



Gargantuan Texts

Bakhtinian Theory in Dialogue With Six of Christina Stead's Novels

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Thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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February 1997

[Bill] says he knows how I see the world; like a fireman in a sewer. How is that?

A lot of flames and a mass of crap.

Christina Stead

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Abbreviations Used in this Thesis and Dates of First Publication¹

Christina Stead

<i>The Salzburg Tales</i> (1934)	ST
<i>Seven Poor Men of Sydney</i> (1934)	SPM
<i>The Beauties and Furies</i> (1936)	BF
<i>House of All Nations</i> (1938)	HAN
<i>The Man Who Loved Children</i> (1940)	TMW
<i>For Love Alone</i> (1944)	FLA
<i>Letty Fox: Her Luck</i> (1946)	LF
<i>A Little Tea, A Little Chat</i> (1948)	ALT
<i>The People With the Dogs</i> (1952)	TPWTD
<i>Cotters' England</i> (1966)	CE
<i>The Puzzleheaded Girl</i> (1967)	PG
<i>The Little Hotel</i> (1973)	LH
<i>Miss Herbert: (The Suburban Wife)</i> (1976)	MH
<i>Ocean of Story</i> (1985)	OS
<i>I'm Dying Laughing</i> (1986)	IDL
<i>A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters</i> (1928-1973)	Letters I
<i>Talking into the Typewriter: Selected Letters</i> (1973-1983)	Letters II

Mikhail Bakhtin

<i>Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics</i> (1929; 1963) ²	PDP
<i>Rabelais and His World</i> (1968)	RHW
<i>The Dialogic Imagination</i> (1981)	DI

¹ See Works Consulted for editions used for page references in this thesis.

² The revised 1963 version is used in this thesis.

Abstract

Gargantuan Texts: Bakhtinian Theory in Dialogue With Six of Christina Stead's Novels

This thesis sets out to explicate aspects of the narrative technique, characterisation and content in six of Christina Stead's novels through the use of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories, especially his concepts of carnival, polyphony, language, and the heterogeneous novel. The novels in question are: *A Little Tea, A Little Chat; Letty Fox: Her Luck; The Little Hotel; House of All Nations; I'm Dying Laughing;* and *For Love Alone*. The thesis argues primarily that Stead's novels can be interpreted as generic descendants of carnivalesque literature as it is perceived by Bakhtin in his study of François Rabelais, *Rabelais and His World*, and in his analysis of Fyodor Dostoevsky's work in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Furthermore, there is an historical position in which it is claimed that Stead's dialogic approach is eminently suited to the tumultuous epoch in which the majority of her work is situated: the Depression to the 1950s. On a broader and more abstract level, it is argued that Stead's novels evince a Bakhtinian ideal of multiplicitous languages and forms. It is concluded that Stead's texts are valuable in their subversion of authoritarian and "monologic" discourses.

Declaration

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

I give consent for a copy of my thesis to be deposited in the University library and to be made available for photocopying and loan.

17/02/'97

M. B. Joseph

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr Philip Butterss, for all his advice, support, and hard work. Many thanks, too, to Dr Eva Sallis, Marc Vickers, Dr Nathalie Nguyen, Mandy Dyson, Richard Joseph, Riekie and Cliff Sloggett for their assistance and support.

Thanks to the staff of the Barr Smith Library, Flinders University Library, and the Library of the University of South Australia.

A substantial portion of chapter two was presented as a paper at the 1996 conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, held at the Queensland University of Technology. This paper will be published in the conference proceedings.

The University of Adelaide generously provided funding for various research components of this thesis.



