All the elements of a traditional fairy-tale setting are present: rivers from glaciers (a recurrent association in the stories of Andersen), idealized "pleasure-castles" and magically smooth lakes. If it appears that we are stretching a point here, we should note that Stead definitely invites us to envisage the world outside the stories as belonging, at least in part, to the realm of the fantastic and imaginary. For during the third day of the storytelling one of the Personages remarks, in response to the panorama stretching out before the company:

This has existed before in the first visions of our young imaginations. When I was a child I had a book with this title, "The Land of Enchantment: or, Banished beyond the Clouds." The story was dull but the title held me spellbound for months. But I never expected to see my vision clothed with earth, trees, rocks, stones, the sound of water and footsteps, and with the war-worn stones that hang before us (p. 202).<sup>4</sup>

We have already emphasized that the tone of the Prologue and description of the Personages is complementary to, rather than different from, the milieu of the stories. The correspondence between the external world of The Salzburg Tales and the stories themselves is constantly apparent, as in the description of the Neapolitan shore in the Italian Singer's brooding Gothic "To The Mountain." This is lent something of the strange fairy-tale quality that pervades, for instance, the description of Salzburg in the Prologue:

The whole coastline, with its bays and many islands,

towers, castles and groves lay before them; the fabulous coast, the headland on which Virgil wrote, the sulphurous caves where Dante saw Inferno, the rocky tombs of the Sirens, and crowned Naples lay bright in the calm tide, and the olive slopes stretched out like a coast of Paradise in the sun (p. 410).

Similarly, Stead's description of the Centenarist at the beginning is echoed in the Mathematician's portrait of Ernest Jourdain in "The Mirror," tinged as it is with suggestions of the mysterious and idiosyncratic. We will quote the two passages together, to draw out the similarities:

[The Centenarist's] eyes sent out points of light and his dark-veined thin hand played delicately from the soft pale wrist on which was a gold chain. He had a dark crafty profile, like an ancient Venetian, with a long, pointed nose and thin lips; he was as attentive as a lizard. He hummed ever and again to himself like syrinx when the tide is rising in the reeds. He was full of tales as the poets of Persia: he unwound endlessly his fabrics, as from a spool the silks of Arabia (pp. 37-8).

[Ernest Jourdain] liked to sit hour after hour ... not looking, he, at the twilight land, but flashing his smile at each of us, and talking, talking perpetually, talking as if we were not bodies but ears, and as if the soul were in the ear, recalling to us our own pasts, things he had guessed from some chance reference, things he had been told, which others had already forgotten, raking up strange acquaintances he had all over the world, ransacking all his unforgotten lore for tales, analogies and arguments. In the dark, as it settled around us, like nymphae or the flowers of the night-blooming Cereus, sudden and splendid, exploded the hundred flowers of his unpremeditated virtuosity (pp. 182-3).

Clearly all this might simply be another way of stating that the tales, the description of the tellers, and the

exoticized backgrounds for both, are a product of one mind, the writer's, which in the words of H.M. Green "cannot help endowing ... [the] principal characters and indeed almost all ... [Stead's] characters with something of her own imaginative acuteness, waywardness, even of her own general attitude, so that for lack of ordinary elements the world she presents has a certain twist in the direction of a nervous tension that has about it something of the abnormal."<sup>5</sup> Allowing for this, there are other things which need be said about the link between the manner in which the stories are presented in The Salzburg Tales and the stories themselves. A good starting point for an analysis of the central idea behind Stead's volume might be a statement made by the writer herself, during an international symposium on the short story:

[T]he belief that life is a dream and we the dreamers only dreams, 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 and, understanding which, the meaning of things can be threaded through all that happens? Then there will no longer be a dream, but life in the clear.<sup>6</sup>

Stead does not presume to tell us what "life in the clear" would really be or mean. But she does focus on the desire for it, explicitly aligning the impulse that seeks an explanation of life with the impulse that helps create those countless stories which, in Stead's words, form "the looking-glasses of all our lives."<sup>7</sup> Her view is that analogous to those "strange, romantic, and tragic moments" of human experience, which enshroud our existence with a sense of mystery by confusing the normal distinctions we make between life and dreams, is another interchange that similarly confuses any absolute division between real and unreal experience. This is the exchange we make of the actual for the imaginary when, out of some obscure necessity, we seek and find a vision of the real world in the looking-glass world of narrative. Since this in itself is such an enigmatic impulse, Stead wants to show that any attempt to rationalize completely this looking-glass world of fiction, by stepping back and

envisaging it as a globular, self-contained realm, is no guarantee of its still not impinging upon our too sure grasp of the rational and explicable.<sup>8</sup>

Let us attempt to flesh out our abstract juxtaposition of the "inner" and "outer," the "looking-glass" and "reality," "narrative" and "actuality," by describing precisely what we mean by it within the context of Stead's work. This first necessitates returning to what might be described as the outer husk of the volume - both the presentation of the Personages and the general setting for the tale-telling - and our point about the confusion of expectations which occurs when Stead refuses to make it function solely as a realistic counterpart to the unreality of the bulk of the stories.

Speaking of the Personages in the volume Clement Semmler writes that Stead's "recurrent characters are the dreamers - the Michael Baguenaults of the world."<sup>9</sup> Whilst we have an important and related point to make as an extension of this, it is worth noting the consistency with which Stead stresses this aspect of her Personages' psychologies. The Festival Director, for instance, is "a ready, practical man of elephantine dreams, who tried to give the imagination a footrest on earth" (p. 11). The poet prefers "phantoms flying out of a dark cloud to the bright, close-embroidered visions of reason" and attempts "to pierce the clouds that hung over his lethargic soul, or to transform them into shapes of fantasy" (p. 21). We will remember from Chapter Two that this last phrase is to return in For Love Alone in association with the dreaming Teresa.

Then there is the group of college girls who "imagined that, in general, the real was the contrary of the apparent" (p. 22), and the Schoolgirl who "was full of romantic ideas" (p. 25). The German hikers (who, incidentally, do not stop to tell any tales) fall asleep and dream of "the fantastic spire of some great cathedral, lacy on a blue sky, the cryptic black marble door closing in the sarcophagus of a great man, or a wide outlook over a blue mountain lake, that was starred in Baedeker" (p. 27). We learn of the Danish Woman that she "talked all day and recounted hundreds of tales, mostly improbable, like a female Munchhausen" (p. 41), whilst the Architect "covered his walls, trunks, letters, easels and

restaurant tables with the motifs of his irrepressible fantasy" (p. 42).

And then there is the Public Stenographer who has a preoccupation with "love and its thick mystery" and those "breaths of the supernatural which had blown on her cheek" (p. 47), examples of which are given even before the main body of storytelling commences. These Personages, and the remainder of their company, are susceptible to the romance of the "golden afternoon" and "starry evening" which mark the beginning and end of the Don Juan opera performance, and we are told: "In this way everyone's imagination took flight. When sleep came, they were ready for celestial adventures" (pp. 55-6). Stead's own connection of dreaming with storytelling during the symposium is clearly reflected in the text of The Salzburg Tales.

This might appear to explain the extraordinary and fantastic nature of the tales which follow, and so contradict the earlier thrust of the argument which insists that both the tellers and the tales share this fantastic quality. But there is a dimension of psychological and descriptive realism in The Salzburg Tales; we do not want to detract from that point. What we do wish to emphasize is that this dimension exists in strange harmony with the other, curiously enigmatic quality, which cannot be said to be confined solely to the tales at all. Before elaborating this point, we might observe that Stead occasionally embarks upon a relatively crude procedure to discourage us from making overly simplistic leaps from the brief psychological revelations of the opening pages, to the wild extravagances and bizarre fantasies of many of the tales. Quite simply, she depicts some of the most prosaic of the Personages narrating some of the strangest stories, whilst the few relatively ordinary tales are mainly told by those whom we know to have a penchant for more vivid imaginings.

For instance, it is the Doctress who brings such conviction to the mysterious and horrifying tale of "The Triskelion," even though, by her own admission, she has "no time for romance," protesting: "A doctor can't be mystic. Besides, I have always been very matter-of-fact...." (p. 211). The American Broker, "whose feet were on earth, and who

liked the smell of earth" (p. 54) works a clever variation on the Don Juan legend in "Don Juan in the Arena," and brings his tale to a mysterious and chilling close. And yet it is the Public Stenographer who, despite those numerous brushes with the supernatural, tells the story of "Overcote," one of the least fantastic or strange of The Salzburg Tales. To be sure it is the Mathematician, who "dreamed at night of curious manipulations of logic and letters from which he got the supple solutions of theorems" (p. 31), whose dream-time distortions of mathematical truth are reflected in the weird symmetries of "The Mirror"; but no unbroken patterning is discernible. The Philosopher himself remarks, in an upending of any convenient one-to-one ratio: "I only tell fairy-tales ... for I would rather be seen in their sober vestments than in the prismatic unlikelihood of reality" (p. 231).

In an expansion of the earlier quotation concerning "the Michael Baguenaults of the world," Clement Semmler writes: "Christina Stead is the artificer of both the dreamer and his dreams which are in fact the stuff and substance of her very stories."<sup>10</sup> We should now like to take this one step further, drawing on Stead's own comment during the short story symposium, her analysis of that curious sense whereby we come to believe "that life is a dream and we the dreamers only dreams." The phrase "the dreamers only dreams" reverberates throughout the whole of the section entitled "The Personages" in The Salzburg Tales, and underpins our claim that a strange harmony of the real and unreal pervades - of necessity, as we hope to reveal - even the periphery of this luxuriant tangle of dream-like, often nightmarish, tales.

For the Personages are, as we have just demonstrated, "dreamers," spinners of elaborate fantasies, but they are also presented by Stead as a dream-like sequence of figures. Not to take account of this is perhaps to miss the strangely ambiguous quality of the writing; more seriously it might lead us to speculate about the insubstantiality of Stead's characterization and so to ignore that this is partly the point. We gave some very general examples at the beginning of the fantastic ambience surrounding the description of the

Salzburg setting and that of the Centenarist. But the ambiguous writing we speak of is more subtle than this, best exemplified by those extraordinary fragments of description which, whilst conveying a strongly metaphorical conception of character (often apt and realistic) at the same time imbue the Personages with qualities that can only be described as dream-like and phantasmagoric.

For example, of the Schoolteacher we are told: "She sailed along on her long legs, like a bare pole on a smooth sea" (p. 19). One of the college girls is possessed of an "Eastern face [that] was the shape of the most beautiful and secret of triangles: her eyes and hair were equally bold, wild and black, and she seemed to bear under her ivory skin the blue which she had knitted into her grotesque garments

... Her companions had her manners, for the most part, but not her harsh beauty, and they did not arouse love, pity and horror as she did" (p. 23). The description of the Italian Singer is another case in point: "[T]hrilling and deathly to hear were the infernal rustlings of his great stage-whisper. The sun silvered his smooth, black hair and his low, satanic forehead" (p. 14).

And then there is, again, the Centenarist, whose "shoe might have concealed the long tip of a seraphic wing or the long toe of a satyr's foot" (p. 37). We should not forget either the impossibly various and fantastic exploits of the Police Commissioner (p. 51), nor those of the American Broker (pp. 52-3). Most memorable of all, perhaps, is the Viennese Conductor who resembles "a tasselled reed, with shoulders and hands spreading outwards, delicate hips and a soft, long, feline stride" and in whom "the passion of rhythm was constant but tidal" (p. 12). Even the element of fanciful superlatives and exaggerations in the descriptions of characters' clothing and jewellery perhaps suggests the world of fairy stories and dreams, where "the finest silk stockings ever seen" and "a diamond as large as a shoe-button" (p. 15), both worn by the Frenchwoman, are not only to be readily found, but are also considered completely rational.

But where does all this lead us? It is not enough to say, as is fashionable, that the highly stylized portrayal of the Personages might place us, the readers, in the same

relation to them as they are to the highly stylized tales; that is, as witnesses to the creation of fictions, and therefore compelled to classify such as merely notional and unconnected with general reality. There is, for one thing, very little speculation by the Personages about the nature of the tales anyway, and what there is gives every indication of their taking the act of storytelling very seriously, which is a significant point in itself. The Music Critic, for example, aligns his story of "The Little Old Lady" with his obsessive desire to "look at life altogether, as a spectator who looks at a vast stage-setting" (p. 367). And it is with a sort of shocked gravity that the company contemplates "To The Mountain," the discussion of which inspires the Schoolteacher to narrate her own "grand and awful" (p. 414) episode in "On The Road."

Nor, as we suggested earlier, would it be terribly accurate to claim that Stead's external framework for The Salzburg Tales is designed to undermine completely any sense of realism. Those metaphors and similes we listed, so tinged with an air of the fantastic and phantasmagoric, are also undeniably apt for evoking very real human characteristics. Our quotations from the portrait of the Viennese Conductor, for example, illuminate this key double perspective Stead affords us. Her image of the "tasselled reed" and exaggerated description of the conductor's willowy movements marvellously capture the ludicrous posing, the absurd affectations of this prima donna.

Our earlier assertion that Stead creates a liaison between the enigmatic quality of the writing in her portrayal of the Personages, and the enigmatic nature of many of the tales, compels us to turn our attention now to the inner realm of the volume, the actual stories, and so to realize that the general conception behind the work is a quite unorthodox one. This conception seems to be at odds with the traditional ratio of realism to illusionism we might have expected in the opposition of narrator and narrative.

It is the notion of a ratio of one fixed dimension to another - whether in our earlier abstract terms of internal to external, or the looking-glass world of narrative to the real world outside it - which could so easily be given the



wrong emphasis in a discussion of The Salzburg Tales. If the abstract conceptualizing might be permitted to continue briefly, we could think of the work's general structure in terms, not of fixed one-to-one relationships, but of concentric circles, all sharing the same centre, this strange harmony of real and unreal elements. The curiously dream-like, yet also realistic world outside the stories, is not so much an exterior which encloses the world of the fictions, but rather an overlay, which but adds another surface to a series of overlays all embodying a similar combination of elements.

In other words, the inner realm of The Salzburg Tales, the world of the narrated stories, is not fixed either. It constantly telescopes inwards, with many of the tales a mere starting point for other references to tale-telling or, more importantly, to actual internal narratives, or stories-within-stories. This patterning mirrors in miniature form the larger relationship of the Personages, and their strange world, to the world they create. It is the main structural feature of Stead's volume, as we stated at the beginning.

There are numerous examples of this telescoping effect, particularly in the more substantial of The Salzburg Tales, where there is time and space enough for it; unlike, for example, such very slight narratives as "The Sparrow In Love" and "The Death of the Bee." However it will be necessary to separate our examples of these structural movements from our later discussion of some of their unifying themes, to avoid dwelling at too great a length upon a single story at a time, and consequently to miss something of the effect we experience when, reading the volume, we move swiftly from story to sub-story, thence to sub- sub-story, and so on. Besides, the work's most recurrent themes are best presented in block fashion, supported by selected examples from the tales referred to, rather than piecemeal; that could only give rise to confusion, considering not only the great number of tales, but also their surface diversity.

Shortly after the opening of the first formally told tale "The Marionettist," given by the Town Councillor, the central character's mother narrates a strange dream she has

had. This immediately signals Stead's very common alignment of narrative, particularly internal narratives, with her characters' dreams. Both represent apparent breaks with externals, but are ultimately revealed to be significantly related to them, whether through a metaphorical meaning, or even (as is the case here) a prophetic or spiritual one. Then there is the depiction of the marionettist's relationship with his own children. Each night he narrates to them "a new chapter in an endless story that he made up as he went along, one which sprang naturally out of the events of their daily life, with incidents he read in the newspapers, and memories of his childhood pieced in" (p. 58). He also acts out "fantastic pieces, a 'Hexantanz,' 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice,' and many other ancient themes" (p. 59). We are told how the marionettist "lost himself in his performances" (p. 59). An actual sub-story is narrated later in the tale - one of James' pieces, "The Pot of Gold" - which is an allegorical rendering of "The Marionettist." And finally an account of the mother's recurrent, prophetic dreams returns, fulfilled by James' eventual return to his parents' home.

In the English Gentleman's tale "The Gold Bride," we learn how Carlos's obsessive, unnatural love for his dead wife becomes the substance of a popular legend. This legend subsequently inspires the son to become embroiled in the extraordinary sequence of events. "In Doulcemer," narrated by the Doctor of Medicine, contains several internal narratives: the story of a "ne'er-do-weel" from Tennessee (p. 147); the tale of a degenerate poet and his girl-friend who commits suicide; the incident of Nina's and Stepan's thwarted attempt to gain control of a fabulous chateau in Doulcemer; Nina's unconsummated affair with a Parisian artist and her husband's ludicrous attempts to expose both wife and would-be lover; and so forth. One of the characters remarks of the village of Doulcemer: "Those histories spring up here spontaneously: it is like the feverish, foul air of decay, or a loathsome deposit left by the old mountain lake that infects the air, a melancholy or ague which everyone of us gets eventually, even the best of us" (p. 152).

We discover that the central character of "The Mirror"

initially established relationships with his wife and her brother (the narrator) through his endless, nocturnal tale-telling. His reflections on the past are balanced by some futuristic tale-telling and a rather more literal reflection; his wife's account of "their life from stage to stage" (p. 187), as she sees it unfold before her in the mirror. In "The Divine Avenger," the Foreign Correspondent (who narrates the tale) is cruelly and unjustly spoken against by his best friend. His subsequent rage causes him to imagine himself in the vortex of "thousands of tales" (p. 204), all on the theme of vengeance. A separate story then commences, the substance of the narrator's allegorical dream. It is introduced by the words: "Clouds assembled, curdled, rose and began to disperse again, and light dawned on a strange scene" (p. 205). It is surely no accident that these introductory words appear a mere two pages after the Foreign Correspondent himself has likened Salzburg to his childhood book "The Land of Enchantment: or, Banished beyond the Clouds" (p. 202), before commencing with his story. Dream-like visions exist both outside and inside his story; they are clearly not the prerogative of narrative, just as - on the terms of this work - narrative is clearly not the prerogative of the enigmatic. The sense of not being able to determine where the transition from reality into the looking-glass world begins and ends (a notion taken very literally in "The Mirror"), is subtly evoked in this sequence.

It is even better handled in the ensuing tale, possibly the best in the collection: "The Triskelion," given by the Doctress. We are slightly in error, though, when we say that it is "given" by the Doctress. For this tale passes hands a number of times, and is even completed - if that is an appropriate term for the final words on such a cyclical story - by another member of the company, the Balkan Lawyer, who knows a sequel to it. The shifts from narrator to narrator within the Doctress's tale are possibly its single most notable feature, apart from its striking central image of the phantom wheel, the triskelion, which constantly appears at a small coastal resort in New South Wales as a supernatural herald of disaster.

The Doctress begins her tale of Arnold, the blind youth,

as a sort of prologue to another tale, this latter an account of her own further investigations of his curious case. This, in turn, leads her by chance to a barrister friend who - knowing nothing of Arnold but recognizing the trinket of the triskelion he has given the Doctress - embarks on a long story from her own past. This entails a hideous series of events occurring at Lakes Entrance in Tuggerah whilst she is staying at a boarding-house there.

Within this narrative the barrister recounts her vision of the three-legged phantom and the effect she has on the residents of the boarding-house when she tells them about it. Significantly, her tale inspires the boarding-house proprietress, Rhoda, to embark on no less than three separate narratives involving the triskelion: the tale of the grossly obese dwellers on the opposite side of the lake; the story of two vagabonds and their suicide pact; and finally, of some fatal boating accidents caused by a mysterious release of flood-waters at the Lakes Entrance. After this the narrative is again taken up by the Doctress's friend, then by the Doctress herself, and finally by the Balkan Lawyer.

The theme of dreaming returns in "The Sensitive Goldfish," which also contains a miniature fairy-tale to explain the history of the unique fish, later exploited by the securities clerk. The fairy-tale is reminiscent of Andersen, with its wealthy Emperor and enchanted animals. After the Solicitor's story "The Amenities" we discover that several of the company "had new details to add; so that they sat there in the wood till the sun was high up and very hot and the noises in the town below announced midday" (p. 299). A dream like one of Michael's mystical and violent dreams in Seven Poor Men of Sydney is solemnly related by Maria, the heroine of "A Russian Heart." And later when she narrates details to her friend France of her journey to Odessa, the latter asks: "Did you dream that then? Or are you dreaming it now?" (p. 306). She replies: "Then or now, what is the difference?" (p. 306). Again we note the frequent inability to distinguish between actuality, dreaming, and invented narrative at certain points in Stead's fiction. The rest of the story is composed of Maria's own tale about her great passion for her former lecturer, and her final confrontation

with him before he commits suicide.

In the Centenarist's tales at the conclusion of the Fourth Day, one of the personages he introduces is a holy man, Baalshem, who like himself is a raconteur. Not only are "thousands of tales" (p. 320) associated with Baalshem's name, but he himself indulges in the recounting of "homely analogies," "domestic parables," and "interminable tales" (p. 321). The first narrative of the Fifth Day is "The Prodigy," and this too, like so many of The Salzburg Tales, contains another tale-teller and his story; in this case the porter, and his tale of a young musician's terrible fate. This follows on from a sort of mini-prologue by the Musician, outlining his first encounter with the young girl in question.

In the ensuing Interlude, before the Frenchwoman narrates "Gaspard," the latter remarks to the Musician: "There is a sound on the hill ... as if your tale continued: it may be the prologue to mine" (p. 333). The interlocking of life and stories, of one story with another, and so on, is suggested again when the Frenchwoman announces that she is taking her narrative from a vast collection of fables and legends of her own home region. She speaks of "Calliope, the mistress of us all" who "tells many a ribald pasquinade or minor pomp, and pieces together with florid interludes, village tales whose tissues long ago fell in tatters in the sun" (pp. 333-4). We are perhaps tempted to think of these as "The Province Tales"; yet another mirror image of Stead's own volume.

"To The Mountain," narrated by the Italian Singer, also contains these structural features of miniature prologue and internal tale. The singer gives an account of his first chance meeting with the lovers and then, as in "The Triskelion" or "The Prodigy," details of the central characters' lives are filled in by somebody else; in this case the Dutchman J. van Hoven, a mutual friend. Stead even draws attention to this internal narrative by concluding it with the words: "This ended the recital of J. van Hoven" (p. 402). The final sequence, the Dutchman's ascent of Vesuvius with the mad lover, has clearly also been narrated to the Italian Singer, since he himself is not present at the time of the ritual suicide.

The Lawyer's tale "Speculation in Lost Causes" opens like "The Marionettist" with the narration of a dream, a brief prologue to explain how the Lawyer becomes "the partisan of the improbable" (p. 442). The tale-within-a-tale which follows shows Stead working a variation on the usual format. For the Lawyer's amusing and witty story of Henna and Joce, both accused of poisoning Henna's husband Cok Huld, is ostensibly narrated by Stead's Personages, but also nominally by one of the Lawyer's, a Viennese jurist called Potago. And within this story, many versions of the incidents surrounding Cok's death are taken up and wittily exploited, forming a myriad of minute tales.

Thus The Salzburg Tales often seems to present its gradations of reality as a type of Chinese box, wherein a fixed hierarchy of dreams, storytelling and actuality is barely discernible, since these are merely veils which may be drawn aside to reveal other layers of reality as presented by other tale-tellers, other tales. This structure contains the metamorphosis Stead speaks of during the short story symposium; the transformation of the dreamer into the dream, the dissolving of narrator into narrative and vice versa, and this a product of that "desire for the great legend, the powerful story rooted in all things which will explain life to us and, understanding which, the meaning of things can be threaded through all that happens," The idea of seeking, of threading oneself through a maze of experiences in an attempt to see, in Stead's phrase, "life in the clear," underlies this conception and is connected with her employment of a maze-like structure in The Salzburg Tales.

When we made the point at the start that Stead does not use narrative-within-narrative to distance us from fantastic or inexplicable elements we might have added that, on the contrary, it often (though not always) becomes her means of pursuing her enigmas through the maze, or else of showing how impossible it is to escape from the problems they represent. We will see in the next chapter that this is also a central feature of The Rightangled Creek. In such works there is no easy transition from question to answer, but rather a movement from enigma to enigma.

This delivers us at the difficult door of theme; or

rather some of the more recurrent or insistent themes of The Salzburg Tales, remembering that a volume of stories like this one can hardly contain its dominant preoccupations in each single story. This last point might be directed, for instance, at such tales as "Guest of the Redshields" or "Don Juan in the Arena" which are, although novel and enjoyable, essentially one-gimmick stories that fail to unite with much else in the collection.

Our metaphor of the concentric circles, to describe a recurrent structural feature of The Salzburg Tales, should be extended to incorporate some of its themes as well; notably Stead's interest in predestined human cycles, which are often portrayed in a given story and mimicked, as it were, by the mirror maze of internal narratives, or else shared by a number of other tales. This theme of the endless cycle and its associated elements is usually allied with the more fantastic and supernatural orientations of Stead's fiction. The writer's synthesis of real and unreal elements, her creation of an enigmatic reality in other words, enables her to reveal certain of the problems associated with predestination; especially its attribution to forces existing both inside and outside the normal human realm. And as a pessimistic statement about some of the limits of human endeavour, this theme - and its attendant enigmas - becomes as inescapable as the internal networks of narrative which persistently reiterate its bleak story. No doubt we find endless cycles in certain other works by Stead which possess no overtones of the supernatural. For instance, in For Love Alone we are lead to suspect that Teresa's and Quick's relationship might inevitably be flawed by the inescapable and underlying problems that beset the young girl's relations with Crow. We recall her words at the end of the book: "What's there to stop it?" (However in For Love Alone this pessimism is powerfully counterbalanced by a celebration of human will, as we showed, and it could therefore be misleading to over-emphasize the theme of determinism.) The Puzzleheaded Girl is another case in point; here the eerie, almost supernatural atmosphere in places is finally attributable to Debrett's obsession with Honor Lawrence, a psychological fixation somewhat reminiscent of the obsession - and its

cyclical treatment - at the centre of the French story "D'Entre Deux Morts" by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, probably better known as the vastly superior film Vertigo, an astounding and piercing scrutiny of human romanticism.

"The Triskelion" is the most explicit and satisfying example of the predestination theme in the whole of The Salzburg Tales, possessing too the most complicated of the narrative-within-narrative structures. The sense of a discontinuous series of events, conveyed by the numerous internal movements from narrator to narrator, cleverly establishes a sense of the seemingly aimless and elliptical movements of ordinary life, only to reveal a dreadful pattern of predestination and an unfathomable mystery. For as the story is pieced together by its various tellers, it gets closer and closer to the inexplicable, as witness the transition from the relatively stable and explicable world of the Matron's office, to the innermost narratives of Rhoda, the boarding-house proprietress. In these latter we learn of the prophetic powers of the triskelion, a revelation which not only casts the shadow of catastrophe over the following events, but which unveils that deterministic dimension of reality that has the Jeffries family in its grip.

One of the most disturbing features of "The Triskelion" is the way it manages to cast a new retrospective light over its incidents, as well as a prophetic one. For example, at the end we conclude that Arnold's blindness is the by-product of the incestuous union between his father and "sister," and probably regard this as his share of the terrible heritage bequeathed each generation of the family. But Stead has hinted at a heritage darker than blindness. If we hark back to that so-called "stable" and "explicable" world of the Doctress's initial narrative, we realize that all was not, after all, as it seemed. The wife's account of Arnold's sexual proclivities at first strikes us as her hysterical over-reaction to the unexpected agilities of a blind man's love-making; her protestation that she comes from a "very religious and very decent" (p. 216) family and the Doctress's indulgent smile at this, seem to confirm us in this view. "It's a disease," (p. 216) the wife cries.



And well we might believe it is, after we come to possess all the information about the sexual perversion rife in the Jeffries household. Earlier aspects of the tale now take on a different meaning, suggesting darker possibilities.

When the Balkan Lawyer adds his sequel to "The Triskelion," to reveal that the blight which afflicts the family is far from dead, but still passing its heritage of madness and sexual corruption from generation to generation, the Doctress remarks: "What a three-legged history! ... I begin to think it will never stop" (p. 230). In this merging of symbol, narrative and narrative structure, we realize that the triple-pronged triskelion, harbinger of recurrent human and supernatural evils, which too has a cyclical structure and revolves endlessly, is an external manifestation of the malignancy afflicting three generations of one family, as well as generating the three main tales that outline the cyclical history. And the three mini-tales given by Rhoda afford us a glimpse of other people and events caught in a similar scheme of predestination, and another glimpse into the nightmarish Chinese box of "The Triskelion."

Throughout The Salzburg Tales Stead constantly associates the family with these cyclical patterns of destructive behaviour. However, the emphasis on doomed families throughout the volume should not lead us to make any too specific connections between this work and The Man Who Loved Children. The conception behind the families of the earlier work is more closely, if somewhat crudely, aligned with the symbolic families of Greek tragedy, governed as they are both by a fault in humankind and a fault-line splitting the universal scheme. The Man Who Loved Children is based on a more realistic and naturalistic conception, although it does of course have a great tragic sweep rivalling the most powerful and eloquent of all tragedies.

The cycle of unhappy families in "The Marionettist" is also connected with recurrent patterns of behaviour within a family - or rather two families in this case - and is encapsulated by dreams and internal narratives which seem to represent glimpses of a reality that remains essentially unchanged, ensnaring individuals in its repetitious rhythms. This is the underlying pattern of The Rightangled Creek also, although in Chapter Six we will show that the novella is a

far more complex work than most of The Salzburg Tales are when taken separately; perhaps excepting "The Triskelion," which in terms of both depth of intention and relative value ranks as a definite precedent for the later work.

In "The Marionettist" sorrow befalls one family when two sons run away, leaving the third, James, to remain with his parents. This becomes the basic theme of a story James tells his own children years later, after he too has left home and married. But in this story, "The Pot of Gold," the third son, the stay-at-home, also eventually runs away, shortly to return "shamefaced and annoyed" (p. 60) because he does not possess a great fortune. James and the children rarely perform this story with the marionettes, "for the mother, Anna, had some sort of prejudice against it" (p. 61).

The suggestion of premonition here, of Anna's recognition of the tale's mythical implications, is realized when James suddenly abandons his family, as his brothers did his own parents, seeking fulfilment elsewhere and confronting disappointment. When he eventually returns to his wife and children, only to face difficulties with re-integration, he is forced to return to his parents, saying: "I told you I was the stay-at-home of the family. Can I stay with you, mother?" (p. 69). Shortly before James' return his mother, who often dreams of her two other lost sons, this time dreams of James as a homeless beggar who approaches her and asks for food. "Your dreams are always the same, mother" (p. 69), her husband comments, returning us to the very start of the story, with James again residing in the home of his parents and his mother reciting her sad, unchanging dreams. This sombre little myth involving marionette-like humans who act out a pre-ordained play of abandonment, failed attempt at grandiose achievement, and partial re-integration with the humble source of discontent, is one of the most low-key of The Salzburg Tales, but hardly less effective than the very strident tones of "The Triskelion."

Another sombre story of predestination and of a malaise which begins to afflict an entire family is "The Mirror." The tell-tale looking-glass in the Mathematician's tale is presided over by the violinist Metternich, symbol of malevolent fate. After the Mathematician's sister becomes engaged to

Ernest Jourdain, she narrates the future course of their lives as she sees it in the mirror. During her engagement party, and then later on her wedding-day, a Metternich-type figure appears, as if to seal the prophecy. The events as foretold in Giselda's narrative all come true, as we no doubt believed they would from the start.

But "The Mirror" is no simple, predictable Gothic. These boldly supernatural strokes exist as a framework around which are interwoven numerous seemingly unconnected, though repetitive patterns of human behaviour, which are no more explicable for existing in the "rational" world outside the looking-glass, and also bathed in the same menacing glow of determinism emanating from it. The enigmas shared by the two sides of the looking-glass return us to our earlier statement that "any attempt to rationalize completely this looking-glass world of fiction, by stepping back and envisaging it as a globular, self-contained realm, is no guarantee of its still not impinging upon our too sure grasp of the rational and explicable."

For example, the Mathematician reveals how his own father, shortly after his daughter's marriage, for some inexplicable reason turns against his Mathematician son: "[H]e died in my presence with his head turned to the wall and without a word" (p. 190). We perhaps ask, as the Mathematician does: "What laboured to this destruction in my father's spirit?" and can only conclude, as he does: "The world is full of private and incomprehensible disappointments" (p. 190). Shortly after this the Mathematician announces, in a sinister playing with the notion that the incomprehensible aspirations and disappointments of the forefathers might actually be visited upon later generations: "I was estranged from my sister for a number of years by my own fault, for private difficulties irritated the nervous disposition I had from my father" (p. 193).

Similarly, in the case of Giselda and Jourdain, their fatal obsession with the mysteries of the mirror is inherited by their little boy Bobby, who develops a preoccupation with the glassy surface of the pool in their back yard, claiming visions of an old man (Metternich?) who daily compels him to play by its side. When an adult Bobby, like his raconteur

father, becomes obsessed with these incidents from the past, "every instant [of which] is reflected in his mind as in the unblemished surface of the pool" (p. 198). The cycle is complete; the "mirror" of the title becomes a two-way one, the events of the future as well as those of the past merging in a continuum of real and unreal happenings, sustained and preserved by narrative, which not only contains both, but is depicted as an essential mechanism of that same continuum.

Another theme common to several of the stories in The Salzburg Tales, and often cast in this scheme of pre-ordination, is that of obsessive love. Whether presented grotesquely, fabulously, with comic exaggeration, or with a degree of morbidity, a fatal or near-fatal passion is at the heart of many of the best tales. And this theme also finds itself reflected in certain internal narratives, Stead's means of revealing how all-pervasive and unavoidable are some of the uncontrollable impulses of human behaviour. Consider some of the following examples:

A Spanish youth marries a Moor, and through an excess of passion falls desperately ill; later when his wife commits suicide he has her embalmed, makes love to a gold statue sculptured in her likeness, and eventually takes his own life when he is interned in a lunatic asylum and the statue confiscated ("The Gold Bride").

A deformed Dane slaves at his humble trade for seven years to save enough money to marry the object of his overwhelming desire; when his beloved rejects him he obsessively returns to his work despite the danger to his health, and in an access of despair eventually dies ("The Death of Svend").

Then there is the woman who abandons her husband and travels a great distance on foot to be with a former lecturer whom she has loved for years; she discovers that he simply regards her as an interesting conundrum, a mere child bloated with romanticism ("A Russian Heart").

A young poet, in another tale, suffers acutely from a more abstract passion; he becomes obsessed with a statue of Antinoüs, believing that Hadrian's favourite will be "able to come to life again in me, as if I conceived him the first moment I saw him and now must tread again in every particular the path he trod before" (p. 397, "Antinoüs").

Two lovers are victims of a passion so extreme that the man threatens to castrate himself if his beloved should ever be unfaithful to him; and she, in a reciprocal gesture, pledges her heart to him forever. This notion is taken very literally by the man who, after his lover dies, cuts out her heart and casts both it and himself into the depths of Vesuvius, thereby acting out "the idea of a tragic destiny" (p. 401) that had possessed the pair all along ("To The Mountain").

And the heroine of "Poor Anna" develops a fatal fixation on a young lieutenant residing in the house opposite her own. Her romantic exhibitionism, which compels her to lean out of her bedroom window declaiming her great spiritual passions, unfortunately only meets with a rather less elevated form of exhibitionism; for the young soldier one day appears at his own window and mockingly exposes himself to her. Anna never recovers from this and dies, unfulfilled and unrequited, at the youthful age of twenty.

The internal narratives contained in some of these stories present us with a re-enactment of their essential features. For example, in "The Gold Bride" Carlos's unnatural obsession with the statue is inherited by his cousin Ferdinand. The narrative switches at midway point to emphasize the beginning of a new cycle of emotional destructiveness when the latter steals the statue, causing his wife to fear that he will revert "to his former wild ways" (p. 104)-- as he does. (There are suggestions of another cycle here.) Significantly, Ferdinand becomes more and more covetous of the statue for fear that Carlos's son will "learn its history and claim it" (p. 105). When a legend springs up around the gold idol the son too comes into contact with it, and is "marvellously affected by the statue's grace" (p. 107). Again we have, as in "The Triskelion," a "three-legged history," an account of an intra-familial contagion which is presided over, indeed perhaps guided, by an inexplicable force; in this case destructive, obsessive love, seemingly founded in the frail human heart, yet also in the inhuman bosom of the enigmatic bride, who appears to exercise an influence beyond the bounds of ordinary human autonomy.

In the Master's story "A Russian Heart," the internal tale told by the obsessed woman of her phantasmagoric journey

to Odessa to be with her beloved, contains dark and twisted images of the destruction underlying her relationship with Ivan Soklow. " ... I passed two lovers behind a bush: a tarantula crouched over them and she was slowly dropping on to their heads. Then I saw that they were only spiders themselves...." (p. 305). A link between the spider story and the external events of the tale is created by the horrible image of Maria scouring Odessa "in an ecstasy of passion": "I swung from one door-handle to another, and passed my gluey, arachnid, tentacular fingers along the glass and walls" (p. 306). But as in Maria's story it eventuates that both figures are spiders, as witness the final venomous exchange between Maria and Soklow, culminating in the latter's bizarre suicide (he smashes a window casement down upon his head).

As we observed in Chapter Two, this story with its epic journey and account of an unreciprocated passion, appears to contain the seeds of For Love Alone. The two central characters of that novel, Crow and Hawkins, are named after birds of prey, a fact remarked by a number of critics. Also in For Love Alone Teresa likens the lover in her sex-fantasy to "a big spider." The tarantula motif features in "The Triskelion" as well. Moments before the barrister sees the phantom wheel she remarks on "the overgrown shrubbery full of tarantulas" (p. 218). It is in this same shrubbery that she is later preyed upon by the evil father whose "reddish and ichorous" eyes are likened to "two little wounds looking on an interior ulcer" (p. 226).

These recurrent images of predator set against predator are in The Salzburg Tales generally governed by forces the ego cannot control; unlike, for example, the instance of For Love Alone where there is much to suggest that a human can forge the course of his or her existence. The displacement of human autonomy in Stead's early volume reveals an imagined reality presided over by mysterious forces. And as we have established, the structural mainstay of The Salzburg Tales, the story-within-a-story format, contains the writer's preoccupation with endless cycles and her desire to reproduce almost endlessly the central events portrayed within these.

H.M. Green writes of the work: "All the tales are fantasies, though most are realistic in their own way, and again they are almost all humorous, though the humour may lie beneath the surface...."<sup>11</sup> Our own thesis definitely supports the first half of Green's statement, even though we would prefer to think in terms of an enigmatic "synthesis" of real and fantastic elements. The second half of the statement perhaps needs some qualification. Several of The Salzburg Tales are, undoubtedly, quite funny: "Sappho," "The Deacon of Rottenhill," and "The Sensitive Goldfish" may be listed among them. Others, however, impress us with their "darkness and pessimism,"<sup>12</sup> to use Tony Thomas's phrase. These are the tales we have been discussing, although even amongst the darker stories there may still be detected an occasional streak of black humour. The sheer exaggeration of the lovers' passions in "Poor Anna" and "To The Mountain," for example, are somewhat suggestive of mockery.

Interestingly, one of the final notes struck in the collection is that of burlesque and black comedy. Although this does not cast an air of flippancy over the volume, it indicates a sort of ironic detachment in Stead which is definitely more pronounced than the detachment of the later more "realistic" works. The tale we are thinking of is a nameless one, the penultimate snippet served by the Centenarist. It is "a quaint ghost-story" (p. 488), the medical background for which provides a link, significantly, with the grimmest and least parodistic of the tales, "The Triskelion."

It opens with the words: "A physician, in a family of physicians, died and left his skeleton to his son" (p. 488). This skeleton, which is actually hidden away in a closet, quickly becomes deliberately "over symbolic" of that proverbial skeleton in the closet hidden away by other families in The Salzburg Tales, only to haunt later generations. In keeping with the structure of many of the other tales, the account of the irrepressible skeleton's passing from the physician's son to his grandson and thence to his great-grandson, is presented in a series of miniature tales, each one growing out of the one coming before it. Stead parodies this outlandishly by concluding the story with the leading words: "This nerve-specialist's son...." (p. 491) - and so

suggests another endless history. And in another parody, this time of the comments made by certain other Personages after the story of "The Triskelion," the Musician cries: "For the love of God ... is there no end to this frightful skeleton?" (p. 491).

There probably is no end to it in this work, according to Stead, but the pessimism is ultimately leavened by a wry humour, rather than weighed down by heavy melodramatics. This final touch to The Salzburg Tales also characterizes a much later work, The Rightangled Creek. The latter, a perhaps maturer version - if not always quite such an elegant one - of the key Salzburg stories, also shares their predominant thematic and stylistic qualities, and it is to a discussion of this work that we should now turn for an analysis of their fruition.



The Rightangled Creek

## Chapter Six

### THE RIGHTANGLED CREEK

Like The Salzburg Tales, Stead's novella The Rightangled Creek contains important internal narratives, a cyclical patterning of events, and a distinct intermingling of the relatively explicable with the obscure and inexplicable. It moves from (fairly detailed) psychological analysis to a mysterious point of reference outside the human mind which appears to subvert the explicability of reality suggested by the former. Thus we start out with a strong emphasis on the human and mentalistic; but by the time we are dealing with the last tenants of the haunted cottage Stead has almost completely dismissed a psychological rationale for the events of the narrative, and the characters fade into the background, overwhelmed by an active and apparently hostile supernature.

In our discussion of the volume of short stories we concentrated on the fantastic aspects of the work, but pointed out that a dimension of psychological and descriptive realism is an important facet of its overall scheme. The novella pays more attention to this realistic dimension, and for this reason we will need to examine it in some detail before shifting focus to place it in its larger perspective. Again, we are dealing with the concept of displacement. This is a crucial concept for an understanding of Stead's novella, operating as it does on various levels. For example, the writer uses "displacement" in a psychological context, and as a metaphor for certain of the occurrences in the physical world depicted in the story. It is also bound up with some of the narrative dislocations occurring throughout.

Since the novella is so complicated, though, a brief paraphrase of the story might preface the main body of the argument to help clarify the central action. The work opens with Sam Parsons visiting some friends, Laban Davies and his wife Ruth, who have rented a cottage in the backwoods of Pennsylvania. Laban, an alcoholic writer, is haunted by his past, and this not only in a figurative but also a literal sense; for one evening an intoxicated rabble of

former drinking companions comes crashing through the woods to "claim" him. He deteriorates mentally and eventually walks out on his family. His wife Ruth, who has meantime developed an obsession with a real or imagined phantom in the cottage attic, sets out to find her husband.

Sam Parsons and his wife Clare take over the cottage and a "new" tale commences. These tenants encounter inexplicable phenomena: knives, axes and hatchets are discovered in unlikely hiding places throughout the cottage; mysterious footsteps are heard at night; and one day an invisible force attempts to hurl Clare Parsons down the staircase. In yet another story-within-a-story, their estate manager Thornton reveals that a mad girl had once attempted to murder her parents in that very cottage, and now possesses the place in spirit whilst living out her remaining earthly years in a lunatic asylum. As time passes the natural world about the cottage seems to become more and more animate; it encroaches on the cottage gradually, taking it over in all manner of subtle and barely noticeable ways. Then a weird phantasmagoric storm one night breaks over the area, causing the rightangled creek to overflow and flood the house. The Parsons are forced temporarily to abandon their dwelling.

Prospective new tenants of the cottage, Bill and Joyce Jermyn, commission two brothers to widen the creek so as to prevent future flooding. Their plan is foiled when one of the brothers dies horribly after rolling about in the poison ivy that covers the banks of the creek. The Parsons move in again, but leave shortly afterwards when Clare meets with an accident. The story concludes with the estate agent declining to determine the future of the cottage whilst the lunatic girl is still alive, although it is implied that his own daughter will inherit it when she marries.

This paraphrase perhaps makes The Rightangled Creek seem sensational, slightly trumpery, even silly. But it is not really so. The novella is one of Stead's most restrained works, sombre and often grim, allusive rather than explicit, unwinding at a leisurely, unhurried pace. Only near the end does Stead permit a strange black humour, or grotesque comic exaggeration, to subvert the serious mood; but as with The Salzburg Tales we will discuss this towards the close of

the chapter. For the moment let us say that it is probably misleading to make too definite generalizations about the novella's overall tone, because its subtle alterations of mood and emphasis readily lend themselves to distortion when we attempt to contain the whole in a single impressionistic statement. Perhaps Dale Edmonds makes this error when he suggests that the work's atmosphere "is such as might have resulted if William Blake had served as rewrite man for Ann Radcliffe's novels."<sup>1</sup> Edmonds rightly praises the novella, but it is probably better to approach a work like this one with stealth and close reasoning, and avoid the determined catch-all pounce.

It is a vital aspect of Stead's skilful integration of theme and style that The Rightangled Creek initially appears to be a patchwork quilt of separate stories, loosely stitched together. But the elements of the tale are ultimately, to quote the Shaw Neilson poem, "on the one string,"<sup>2</sup> despite the apparent, indeed as we hope to make clear, thematically necessary fragmentation on the surface. What of the apparent fragmentation then? On a first reading of the novella it is likely that many readers will want to know to what purpose is the self-contained first half of the story, with its careful delineation of character psychology and build-up of event, if it seems to lead nowhere, indeed stops altogether just as the narrative appears to be underway? And the next question might run as follows: what is its relation to the last half of the story with its looser structure, internal narratives, and vexing mixture of ghosts, madness, and the world of nature? (This division of the story into two imagined parts is in the final analysis crude, since we must show that the first "half" is not as self-contained as it might initially appear to be; but for the moment it is a useful abstraction, affording us a legitimate foothold on the overall pattern of the work.)

Given the nature of the work some would want to say that Stead dispenses with characters at vital moments and fragments the narrative at every opportunity in order to permit The Rightangled Creek to dwell self-reflexively upon the structures of its own fictionality; and this would serve the useful purpose of frustrating our naive expectations as to plot

and character development. But this hackneyed, though fashionable proposition invariably sounds more impressive than it actually is. Those literary works whose structure and content at first make them difficult to comprehend as an intelligible whole have not been idly waiting about for the advent of, say, deconstruction, to be "put in their place." Contrary to widespread belief, deconstruction has not been hovering above us for all eternity like a metaphysical sword, waiting to be seized by a handful of brave debunkers now suitably evolved to sally forth and destroy all our mistaken illusions about order and meaning. (The mysterious process by which one "recognizes," despite the wayward teachings of one's past, that deconstruction is not for an age but for all eternity, that one knew it was right all along and was merely waiting for the theory to be made flesh, suggests that its advocates are not just deconstructionists, but born again ones.) Of course that is the sort of thrilling romanticism a lot of critics currently indulge in because it looks tough-minded and "real." And admittedly it is rather thrilling to imagine oneself in a meaningless void, or part of a mere chain of "signifiers," because one can then legitimately pretend to have given up all the false illusions one once had, and subsequently prove that yes, it is possible to live by bread crusts alone: that, after all, is a more tough-minded and "real" thing to be doing. But this self-deposed-king-in-self-imposed-exile fantasy simply will not do for anything but the printed page, where it is sanitized and given its own order and intelligibility. When you have really fallen apart at the seams you are hardly in a position to theorize logically about it; in fact the desire to do so will normally not be present.

The Rightangled Creek does not fall apart at the seams either. It is simply difficult. It is also a fiction, but we do not wish to labour the obvious.<sup>3</sup> The sense of a random patchwork quality which may be our first impression necessarily conceals, as we have suggested, the ordering of the ellipsis and division that initially appear to dominate the novella. Evidence of concealed and subtle planning on the level of plot alone is readily forthcoming. For example, there are one or two obliquely meaningful statements woven into the

deceptively casual opening of the first half of the tale which, in retrospect, can be seen as preparing us for some later disclosures. When Sam Parsons arrives and mentions that his wife will soon follow, because he prefers not to leave her behind whilst travelling, Ruth Davies comments, "Some do, but you wouldn't,"<sup>4</sup> a statement we appreciate the full weight of when we learn of Laban's desertion of her in the past. Similarly, Laban's curious greeting of Sam hints at something darker than the immediately ensuing events of the tale would suggest: "I couldn't think who Sam was! I'm working and not to be disturbed. Company's not good for me. I mean some company; the sort we're likely to get" (p. 106).

Also it will be noted before proceeding further that there are, conversely, some things in this part of the novella which, touched on briefly and appearing to be largely irrelevant to the drama of the Davies, re-emerge and develop in the second half of the tale. We keep in mind for later reference the opening's emphasis on the peculiar geography of the tale's location, the early off-hand mention of irregular footsteps heard moving about the cottage "though there was no one there" (p. 106), and the odd statement suddenly made by Ruth Davies, after her husband abandons her, that she senses the presence of a huge phantom residing in the cottage attic. There is also some crucial symbolism, most notably that of the early description of the cottage itself, which is "part stone, with stone cellar and attic, part wood with double porches and upper story" (p. 104); but we must first lay some important groundwork before examining the significance of this ever-present key symbol.

There are a number of curious parallels in The Rightangled Creek too, which compel us to take account of an overall order and coherence. One of the most subtle and easily overlooked of these concerns the mention, in the first half, of shouting voices and "singing like a thin musical saw" (p. 121) invading Laban's alcoholic nightmare; this suggests a premonition of the haunting which will take place when his noisy, drunken friends come to claim him. We note the strangely transformative reappearance of this "singing like a thin musical saw" in the second half. For Clare Parsons, perhaps detecting the ghost of the "Nevada man with the

gui-tar" (p. 143), begins constantly to hear "a singing or faint twanging ... like a brass spider twanging on its brass web" (pp. 136-7), a psychical haunting as distinct from the earlier psychological one, yet both sharing a similar detail. We realize too that like Sam Parsons the Nevada man also deserted his wife, years earlier. There are numerous other such parallels, of both the very subtle and more obvious varieties, some of which will be revealed in the course of the discussion.

In the first half of the tale Stead is mainly concerned with characters' attempted suppression of past events and the subsequent destructive unleashing of the reverberations of these events. Here characters' psychological displacements are related to structural dislocations in the story, these last the apparent source of the narrative's fragmentation. A telling structural dislocation occurs approximately midway through the story of the Davies family, just as an even more noticeable disjunction takes place later when, for example, the Davies fade out of the picture and the tale of the Parsons family commences.

The transition from the opening's comparatively low-key and conventional narrative and speech patterns to Laban Davies' barely interrupted monologues at midway point in the first half, signals the initial important break. Laban's operatic outpourings of words create a tale-within-a-tale, and support a dislocation of the reverberations of the writer's past from their suppressed source. Laban's self-revelatory monologues are provoked by a haunting from his past; a haunting in the form of a letter sent him by his alcoholic companions who, disquieted by the knowledge that he is attempting to sever his connections with former days, announce that they will soon be coming to claim "the best drunk in the U.S.A." (p. 115). To some extent the flood of words that constitutes Laban's monologues represents a release of key information, and despite appearances follows naturally from much of the preceding material, suggestive as it is of characters' subconscious displacements of earlier events. We should keep in mind this idea of "release" and "flooding" for later; it is central, like the symbolism of the divided cottage.

The earlier perspective on the causal factors underlying the Davies' experience of hardship and tension, aims at creating an atmosphere of anxiety and fear appearing to arise naturally from a highlighting of the economic, social and political tensions in the Delaware farming community. Therefore we are at first lead to suspect that we are reading a tale about such external tensions, and are perhaps taken aback by the psychological maelstrom which suddenly dislocates the narrative.

However the sociological problems that are roughly sketched at the start, although valid as independent phenomena, ultimately capture a sense of the characters' forced disregard for the root causes of the adversity pervading their lives. Tensions explored in Laban's monologues are, up to the point of their fresh release, siphoned off into these relatively minor concerns as the characters struggle to establish a meaningful and happy future for themselves. For instance, after outlining the political oppression of the Republican farmers' co-operative, and the apparent alienation this means for the Democrat Davies and their like, Stead tells us:

Ruth was preoccupied with these troubles ... brought up in a town, [she] was quite at home in all the cults and sects of any metropolitan society, and very uneasy here. Laban, bred in a farming community of the middle west was knowing and sarcastic about all his neighbors. Frankie learned all these opinions from his parents ... and the three of them, anxious and hungry, lived in a ferment of distrust (p. 110).

Similarly, a description of Ruth Davies' general uneasiness - "she was overworked, uneasy and cranky: she saw dangers all around them" (p. 109) - follows on from an account of her struggle to work inarable land and maintain the farm single-handedly, whilst Laban writes another book in an attempt to provide economic security for the family. But what remains unsaid in these sequences turns out to be of primary importance. For the emphasis on anxiety, danger and alienation, in retrospect already loaded with a sense



that other problems (necessarily displaced) lurk beneath the surface, provides the closest link with Laban's monologues. After receiving the letter Laban prefaces his first speech with the words: "I felt something impending ... I felt anxiety" (p. 115). But this anxious anticipation of something terrible, whilst partially associated with the writer's fear of again falling under the influence of his friends, has deeper psychological origins. Laban has been attempting to escape from something all his life, a strange existential despair, and his alcoholism is but one offshoot of this.

I hate digging; I'm an ex-farmboy. If I stop writing and do physical work, I become what I was, as a boy on the farm in Illinois, anxious, troubled, a sort of black sterile perpetual insomnia in the daytime. My mind is awake; the back of your mind which sleeps normally, wakes up in insomnia, is then awake all the time. There's anxiety and a sort of sinister grin too.... (p. 115)

Laban's monologues passionately unfold a history of personal despair and suffering, the unhappy consequences of which have been forced upon his wife, and possibly inherited by their boy Frankie. (This notion of inheritance, and its connection with Frankie, is bound up with the central themes of The Rightangled Creek; but again we must keep it in mind for later.) As we have seen in certain of our discussions of other works by Stead, the writer's use of monologue is often double-edged, serving at once as a character's conscious revelation of himself, and yet also as the author's revelation of things about which the character lacks a complete understanding. This mode of writing is well managed in The Rightangled Creek.

In the monologues we therefore have revealed both the alcoholic's deeply felt suffering and the unconscious contradictions upon which his experience of reality is founded. These contradictions are bound up with his divisions between past and future reality, the source of the vicious cycle he is caught in. This cycle, and its associations with a paradoxical view of time, will be seen as a psychological model for the supernatural forces which, later in the tale,

apparently cannibalize all the other models used for constructing reality within the work. The contradictions are also bound up with Laban's conflicting notions about the relative relationship between the self and society, as we shall see.

Laban's hopes for the future are linked with an attempted escape from the past and the self, and are thus, within the world of this novella, paradoxically one or self-negating. He explains to Sam: "I naturally believe in the future of men; and I believe in myself; and I have the youngster, I believe in him" (p. 119). And shortly afterwards: "I have got to believe in society, social destiny in our people. That gives me something to give Frankie" (p. 119). Laban's identification of a hopeful destiny and future with social and familial integration should be seen as a carry-over from his earlier significant statement: "I have the will power to live as a recluse in this green prison, but I know what I am missing. The life of cities. The mind is like a city; it isn't like a clod" (p. 116).

But we have the evidence from Ruth, and from Laban's own admissions about his past, and from the fact of the writer's willed isolation in the country, that social integration polarizes him to the opposite extreme, violates his sense of self and the attendant craving for individual power which can only be gained by disengaging the self from thoroughgoing social commitment. "Back in town he gets into that drinking set," says Ruth: "He wants to get his books done. He needs success: he needs fulfillment [sic]" (p. 114). More revealing, however, are Laban's own statements, which align his past alcoholism with a desire for a sharply defined sense of positive identity and fulfillment, disturbingly akin to the present and future objectives of his self-imposed isolation. For example, he says that he "felt obliged to drink because I soon became famous for it" (p. 122). His drinking gives him a sense of identity just as his writing does, gives him something with which to fill in the black despair that mysteriously awakens in the back of his brain as a boy, the aforementioned "black sterile perpetual insomnia" he speaks of.

It becomes apparent that there is a single vantage point

only from which Laban can view the past and future, his own position in or out of society, and the experiences of the present; and this is at once the vantage point and prison house of his unchanging nature, torn as it is by conflicting impulses. This counter-active dualism underlies the unconscious contradictions embedded in his monologues, and the double sense of his somehow being in control of himself by virtue of the intensity of his self-realizations and articulations, and yet held prisoner by the very paradoxes they uncover.

Therefore Laban craves freedom and a release of his energies, but also speaks of his need for externally imposed restraints, referring to his wife as his "blessed chains" (p. 116). It is the paradox of destroying the self to rise above the self, of imposing restraints to experience freedom. He talks of the other "dimension" provided by drink, the "joyrides you dream about as a child" (p. 118), and then says, "I loathe alcohol and I always did" (p. 118). His alcoholism allows him to rise above the petty reality which, as a young man, he feels is stifling him, for it gives him a sense of identity. And yet it also destroys him. It creates a future for him because it gives him "being," but when later he attempts to relegate his vice to the forgotten and impotent past, his "being" must go with it. Laban is - on the early terms of the novella - trapped within a system of reality where past and present are one, dissolved into the essence of being. He is free, from his paradoxical "vantage point," to speculate about the virtues of social integration, but only as an ideal disengaged from the binding reality of his own experience; he is free to conceive of future happiness and prosperity only when he locks himself into a vacuum which, in necessarily displacing - without eradicating - the past, also further displaces the ideals of futurity; he is free to revel in his own displays of will power, insofar as they are measurable against the restraints which permit them. And the harshest irony of all is in a sense the most obvious one; for Laban, in seeking to escape the terrors produced by his earlier escape from the country, returns to the isolation and intellectual stagnation of the backwoods which, he claims, gave rise to the need for escape in the first place.

This is where the tale's locale comes into the picture. Rodney Pybus writes of The Rightangled Creek that its "nodal point is an overgrown, lush paradise-garden, attractive in its profuse abundance of vegetation but minatory at the same time."<sup>5</sup> The beautiful and menacing descriptive passages are certainly important, as we will see a little later, but at least equally so is the symbol of the half-wooden half-stone cottage, a shadowy constant in the novella, and a key representation, though an effectively understated one, of some of its main tensions. With regard to the first half of the tale it is bound up with the time paradox we have touched on and Laban's meaningless ideals for the future; in a more general sense it is connected with a number of doomed alliances between families and their subsequent generations.

The association of the cottage with what turns out to be an uneasy and fearful linking of family generations is ever-present throughout The Rightangled Creek and is of considerable importance. In the first section we learn that the Davies hope to buy Dilley's place "to have a home in the country for their boy, Frankie" (p. 107), Laban constantly stressing to Sam Parsons, outsider and confidant, that "Frankie when the time comes will have all we can give him" (p. 110). In the tale of the Parsons, the new tenants learn from the estate manager Mr Thornton, that the mother of the girl who has been committed to a lunatic asylum "thinks the daughter will get better and she wants to keep this place on for her. She thinks the country will improve her" (p. 138). And finally we discover that Thornton himself has designs on the cottage for his own daughter, the gross and porcine Maureen, when she marries. (The grotesquerie of the emphasis on the sow-like and obese Thornton women has overtones of the repellent sub-story of the brothers and sister in "The Triskelion." And of course the theme of unhappy alliances between family generations is central to many of The Salzburg Tales as well.)

Stead's representations of "a double cottage Pennsylvania style" (p. 103) and the curious surrounding landscapes, are designed to go beyond the purely descriptive. She subtly draws attention in a number of ways to the larger significance

of Dilley's place, which as we remember is "part stone, with stone cellar and attic, part wood with double porches and upper story." For instance, we note that it is specifically the stone half of the cottage which is associated with the hauntings throughout (the initially obscure connection will be made clear presently), although again such a detail might easily be overlooked in a tale teeming with interlaced minutiae. The footsteps heard on the staircase at the beginning, when Ruth calls for Laban, come from the stone house; the phantom whose presence is sensed by Ruth Davies in the first half and felt more strongly by later tenants, resides in the stone attic and so on.

A clue to the larger symbolical significance of the cottage in The Rightangled Creek is given when Ruth Davies says: "A farmer builds himself a frame house and when the son grows up, he builds on a stone one for the young couple" (p. 106). Already we have noted the association of the cottage with a limbo betwixt possession and bequest. The more specific association of the stone cottage both with a haunting and with its projected ownership by second generation inhabitants is of central importance, for the two are symbolically linked. Laban Davies hermitically retreats to the country with his family in an attempt to provide enough money to buy and pass on the house to his son Frankie, the house representing, like the "good car" (p. 113) Ruth speaks of, the security and sense of achievement he needs and desires primarily for himself. But since, as we have seen in the examination of Laban's monologues, his hopes for the future and for his own son are motivated by, indeed bound up with, an attempted escape from the past and from himself, they can never be realized. All he can bequeath is the destructive essence of his own nature which, though caught in the flux of time and the changes associated with it, is in reality as petrified, unchangeable and ghost-ridden as the stone cottage to which the son of the father is also would-be heir. Like the two halves of the cottage, built at separate points in time yet forming an incongruous unity, the nightmares on one side inseparable from the reality of the whole, the two generations produce a fearful conjunction of past and future ills.

In the earlier part of The Rightangled Creek we notice that the parents' sense of general anxiety is also extended to their child, but once more they displace the real fears that govern their constant premonition of disaster, and it is not until Laban's outburst that we are given a straightforward acknowledgement of them. For example, they both frantically attribute their boy's idiosyncracies - his dreams about political enemies, his feverish sleeping, his oratorical outbursts - to his alleged genius. And they attach such significance to Frankie's future as a symbol of progress, "[s]atisfaction," and "release of energy" (p. 113), their own unattainable ideals, that their claims for him become neurotically exaggerated. "His future was a rather important fact in the future history of the country; he would possibly be President" (p. 113).

But we know, as the Davies fear, that Frankie is destined to grow up to be like his father. One scene in particular impresses this point on us, when the little boy recounts how he discourages a man from buying eggs in a certain shop. "Do you want to encourage Bundists, I asked him" (p. 111). The child's ideological projections on common reality are not simply a mimicking of his parents concerns. His own abnormally disproportionate response to experience shines through, even though he perhaps uses comments he has heard from his parents to help organize and articulate his feelings. Thus he starts off merely by telling the shop's proprietress that she has "no right to cheat the public" (p. 111), but then fantasizes about grandiose schemes; he speaks of printing propaganda against the Bundists, and even of driving them out of the Delaware region altogether. No wonder it is, then, that in one of his monologues Laban exclaims, "I'm afraid for Frankie: because of the father in his blood" (p. 119), a startling contrast with his pathetic hopes that one day his boy will be President of the United States.

To return to Laban and the symbolism of the cottage, it is not by chance that Stead positions his workroom, where he frantically scribbles his way to a projected future that promises to be no longer tied to the past, in the stone half of the house, twin symbol of futurity and regression. Nor is it an insignificant detail that Sam Parsons, after warding

off the drunken horde come to disrupt the Davies, finds the family huddled, not in the main living quarters, but in the stone house, "sitting hand in hand on the iron bedstead in Laban's workroom, silent, their thin stomachs tucked in, their thin forms only visible by the pale light from the summer fields" (pp. 125-6).

Shortly before Laban leaves his wife and child, and thus completes a recurrent and predetermined pattern of events, our sense of this all having happened before is reinforced by the subtlest return of the stone house motif, transposed to another place and time. Speaking of her husband, Ruth says to Sam: "He knew when he came over, that Frankie and I were starving in Europe, in a ruinous stone hut...." (p. 120). Even the ritual of exorcism seems a meaningless one in the world of this novella. The hopeless sense that knowing is not stopping, that confrontation is not prevention, is strongly evoked when, after the episode involving the drunkards, Sam asks Laban: "Have you had any more nightmares?" (p. 126). The latter replies: "Oh, that phase is ended. Seeing the gang last night brought it home to me" (p. 126). But after saying this Laban calmly dresses in his best suit and abandons his family. The confessional and releasing aspects of his monologues are similarly powerless to liberate him from the shackles of the self.

We have mentioned that a central concern of Stead's in The Rightangled Creek is the notion of displacement, and the subsequent release of tension. It was suggested that in the section of the tale dealing with the Davies, the attempt at displacing the past and the failure to do this, the flooding of the vacuum by an overflow of the self's accumulated store of past memories and core experiences, is imaginatively rendered on the level of style by the transition from an oblique and allusive mode of writing (which filters out vital information) to the ebullition of monologue. Exposition, our sense of which is deliberately heightened by the use of revelatory internal narrative, arises from the need to go beyond the phenomenological, to attempt to fathom, at least in Laban's case, the mystery of personality behind the façade of everyday reality.

But a larger mystery subsumes this one; the mystery of predetermination, which engages the self's relation to self-awareness and external reality in a game of cat-and-mouse, rendering the nodal points of perception of time and perception of change as meaningless as longitude and latitude readings for a map without place names. In this dimension displacement and release come to the same thing, creating their own endless cycles within pre-set barriers. Thus the problem is not simply in Laban's mind. In fact the psychological form given to the problems afflicting the Davies family turns out not to constitute a definitive focal point for the events of The Rightangled Creek, but is rather one of a number of metaphors designed to reveal imaginatively a deterministic reality; a reality presided over by inexplicable forces. These forces reveal themselves by degrees throughout the course of the novella, binding together its various elements.

This placing of the Davies story within a larger framework forms part of the reason why the narrative of The Rightangled Creek appears to break off shortly after Laban's departure. At the beginning we referred to Stead's skilful integration of theme and style, the source of the work's unity; and already we have considered the thematic and stylistic applications of the abstract notions of displacement and release to some of the elements that comprise the first section of the novella. The association of displacement with the attempted but unrealized breaking away from the past informs the larger structural movement of the tale as well. For the novella's structural dislocations, which give us a series of seemingly separate narratives, at first appear to undercut the work's own linear history, until we realize that its events are caught up in a cyclical, predetermined reality that permits no escape from its set of basic, unchanging implications. We will return to this after we have said a few things about the extra-psychological aspects of the even more obviously mentalistic phenomena explored throughout The Rightangled Creek; for if we lose sight of these we cannot grasp the curious nature of the predetermined reality depicted.

In the second half of the novella Stead makes explicit



a metaphor which describes the phenomenon of displacement in the physical world. This is the metaphor of the overflowing creek. Like the symbol of the divided cottage, with which it is associated, it is really present in the tale from the start, except that we are unlikely to see its overriding significance until we are able to envisage the novella as a whole; that is, until we possess, as we do by the end of the story, all the revelations necessary for conceiving of Stead's broader scheme. The relationship between this metaphor and the metaphor of psychological displacement is an enigmatic, poetical one, a fundamental source of the tale's sense of mystery, and hard to analyse.

The creek's peculiarity is that its volume is displaced unnaturally by a panhandle, so that after storm rains it swells, overflows, and releases its volume across Dilley's place, the cellar of the stone house serving as a freak catchment for the overflow. "That house down there is always the same, winter it's waterbound" (p. 150), observes Thornton; and our sense that it will always remain caught in this unchanging rhythm is reinforced when the plan to alter the course of the creek must be abandoned because of the poison ivy that protects its banks.

The unusualness of the metaphor, its remoteness from the human sphere, is by virtue of this peculiarly apt, for it corresponds to the sense of obscurity which, of necessity, we feel surrounds the source of the human rhythms it imaginatively parallels. Just as Laban's past comes flooding back into his own and his family's existence, symbolically associated with the stony, ghost-ridden part of the house, so does the water released from the creek perpetually flood the stone cellar, caught in an endless natural cycle. The psychological patterning is reflected in the physical world, for all is ultimately seen in this novella as part of a single, excessive, albeit natural or unavoidable flux. More bizarrely, the releasing aspects of Laban's monologues are concerned with his constant raving about drink; his passion for alcohol, displaced for so long, overwhelms him and compels him on his cyclical, self-destructive behavioural patterns. A destructive craving for drink and the destructive excess water from the creek each seems to become a metaphor for

the other in Stead's story; each is associated with some form of displacement and release, and as we said, the poetical relationship between these is a significant source of the tale's mystery.

For example, Laban tells Sam how some "sex crazy youngsters" (p. 117) one day invade the Davies' kitchen and begin pouring water down their throats. The Strasser boys, hostile because their "dry rock farm" (p. 117) is deprived of water and because the Davies produce an overabundance of it, travel into town every Saturday night to get drunk. Laban himself of course raves about his "hopeful and hopeless passionate desire" (p. 120) for alcohol, and tells a story about a country druggist who "loved to destroy others" (p. 122) by supplying them with lethal homemade whisky during the prohibition. And the drunkards who visit Laban are frustrated in their attempts to get to the house by the creek itself, a suffusive watery barrier.

In the second half (and here we must prefigure incidents that will be developed at greater length presently) the indulgent Clare Parsons, craving her union with nature, imagines that the reality about her "was a lake, a deep pool of animals, a deep pool filled to the top with air and in it animals, not fish" (p. 134); this beautiful and unsettling image returns later in a more literal form when the creek rises and fills the airy hollow to the top with water so that the Parsons must leave. One of the haunters of the stone house is also specifically connected with water images, moving "with the strength of water being glass, without shape and ready to pour through...." (p. 146). And at the end, Clare Parsons has an accident by slipping in a pool of excess water, and Stead shows with the low-key but slightly grotesque humour we mentioned earlier, how she gets drunk whilst waiting for the habitually inebriated doctor to arrive and perform his drunken operation.

This obsessively recurrent water and drink imagery serves as a mysterious rendering of the rhythms and patterns of the personal and impersonal impulses that govern The Rightangled Creek. It creates a cumulative sense of flux and saturation, the dynamism of which is conceptually opposed to the stasis or timelessness of the house symbol in and

about which these forces are locked in essentially unchanging, or predetermined, counteractivity.

With these abstract notions in mind, which reveal the work to have an overall shape, if largely a poetical one that is difficult to re-state in critical terms, we may again take up the main thread of the argument. It has been necessary to combine a linear discussion of the tale's events with retrospective analysis; without partially grasping the more explicitly supernatural revelations of the second half we cannot envisage the novella as a whole, but unless we also proceed by examining the work in successive stages we cannot come to terms with why it must at first appear so fragmented.

One of the most significant things about the novella's second half (now using this division for pure convenience only) is the way the narrative progression into the future is, as in the story of the Davies, counterbalanced by reference to the past. Once more the past erupts into the present, most notably in a lengthy monologue delivered by Thornton. This monologue describes the events leading up to Hilda Dilley's committal to a lunatic asylum, and balances Laban's monologues in the first half; this is another of those curious symmetries we outlined some while back. Much of what we are told, describing events which occurred not only before the Parsons take over the cottage, but before the Davies do, becomes enmeshed in a tangle of associated images - for example, the aforementioned detail of the musical "sawing" or "twanging" - which is designed to frustrate the reader's own attempted disentanglement of past, present and future.

The similarities between the tale of the Davies and the tale of Hilda Dilley are striking, revealing mysterious patterns in human motivation and experience the consequences of which create a sense of the impossibility of breaking out of the larger cycles to which these belong. Hilda's imaginative escape from the reality of her own unfortunate condition is less rationally grasped than Laban's. After all, the writer is able to proclaim: "There's no imagination in the bottle that you didn't put there" (p. 121). But Hilda's "escape" still constitutes an example of an evasion

which turns back upon itself, trapping the escapee and making mock of the self's attempt to stand outside the reality which governs it.

Hilda's imaginative projection of herself into the persona of a legendary Indian princess, after watching a local production of a play about Pocahontas and Captain John Smith, binds her to more than the glamorous and romantic aspects of the legend. In a perverse variation on the romance Stead reveals how the prosaic Thornton, a far-from-dashing John Smith, rescues Mrs Dilley from certain death only moments before Hilda-Pocahontas is to cleave her with an axe.<sup>6</sup> For the acknowledgement of Hilda's dilemma necessitates a dissolution of her romanticism, and Stead effects this, not by ironically distancing us from it, but by juggling its elements so as to reveal, through grotesque counterpoint, its inherent warping of the truth.

The theme of inheritance is important too; the Nevada man passes on a disease to Hilda, who in turn passes it on to her baby, who dies as a consequence. Hilda's parents, as mentioned earlier, buy the cottage in anticipation of a fruitful continuation of the family line, and even in their despairing knowledge of the futility of this, cling to the hope that one day their hopes will be fulfilled, just as the Davies do. And, interestingly enough, just as Thornton refers to Laban Davies as "a sick man" (p. 139), so he describes not only Hilda Dilley but her mother also (p. 138). It is therefore entirely possible that Stead intends us to detect an echo of the unhappy bond between Laban Davies and his son Frankie in the relationship between Mrs Dilley and Hilda, although it is not made clear that the nature of the mother's disease is identifiable with that of her daughter.

It is clear, though, that Hilda's act of violence against her parents (she tries to kill her father also) is motivated by a sense of frustration and revenge. Thornton reveals: "[s]he told me she was a-killin' her mother because her mother did things to her" (p. 141). Hilda's is a last frantic attempt to retaliate against the forces operating on her life from without, before she is reduced, in Thornton's words, to the condition of "a sick animal or a baby, worse"

(p. 139). These last words provide a definite echo of Laban's description of his own condition when, after experiencing through drink the violent expansion of his human will, he simply becomes a "helpless imitation of a human being, unable to use his tongue or his legs, crawling about the floor like a child of two" (p. 118).

Thornton's monologue is essentially a story-within-a-story which, like many of the internal narratives of The Salzburg Tales, mimics the deterministic pattern of events described in the more general movement of the work. It dislocates our sense of narrative development because it at first looks like a "separate" tale, and yet provides a key to our understanding of the impulses behind the dislocative process. That is, it reveals to us an attempt to displace the events of the past, but simultaneously shows the impossibility of this in a world where past, present and future are imagined to be one. Thus one story becomes a metaphor for another story; just as their own metaphors for the psychological and physical are enigmatic mirror images each of the other, binding the stories together with their shared symbols of cottage and creek.

Importantly, the personages in Thornton's tale are lent a remote, almost legendary quality, like the figures of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas, with whom they are imaginatively bound up. This prepares us for their association with the ghostly happenings in the cottage, and signals the movement away from detailed psychological analysis (as found in the story of the Davies) and the progression towards the mysterious and symbolic - a progression we emphasized at the beginning of the chapter. Of course we can only speak in terms of "movement" or "progression" or even "balance" by regarding The Rightangled Creek in linear fashion, and we have already shown that this conception needs some readjustment when we grasp the larger, cyclical pattern of the tale and its vision of predestination. Stead anticipates this need for reorientation, and so in the latter part of the novella the "history" of the Davies is divested of its explanation-through-psychological-analysis aura when one of the minor characters, Mrs Thornton, makes a brief summary of the unhappy events the cottage has

witnessed; the Davies are now diminished as characters, merely part of a chain of almost legendary figures the sum of whose experiences is greater and less explicable than any analysis of the parts.

The berry farm failed. I knew it would. One of them got sick; and then the Dilleys had their daughter get sick with the lung-sickness, that's the damp; and then the Davies came. You could see right through that boy when he came and the father's a very weak-looking man.... (pp. 150-1)

So far we have examined some of the relationships between Thornton's story and the events of the first half of the story. Now we should consider its position in the second half, with its pronounced emphasis on the supernatural, and the effect of this on the later tenants. Sam and Clare Parsons are not important as characters in the sense that we first imagined the Davies to be; they are overwhelmed by the descriptions of the strange world around them, but even so we have more sense of their presence than we do of the final visitors, Bill and Joyce Jermyn.

In the section that focuses on the Parsons Stead works an interesting variation on the more general theme of characters' attempted escape from themselves and the past. R.G. Geering points out that Clare's "love of nature and solitude is itself an obscure form of self-indulgence,"<sup>7</sup> and this is well-observed since her impulse at first appears to be one of self-dissipation. In a bizarre counterpoint to Laban Davies' claim that the "mind is like a city; it isn't like a clod" (p. 116), we are shown Clare attempting to dissolve herself into the environment around her. For example, she performs absurdly literal-minded acts such as laying herself down "naked in the center of the weed patch" (p. 144), and makes it known that she "always wanted to live in the zoo" (p. 144). But the counter-active dualism we spoke of earlier, at first apparent in human nature, eventually extends to a conflict between physical nature and human nature; the two are bound together, but caught in a supernatural flux of excess which is ultimately destructive and disharmonious. Thus the slightly ridiculous figure of Clare forces an impossible harmonious union between herself and "otherness"

and finds herself rejected by all the forces, both natural and supernatural, alien to her humanness. We observe that the world of The Rightangled Creek, insofar as it is interested in human psychology, reveals the mind to be neither like a city nor a clod, but something which shows a portion of its own imprisoning limitations by even conceiving of reality in such terms.

Clare Parson's unconsciously motivated attempts to escape from the self into the "deep pool" of surrounding nature are not so much bound up with her own past, as is the case with the Davies, but with the reality of the past as a generalized force existing outside the human sphere; the significance of this generalized force, the supernatural, she repeatedly overlooks, since her eagerness to become one with the reality about her necessitates an ability not to acknowledge certain features of it, or else to distort their nature. There is an element of black comedy in Stead's recording of Clare's nervousness, for instance, when confronted with the haunting by knives and axes, and her subsequent haste in displacing her unease and viewing all "grisly fancies" as "an unrecognized part of nature, like the faint sound of a spider scuttling under leaves, or a cat's footfalls" (p. 133), something to accept and even indulge. Similarly, even when genuinely frightened by the force which tries to push her down the stairs one day, and after her husband relates to her the story of Hilda Dilley and the hold the unhappy past has over the house, she says: "The house has accumulated a great ousting power. But how can it oust me? I am for it, I am for all here" (p. 145).

Incidentally, if we are sensitive to the novella's linking of Indian leitmotifs, then the strange haunting by knives and hatchets must be associated with the spirit of Hilda-Pocahontas. But logically it has a larger metaphysical significance, a clue for which is given in the words: "It looked as if everyone who had used the house had come fully equipped with knives" (pp. 132-3). The weapons - for that is the sense in which we are made to perceive these items - are a symbol of the ever-present threat to body, mind and nature found in the entire range of events depicted in The Rightangled Creek, not just those

generated by Hilda.

Just as the Davies are largely victims of Ibsenite ghosts, those ineradicable shades of a personal past, so are the Parsons victims of more impersonal ghosts, these nevertheless often assuming a persona - that of Hilda Dilley. Both represent a reality which in the world of the novella cannot be ignored, and yet it is constantly ignored. This is made all the more remarkable by the fact that, unlike those works by Stead where the presence of extra-human forces is less distinctly felt, the characters of The Rightangled Creek hardly ever indulge in metaphysical speculation. The closest they come to doing so is but a hovering on the periphery of superstitious poetry and fairy-tales. For example, when faced with intimations of the unearthly and awesome storm which breaks over the Delaware, Clare Parsons is simply reminded of Longfellow's "The Ballad of Carmilhan"; Bill Jermyn's observations about the beacon of light that constantly signals misfortune at Dilley's place (like the triskelion in the earlier horror tale) leads him to the conclusion that it is all as in "the musicians of Bremen" (p. 154); and so forth. Characters' constant displacement of the forces which govern their lives in this story causes these last to build up to a great point of release, so that as with the rightangled creek there is eventually a destructive overflow.

But this surely ties up the novella far too neatly. As the work is not so much a detective story as a tale of the mysterious, there is something glib about treating it as a jigsaw puzzle the parts of which simply need to be reassembled by the critic to make sense. Earlier we emphasized the enigmatic quality of the symbolism which binds together the elements of the tale, and it is this we want to take up again before finishing with the last part of The Rightangled Creek. For the "progression" from the mentalistic to the mysterious and supernatural necessitates our letting the former fade into the background, as it does in the novella; and once this is achieved we are logically left on territory the terrain of which we are unfamiliar with.

Thus the last visitors to the cottage, Bill and Joyce Jermyn, serve the useful function of conspicuously turning



us away from the sort of psychologizing that can still even partially be applied to the Parsons, particularly the character of Clare. Although only present for a few pages near the end of the story, the Jermyns' early dialogue revolves around their own psychoanalytical and physical "explanations" for the astonishing history of the cottage. By making these explicit, Stead reveals that they simply will not do, especially in the light of later events. Therefore Bill sees the "imaginary man in the attic" (p. 153) as a psychological personification of "the dark bushy hairy hill" (p. 153) which overlooks the cottage; the strumming and singing sounds are attributed to "an old vine somewhere, some nails" (p. 155); and so on. But when his wife sees a phantom wolf prowling about Dilley's place the tide of their opinion turns.

"You always claim that you're not superstitious," said Bill Jermyn. "I am not. These are facts. I can believe what I see. I said wolf and a wolf came," grumbled Joyce (p. 157).

There is something almost dismissive about Stead's dealings with the Jermyns, as there is with her account of the Imber brothers, one of whom dares to defy the creek and its barrier of poison ivy, and dies in agony as a consequence. Driven to their own multifarious excesses by forces beyond human control, the characters are ultimately diminished by the larger supernature which also acts upon the physical world around them. What we are left with is a strong sense of the cottage itself, governed by the "faceless haunter of the stone house" (p. 146), and the creek which rises and subsides in relentless destructive rhythm, its excess water promoting a stifling over-abundance of fertility in the natural world about it.

And just as the cottage - or rather its stone half - is associated with both the futile attempts in the human world to break with the past, and with ghostly forces acting independent of anything obviously human, so too does the creek have human and non-human associations. On the one hand it seems a symbol of autonomous and destructive rhythms in the natural world, but on the other has definite links

with the humans' mania for drink and liquidity. These obscure parallels, engaged in deterministic cycles of generation and degeneration, cannot be explained in the terms of Stead's novella, and as we said before, our sense is of a mysterious dialectic larger than any analysis of the tale's parts, skilfully dovetailed as these are finally seen to be.

However, one is left a little dissatisfied by the work all the same. This is possibly because there is a sense of a gap between what The Rightangled Creek sets out to say about the nature of an enigmatic reality, and the way in which its implications are realized; a sense that its inner poetry is not deeply felt enough to be saying anything terribly profound, despite the complexity. Of course we admire the way in which Stead has conceived of the work overall, so that it confronts its own broader structure of apparent rift and fragmentation on a level of meaning where a dense foliage of associated images, symbols, themes, and a patterning of recurrent internal structures, coalesce<sup>s</sup> to produce a coherent piece. But the poetical level is not quite deep enough to touch us powerfully. The complexity of organization and the unfolding of strange events do invariably fascinate, but one perhaps feels a little cheated by ingenuity that inspires one to theorize about that which is, ultimately, merely fanciful. "Ghost stories" by serious writers, no less than the more popular and sensational examples of the genre, will almost invariably disappoint lovers of metaphysics; and once more that last category of readers will probably want to turn back to works like Hamlet and Crime and Punishment which, albeit more covertly, really deal with the issues and questions.

But perhaps we are expecting too much from a work which never set out to conquer acres of spiritual meaning in the first place. After all, the seriousness and solemnity of tone in The Rightangled Creek are, as we have intimated, slightly undercut by an element of burlesque near the end, as with the Centenarist's story of the closet skeleton at the conclusion to The Salzburg Tales. Again this perhaps signifies an ironic detachment in Stead which is more determined than the usual "objectivity" we have spoken of in other chapters. That is, we sense that she may not be

wishing to commit herself seriously to the implications of such a deterministic account of reality - and one couched in supernatural terms at that. Exaggeration thus subverts intelligibility, and black humour briefly overrides the menacing tone. We are thinking of the sequence at the end when Clare Parsons slips in the puddle of water and breaks her arm. The water and drink imagery, associated as it is with human and non-human excess, is taken to somewhat ridiculous extremes as Clare gets drunk whilst waiting for the doctor to arrive; and to cap it all, when the latter appears at the scene of the accident he too, we discover, is hopelessly drunk.

We should not exaggerate these few foregoing points, though. The Rightangled Creek may hardly "conquer acres of spiritual meaning," and from a purist's viewpoint may possess a merely fanciful metaphysic; but this does not mean that it is totally lacking in seriousness and interest. The impulse behind the work is, as we have remarked elsewhere, a poetical one; it does not mechanically plant "clues" but rather relies on complex, unforced relationships between its images, symbols and structures to create its sense of unity and meaning. But herein lies the source of the work's inadequacy too. In his brilliant discussion of Othello G. Wilson-Knight speaks of the "limit of the series of wider and wider suggestions which appear from imaginative contemplation of a poetic symbol."<sup>8</sup> In certain great works that limit may be far-reaching and yet never seem far away from the work itself, because the work will embrace much; as does, for instance, The Man Who Loved Children. In other lesser works, however, the limit of the series of wider and wider implications can finally appear remote from the imaginative source. This is perhaps the destiny of creations like The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek, where one necessarily ends up discussing an extravagant metaphysic that does not quite match, in terms of range, the limits of the original source. This is not to denigrate these works though, and it will be hoped that at least some of their relative merits have become apparent in these discussions, even if they fail to attain the status of the great novels analysed earlier in the thesis.

## Conclusion

In the Introduction we made the claim that our emphasis on the word "reality" throughout the thesis was not to serve as a vague, catch-all abstraction. We justified our use of it by pointing out that it is a term used frequently in Stead's books, with a variety of associations. No doubt the word is still a very broad conceptual tool, and Stead uses it as such, but it is certainly not her aim - as it has not been ours - to make it function as an immense fishing-net, capable by itself of dragging up all experience in a single haul. In Stead's works its true significance lies in the way it is applied to a variety of imaginative experiences conveyed through language. "Variety" is the key word here, and relevant to the foregoing consideration of Stead's imaginative range.

Thus briefly recapitulating, we have established as one of Stead's central aims her exploration of a variously graded or multiform reality, and have envisaged this as divisible into three main categories or sets of preoccupations. The first, represented by The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone, uncovers a reality dictated by a seat of power which is located inside human beings; and this may be termed the imagination, the ego, or to employ Don Anderson's useful phrase once more, the "Lawrentian dimension" of character. The next category, explored in discussions of Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Cotters' England, seems also to rely heavily on the conception of a controlling human ego, but imagines this conflicting with a number of forces; therefore the powerful human imagination, although still dominant, collides with an established socio-political reality and occasionally even with what looks like a supernatural one, and we are never absolutely certain to what extent one is responsible for another. The last category, comprised here of analyses of The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek, shows the tables turned on this human seat of power, although the presence of the latter is in places strongly felt. Ultimately, though, we are left with the sense of a non-human seat of power overriding all, inscrutable in aspect and often malign

in impulse.

In terms of Stead's entire oeuvre this framework for analysis is obviously not exhaustive. And on its own terms it is still not exhaustive, for reasons which although fairly self-evident are worth repeating whenever the occasion arises, to remind ourselves that a critical text is only a stand-in for the main performer. (Perhaps "only" is an exaggeration, but may redress an imbalance created by the new matador schools of criticism, which drag literary works into the arena merely to dispatch them in a blaze of theoretical glory.) Ideally, criticism sets out to lasso its subject, to close down as many avenues of further enquiry as possible, and to give the appearance of having explained fully the nature of the texts chosen for discussion. This is not a bad aim at all; it usually ensures a determined effort to grasp as many features of a text as possible, and to relate them in a fashion that will both look convincing and remain reasonably watertight. But of course this act can never contain the whole, although it necessarily gives the impression of wanting to. A given work of literature cannot be an isomorphism for all reality, and so a work of criticism cannot be an isomorphism for the complete literary text. Only the wildest neo-Platonic urges for an all-encompassing "scheme" (manifested most recently in the flashy theories of Derrida and his disciples) could lead one to expect otherwise. We do not say this in order to be dismissive or reductive; criticism is a useful tool, but it would be an even more useful one if it accepted this valuable role and stopped pretending that it can ever be the finished product.

This has implications for what we have been saying about Stead too. We have seen that the writer wants us to ask questions about reality, to examine the structures of our knowing and being, of our motivations and impulses; but she refuses to let this speculative dimension operate as a strait-jacket - something which "explains" or "contains" the whole. Whether in a novel or elsewhere, philosophical musing about the nature of experience can succeed merely in putting experience into a deep freeze; at some point or other the true artist shows us that experience is self-affirming,

and that self-affirmation is not contained in theory. Shakespeare solves this problem in Hamlet with an unrivalled brilliance; "the pale cast of thought"<sup>1</sup> settles over the play like fall-out after a dreadful atomic blast, and although it is designed to contaminate prince and spectator alike in pushing speculation to the furthest paralyzing limits, it is ultimately in the service of the "blast" itself, that curious explosion of "experiential" conjecture so intensely re-created by Shakespeare, and for which there is no outer shell of ideology or philosophy that might contain it. (Such is the work's unremitting equation of speculation with the intense experience of needing to know things - a need for which no complete explanation can be given - that it is easy to see why for many even Hamlet's nihilism throws back echoes of religious intimations.)

In her own less ambitious but still admirable way Stead also combines ontology with the sheer, unencumbered re-creation of experiences. On the one hand the body of her work has an open, speculative aspect, as we have established. We feel compelled to start moving in on the writer's issues from their outermost perimeters of enquiry, to ask questions about characters' construction of reality (as with The Man Who Loved Children), or about the origins of a personage's ferocious malevolence (as with Cotters' England), or even about the ontology of narrative (as with The Salzburg Tales). It is in the nature of Stead's works that these broad questions should point us in the direction of the abstract, and very occasionally even the unknowable. The unspecifiable origins of Nellie's and Tom's behaviour in Cotters' England are essential to the larger concerns of that book. The inchoate stirrings of threatening supernatural forces in The Rightangled Creek reorientate our perception of the psychological realities in that story, as do the apparent larger forces behind Michael's "obscure melancholia"<sup>2</sup> in Seven Poor Men of Sydney. We cannot judge the exact dimensions of Teresa's "extraordinary clutching of reality" in For Love Alone, and yet we cannot dismiss it out of hand without losing our most important yardstick for measuring the important differences between this character and the book's other central figures. Similarly in The Man Who Loved Children we are made to wonder if Louie's implicit

arguing from facts to values, when she establishes the actuality of her parents' harmfulness and decides to kill them for it, operates in a "moral vacuum" or not.

On the other hand Stead balances the forward-looking, speculative aspect of her writing with sweeping appraisals of the real world. In particular her ability to present characters "in the round," placing them in settings created from innumerable, realistically observed details, provides her works with a ballast, a basis of stability. The details, firstly, give Stead's books an authenticity we rarely want to argue with; except, perhaps, in the case of The Beauties and Furies, where they are absorbed into the narrative's psychedelic mainstream and lose their reality - the result is a lurid, mystical extravaganza, excessive after a fashion reminiscent of Ken Russell's films.<sup>3</sup> But the characterization is the main thing. Our character analyses of Sam Pollitt, Henny, Louie, Jonathan Crow, Teresa Hawkins, Michael Baguenault and Nellie Cotter testify to this. Stead possesses the genius to let her characters live in our minds independent of the abstract "parts" analysis we may feel encouraged to pursue. Of course frequently this analysis takes us where Stead wants us to go - into realms of important speculation and valid theorizing - and that is why throughout the thesis we have paid considerable attention to the writer's concern with ideas, a perhaps undervalued, even overlooked, dimension of her achievement. But she also wants us to adhere to the reality of character, to recognize - after we perceive it holistically - that character contains a great deal of this abstractness and complexity, as we stated at the end of our discussion of Seven Poor Men of Sydney. This last point may not apply so much to The Salzburg Tales and The Rightangled Creek - hence our need also to go beyond character at times - but it certainly applies generally to the other works discussed in the thesis, and also to most of the remaining works in the Stead canon.

In an interview with Jonah Raskin the author herself supports this with her much quoted words: "I'm a psychological writer, and my drama is the drama of the person."<sup>4</sup> But in the same interview she also maintains that a novel is "philosophic,"<sup>5</sup> and whilst this is not a startling

observation it serves to reveal Stead's awareness that "psychology" should not be thought of as one of those magical, all-encompassing schemes we warned of a while back, whether on the terms of her own creations or in real life. Stead is too creative to tie her work down to a single ideology, but also too rigorous to make this an excuse for random eclecticism. We have shown that her scope is a large one, but its imaginative components are invariably channelled through that singleness of vision, that essential core of artistic originality, which we felt so compelled to stress at the beginning. If she belongs to any literary genre at all then it is to that of the writer who wants to be original, wants to be truthful, and wants still to be speculative. That these might ultimately be false ideals we shall leave to the sceptics; nothing need intrude upon our wanting them in the meantime, and Christina Stead is one writer who has ensured that.



## Notes

### Introduction

- 1 M. Barnard Eldershaw, "Christina Stead," in Essays in Australian Fiction (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1938), p. 165.
- 2 H.M. Green, A History of Australian Literature, II, 1923-50 (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1961), p. 1070.
- 3 Douglas Stewart, "Glory and Catastrophe," in The Flesh and the Spirit (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1948), p. 235.
- 4 Terry Sturm, "Christina Stead's New Realism: The Man Who Loved Children and Cotters' England," in Cunning Exiles: Studies of Modern Prose Writers. Ed. Don Anderson and Stephen Knight (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974), p. 13.
- 5 H.M. Green, p. 1077.
- 6 Adrian Mitchell, "Fiction," in The Oxford History of Australian Literature. Ed. Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 133.
- 7 Don Anderson, "Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties," in Southerly, XXXIX, 1 (1979), p. 38.
- 8 Don Anderson, p. 38.
- 9 Adrian Mitchell here footnotes Sue Higgins' "For Love Alone: A Female Odyssey?" in Southerly, 4 (1978), p. 430.
- 10 Adrian Mitchell, pp. 137-8.
- 11 Adrian Mitchell, p. 134.
- 12 Mary Midgley, Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 86-7.
- 13 Nicomachean Ethics, Book I.3, ll. 23-5.

## Chapter One

- 1 Graham Burns, "The Moral Design of The Man Who Loved Children," in The Critical Review (Melbourne), XIV (1971), p. 38.
- 2 R.J. Scholfield, "The Man Who Loved Christina Stead," in The Bulletin, LXXXVII, 22 May (1965), p. 29. Scholfield gathers together some of the most favourable quotations: "Better than most of the novels people call great"; "There are few novels in English that are so large and beautifully written"; "somehow it changes the meaning of Washington and even of America, as if it were an historical happening"; and so on.
- 3 "The International Symposium on the Short Story," Christina Stead (England) in Kenyon Review, XXX, 4 (1968), p. 446.
- 4 Dorothy Green, "The Man Who Loved Children: Storm in a Tea-Cup," in The Australian Experience: Critical Essays on Australian Novels. Ed. W.S. Ransom (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974), p. 179.
- 5 Angela Carter, "Unhappy Families," in London Review of Books, IV, 17 (1982), p. 11.
- 6 Elizabeth Hardwick, "The Neglected Novels of Christina Stead," in A View of My Own (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 47.
- 7 Veronica Brady, "The Man Who Loved Children and the Body of the World," in Meanjin, XXXVII, 2 (1978), p. 229.
- 8 Veronica Brady, p. 230.
- 9 Laurie Clancy, Christina Stead's The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone (Melbourne: Shillington House, 1981), p. 9.
- 10 Christina Stead, The Man Who Loved Children (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966), pp. 432-3. All future quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition and the page references included in the text.

- 11 Adrian Mitchell, "Fiction," in The Oxford History of Australian Literature. Ed. Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 135-6.
- 12 Graham Burns, p. 49.
- 13 Hamlet, Act IV, sc.vii, ll. 167-175.
- 14 Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary. Translated by Paul de Man (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1965), p. 238.
- 15 Randall Jarrell, "An Unread Book," an Introduction to The Man Who Loved Children (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966), p. xi.
- 16 Randall Jarrell, p. xxiii.
- 17 Here we borrow the American title for Cotters' England. A brief mention of the alternative titles given this novel will be made towards the end of Chapter Four of the thesis.
- 18 Veronica Brady, p. 235.
- 19 In Dorothy Green's article (see note 4) it is pointed out that the phrase "storm in a tea-cup" is first associated with Henny, in the particular context of her domestic trials. But Green adds "that the image has a general as well as a particular relevance" (p. 184), and it is this we have chosen to dwell on here.
- 20 Graham Burns (see note 1) also feels there is a moral dilemma contained in this scene, and maintains that it is difficult "to feel other than ambiguously about Louie's decision to kill Henny and Sam for the sake of the children" (p. 60). Dorothy Green, however, mainly implicates Sam in her discussion of the novel's murder theme, and quite definitely links his attitudes with the realities of Nazism and Hitler's actions in World War II.

## Chapter Two

- 1 Christina Stead, For Love Alone (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1966), p. 37. All future quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition and the page references included in the text.
- 2 Laurie Clancy, Christina Stead's The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone (Melbourne: Shillington House, 1981), p. 24.
- 3 Michael Wilding, "Christina Stead's Australian Novels," in Southerly, XXVII, 1 (1967), p. 28.
- 4 R.G. Geering, Christina Stead (Australia: Angus and Robertson, 1979), p. 114.
- 5 Ian Reid, "'The Woman Problem' in Some Australian and New Zealand Novels," in Southern Review (Adelaide), VII, 3 (1974), p. 192.
- 6 Brian Kiernan, "Christina Stead: Seven Poor Men of Sydney and For Love Alone," in Images of Society and Nature: Seven Essays on Australian Novels (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 70.
- 7 R.G. Geering, p. 115.
- 8 D.R. Burns, The Directions of Australian Fiction 1920-1974 (Melbourne: Cassell Australia, 1975), p. 83.
- 9 Here we do not presume to make any comment on "Protestant religious law"; the statement is intended to be considered only as a rewording of Teresa's own position.
- 10 It may seem that we have rather abruptly let go of the sawmill sequence after acknowledging its importance. However, an analysis of its larger impact, within the context of the more low-key episodes surrounding it, would cause us to lose track of the main argument, which here focuses closely on Teresa's perceptions. In Chapter Four we will digress to discuss the significance of major "set pieces" in Stead, and a more detailed reference will be made to the sawmill scene in For Love Alone.

- 11 Brian Kiernan, p. 77.
- 12 R.G. Geering, p. 117.
- 13 Robin Wood, Hitchcock's Films (New York: Castle Books, 1969), p. 121.
- 14 H.E.G. Swanston, In Defence of Opera (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 12. This is not precisely the author's point but his paraphrase of opera producer Filippo Sanjust's view of the sequence.

## Chapter Three

- 1 R.G. Geering, "The Achievement of Christina Stead," in Southerly, XXII, 4 (1962), p. 209.
- 2 Rodney Pybus, "The Light and the Dark: the Novels of Christina Stead," in Stand (Newcastle-upon-Tyne), X, 1 (1969), p. 36.
- 3 Anthony Miller, "Seven Poor Men of Sydney," in Westerly, 2 (1968), p. 66.
- 4 Michael Wilding, "Christina Stead's Australian Novels," in Southerly, XXVII, 1 (1967), pp. 24-5.
- 5 Brian Kiernan, "Christina Stead: Seven Poor Men of Sydney and For Love Alone," in Images of Society and Nature: Seven Essays on Australian Novels (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 65. Kiernan's quotation from Wilding is taken from the above listed article (note 4), p. 24.
- 6 Christina Stead, Seven Poor Men of Sydney (Australia: Angus and Robertson, 1976), p. 273. All future quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition and the page references included in the text.
- 7 Epigraph to Howard's End.
- 8 R.G. Geering also makes this parallel point about Wuthering Heights in his book Christina Stead (Australia: Angus and Robertson, 1979), p. 41.
- 9 Tony Thomas, "Christina Stead: The Salzburg Tales, Seven Poor Men of Sydney," in Westerly, 4 (1970), pp. 50-52.
- 10 Tony Thomas, p. 47.
- 11 The Prelude (1850 text), Book 10, l. 521.
- 12 H.M. Green, A History of Australian Literature, II, 1923-50 (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1961), p. 1072.

## Chapter Four

- 1 Michael Wilding, "Cotters' England," in London Magazine, VII, 8 (1967), pp. 98-9.
- 2 Michael Wilding, p. 99.
- 3 Clement Semmler, "The Novels of Christina Stead," in The Literature of Australia. Ed. Geoffrey Dutton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 494.
- 4 Review in Time, September 23 (1966), p. 76. Author's name not given.
- 5 For example, see The Action or The Brighton Belle and Other Stories.
- 6 Christina Stead, Cotters' England (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967), p. 51. All future quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition and the page references included in the text.
- 7 Terry Sturm, "Christina Stead's New Realism: The Man Who Loved Children and Cotters' England," in Cunning Exiles: Studies of Modern Prose Writers. Ed. Don Anderson and Stephen Knight (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974), p. 26.
- 8 Judy Barbour, "Cotters' England," in Nation, November 4 (1967), p. 22. This review, although quite brief, is exceptionally incisive and makes a lot of useful points about Stead's style and characterization.
- 9 So do Joyce and Melville, to extend a point made in Chapter Two (see p. 60). Indeed Joyce himself self-consciously draws attention to this aspect of his writing. In Ulysses Simon Dedalus sings an aria from Martha and Joyce mimics its swelling, orgasmic effect with his own prose.
- 10 Terry Sturm, p. 33.
- 11 Terry Sturm, p. 32.
- 12 There are two additional points that need to be made about the details of this scene. The first concerns Tom's

"airman's suit," which is here worn by Nellie. Perhaps the character symbolically assumes her brother's role in this sequence also; thus she is at once an active agent of destruction, but also the passive observer of it, waiting in the wings to feed parasitically on the ensuing mayhem. The other point concerns the significance of the skylight. Later Nellie is to make her speech to Eliza about love, which we have already quoted from (see p. 138). We recall her words, "there's something wonderful and beautiful in the idea that we have an attic window only, open on the swamp of stars." The attic window through which she forces Caroline, and the ghastly "night-lighted" spectacle which is revealed, expose the satanic reality behind Nellie's romanticism.

13 Judy Barbour's phrase (see note 8).



## Chapter Five

- 1 Ian Reid, Introduction to The Salzburg Tales (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974), page unnumbered.
- 2 See Dahl's Switch Bitch and particularly the comic sequel My Uncle Oswald for their similarly fabulous rendering of actual locales and historical happenings.
- 3 Christina Stead, The Salzburg Tales (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974), p. 7. All future quotations from the work will be taken from this edition and the page references included in the text.
- 4 Later in the chapter we will be talking about the strange tension Stead creates between fantastic and realistic elements. Even in this passage we are given a realistic component. The mention of "war-worn stones" intrudes quite sharply into the more fanciful world created by the Foreign Correspondent's words.
- 5 H.M. Green, A History of Australian Literature, II, 1923-50 (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1961), p. 1070.
- 6 "The International Symposium on the Short Story," Christina Stead (England) in Kenyon Review, XXX, 4 (1968), p. 447.
- 7 Symposium, p. 449.
- 8 Whether one thinks this is a valid attitude or not, Stead cannot be accused of promoting the idea that "everything is a fiction." Although suggesting that there is a relationship between life and art (a belief the present writer would vigorously support) she ultimately holds "fiction" and "reality" as separate concepts. See note 3 of Chapter Six for further comment along these lines.
- 9 Clement Semmler, "The Salzburg Tales," in Australian Book Review, V (1966), p. 155.
- 10 Clement Semmler, p. 155.
- 11 H.M. Green, p. 1172.
- 12 Tony Thomas, "Christina Stead: The Salzburg Tales, Seven Poor Men of Sydney" in Westerly, 4 (1970), p. 46.

## Chapter Six

- 1 Dale Edmonds, "The Puzzleheaded Girl," in Studies in Short Fiction, VI (1968), p. 111.
- 2 Shaw Neilson, Selected Poems. Ed. A.R. Chisholm (Australia: Angus and Robertson, 1980), p. 274.
- 3 Indeed, why ever bother to make a point about art's "fictionality" unless to relate it to something other than fictionality? The conspicuous notion that works of literature are fictions is, as an isolated fact, surely to be pre-digested before a critic sets pen to paper. The fashionable claim that "everything is a fiction" tries to override this; thus any notion based on so-called pre-digestion of fact would be a fiction also. But this is really unintelligible and yet another of those popular "mystical" notions masquerading as a hard-nosed breakthrough in our conceptualizing of reality. How do we conceive of fictions without also grasping that some things are not fictions? In a hypothetical world in which everything was actually a fiction, no occasion could ever arise to make the point "everything is a fiction," since there would be nothing to measure "fiction" against. More importantly, the desire to speculate idly along these lines could never arise. Since this hypothetical world is not our world, however, it seems a waste of time to burden ourselves with vacuous abstractions that can hardly apply to our own situation.
- 4 Christina Stead, The Puzzleheaded Girl: Four Novellas (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 106. All future quotations from The Rightangled Creek will be taken from this edition of the novellas and the page references included in the text.
- 5 Rodney Pybus, "The Light and the Dark: the Novels of Christina Stead," in Stand (Newcastle-upon-Tyne), X, I (1969), p. 31.
- 6 Having arrived at the axing sequence it may strike some

that there are many extraordinary resemblances between the themes, even the style, of The Rightangled Creek and Stanley Kubrick's film The Shining, already mentioned in Chapter Four. The film deals brilliantly with an isolated group of individuals who seem to be victims both of themselves and of a deeply ambiguous haunting. More particularly, its portrayal of the alcoholic failed writer who mistreats his wife and little boy, and its linking of notions of predestination with recurrent acts of violence - invariably committed with a highly memorable axe - make for an interesting comparison. It is conceivable that in radically modifying Stephen King's hokum to accommodate his own graphic vision of human and inhuman predestination, Kubrick drew on Stead's serious novella. The film's strange nature imagery (particularly the unearthly God's eye shots of forests and creeks at the very beginning, accompanied by the Berlioz-like blasphemy of an ominously re-orchestrated Dies irae) and the numerous Indian motifs, are other reasonable pointers. After all, it is not out of character for this masterful director to draw upon and combine both lightweight and serious literary sources for his own unique cinematic ends; anyone who listens with care to the vocal soundtrack of Barry Lyndon, for instance, will recognize substantial passages of dialogue taken from Vanity Fair, cleverly adapted to different situations. And of course The Shining is riddled with explicit visual allusions to classical tragedy, although it is puzzling that the film's critics seem not to have noticed this. For example, how else do we take the stark inter-cuts of butchered children and of a dreamy ocean of blood overwhelming the Overlook's corridors, except as a powerful visual rendition of Cassandra's doom-laden speech about the House of Atreus in Aeschylus' Agamemnon?

- 7 R.G. Geering, Christina Stead (Australia: Angus and Robertson, 1979), p. 163.
- 8 G. Wilson-Knight, The Wheel of Fire (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 109.

## Conclusion

- 1 Hamlet, Act III, sc. i, l. 85.
- 2 This useful term is borrowed from Harold Pinter's film script for The French Lieutenant's Woman (1981: currently unavailable in printed form). Pinter, however, may have taken it from the John Fowles novel.
- 3 For an examination of the positive qualities of The Beauties and Furies see Laurie Clancy's fresh and stimulating article "Arabesques and Banknotes," in Australian Book Review, 42 (1982), pp. 10-14.
- 4 Jonah Raskin, "Christina Stead in Washington Square," in London Magazine, N.S. IX, 11 (1970), p. 75.
- 5 Jonah Raskin, p. 77.

## Bibliography

### A. Selected Writings of Christina Stead

[Only those works by Stead referred to at least once in the thesis are listed here. All first editions are given, and where relevant the edition used for quotations in the thesis is also included in brackets. For details of Stead's poetry, other short stories, articles, reviews, editions and translations, see the bibliographies compiled by R.G. Geering in Christina Stead (Australia: Angus and Robertson, 1979), pp. 193-8, and Rose Marie Beston in World Literature in English, 15, 1 (1976), pp. 96-103.]

#### Novels

Seven Poor Men of Sydney (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1976)  
London: Peter Davies, 1934; New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1935.

The Beauties and Furies London: Peter Davies, 1936; New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936.

House of All Nations New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938;  
London: Peter Davies, 1938.

The Man Who Loved Children (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966) New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940; London: Peter Davies, 1941.

For Love Alone (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1966) New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944; London: Peter Davies, 1945.

Letty Fox - Her Luck New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946;  
London: Peter Davies, 1947.

A Little Tea, A Little Chat New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948.

The People With the Dogs Boston: Little, Brown, 1952.

Cotters' England (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967)  
Published in America as Dark Places of the Heart. First edition: New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

The Little Hotel London, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973;  
New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975.

Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife) New York: Random House, 1976.

### Collected Stories and Novellas

The Salzburg Tales (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974)  
London: Peter Davies, 1934; New York: D. Appleton-  
Century, 1934.

The Puzzleheaded Girl: Four Novellas (New York: Holt,  
Rinehart and Winston, 1967)

### Article

"The International Symposium on the Short Story," Christina  
Stead (England) in Kenyon Review, XXX, 4 (1968), pp. 444-  
50.

### B. Selected Writings on Christina Stead

[This includes the most useful articles, some relevant reviews,  
interviews with Stead, parts of books, and a full length study.  
Some biographical material is also listed with the critical  
works.]

Don Anderson, "Christina Stead's Unforgettable Dinner-Parties,"  
in Southerly, XXXIX, 1 (1979), pp. 28-45.

Judy Barbour, "Cotters' England," in Nation, November 4  
(1967), p. 22.

\_\_\_\_\_ "Christina Stead: The Sublime Lives of Obscure  
Men," in Southerly, XXXVIII (1978), pp. 406-16.

N. Bartlett, "Pioneers of a New-World Literature," in South  
Atlantic Quarterly, XLIX (1950), pp. 32-3.

- John B. Beston, "An Interview with Christina Stead," in World Literature in English, XV, 1 (1976), pp. 87-95.
- \_\_\_\_\_ "A Brief Biography of Christina Stead," in World Literature in English, XV, 1 (1976), pp. 79-86.
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- Graham Burns, "The Moral Design of The Man Who Loved Children," in The Critical Review (Melbourne), XIV (1971), pp. 38-61.
- Angela Carter, "Unhappy Families," in London Review of Books, IV, 17 (1982), pp. 11-13.
- Anne Chisholm, "Christina Stead at 80 and Still Writing," in Bulletin, July 27 (1982), pp. 26-7.
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- \_\_\_\_\_ "Arabesques and Banknotes," in Australian Book Review, 42 (1982), pp. 10-14.
- \_\_\_\_\_ "Fathers and Lovers: Three Australian Novels," in Australian Literary Studies, X (1982), pp. 459-67.
- "Cotters' England," (reviewer's name not given) in Time, September 23 (1966), p. 76.
- Dale Edmonds, "The Puzzleheaded Girl," in Studies in Short Fiction, VI (1968), pp. 110-12.
- M. Barnard Eldershaw, "Christina Stead," in Essays in Australian Fiction (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1938), pp. 158-81.
- Clifton Fadiman, "The Salzburg Tales," in Reading I've Liked (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946), pp. 521-2.
- Robert Fagan, "Christina Stead," in Partisan Review, XLVI (1979), pp. 262-70.
- Carole Ferrier, "The Death of the Family in Some Novels by Women of the Forties & Fifties," in Hecate, II, 2 (1976), pp. 48-61.

- Miles Franklin, Laughter, Not for a Cage (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1956), pp. 172-3, 179-80.
- R.G. Geering, "The Achievement of Christina Stead," in Southerly, XXII, 4 (1962), pp. 193-212.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Introduction to Seven Poor Men of Sydney (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965), pp. ix-xv.
- \_\_\_\_\_ "Christina Stead in the 1960s," in Southerly, XXVIII, 1 (1968), pp. 26-36.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Christina Stead in Australian Writers and their Work Series (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Christina Stead in Twayne World Author Series (New York: Twayne, 1969). This study was published in a revised edition by Angus and Robertson in 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_ "Christina Stead," in Contemporary Novelists. Ed. James Vinson (London: St. James Press, 1972), pp. 1169-72.
- \_\_\_\_\_ "What is Normal? Two Recent Novels by Christina Stead," in Southerly, XXXVIII (1978), pp. 462-73.
- Annie Gottlieb, "In Good Stead," in Viva, II, 8 (1975), p. 37.
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