Introduction

Gargantuan Texts

This thesis sets out to explicate aspects of the narrative technique, characterisation and content in six of Christina Stead's novels through the use of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories, especially his concepts of carnival, polyphony, and the heterogeneous novel. It argues that Stead's artistic project is a dialogic one and that this, to a large extent, explains the characteristics perceived in her texts by various critics. Stead's technique is not chaotic, confused, or ill-disciplined, as has sometimes been suggested, but her unconventionalities are largely evidence of the carnivalesque and polyphonic nature of her novels. Primarily, it is argued that Stead's novels can be interpreted as generic descendants of carnivalesque literature as it is perceived by Bakhtin in the work of François Rabelais and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Bakhtin's work in general has two emphases: firstly there is an historical focus, and secondly, his theories are based on more abstract principles. For instance, in various works¹ Bakhtin outlines the historical development of the novel, carnivalesque literature, or different genres, but these are also talked of in more abstract terms in relation to his theories of heteroglossia and language. This thesis approaches Stead's novels from these two perspectives. Firstly, there is an historical position in which it is argued that Stead's dialogism is eminently suited to the epoch in which the majority of her work is situated: the Depression to the 1950s. Secondly, on a broader and more abstract level, it is claimed

¹ See chapter one for more detail.

that Stead's novels evince a Bakhtinian ideal of multiplicitous languages and forms which challenge "monologic" and dogmatic discourses.

Christina Stead (1902-1983) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) are historical contemporaries. Politically, Bakhtin has been seen as Marxist but anti-Stalinist in his opposition to authoritarianism, although his political affiliations are difficult to pin-point (Clark and Holquist 1). Stead is a self-professed "leftist" (Giuffré 27), and according to Ken Stewart a "supporter of Stalin" (1993, 171), but in her novels such as *I'm Dying Laughing*, *Letty Fox* and *Cotters' England* she is by no means uncritical of some characters who purport to be communist or Marxist. In spite of Stewart's assertion of Stead's faith in Stalin, her work seems to evince a disdain for polemic, and an opposition to authoritarian viewpoints, or, in Bakhtin's terminology – "monologic" discourses. Both Stead and Bakhtin are unlikely to have known of each other's work, but they both speak to the ideological dilemmas of the first half of the twentieth century. It seems appropriate and not entirely arbitrary, then, to enact a dialogue between the two.

There has been little work done on the connection between Bakhtin's theories and Christina Stead's work. Diana Allen's thesis, *Lives of Obscure Women: Polyphonic Structures and the Presentation of Women in the Fiction of Christina Stead*, gives a detailed analysis of the polyphonic elements of Stead's novels using the typology of discourses offered by Bakhtin in chapter five of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "Discourse in Dostoevsky". Her thesis, however, is limited in that it excludes an analysis of carnival in relation to Stead's texts, and ignores the broader connections to be made between

Bakhtin's theories. It is argued here that there are carnivalesque elements in Stead's novels and that these must be considered in conjunction with polyphony in order to examine Stead's dialogic project in more comprehensive terms. It is the case that Bakhtin's theory of polyphony cannot be separated from wider theoretical connections with other of Bakhtin's concepts, such as heteroglossia in language, and carnivalesque literature, as will be demonstrated.

Critics such as Susan Sheridan, Diana Brydon, Jonathan Arac, and Jennifer Gribble have suggested Bakhtinian readings of Stead but have not gone on to explore Stead's work in these terms (Sheridan 1988a, 132; Brydon 1987, 3; Arac 123). For instance, Gribble states that Stead is "way ahead of her time in exploiting what the Russian theorist Bakhtin describes as the novel's 'dialogic imagination'", but then goes on to discuss Stead's narratives in terms other than Bakhtinian theory (1994, 3). Diana Brydon does give a Bakhtinian interpretation of Stead's novel *I'm Dying Laughing* in her article, "Other Tongues than Ours". There she writes that:

Stead's novels themselves, in their sprawling messiness, insist on embodying a Rabelaisian alternative. They speak in other tongues than those approved by critics seeking the well-made novel. (1989, 23)

However, despite this article, which is referred to substantially in chapter six of this thesis, the possibilities for interpreting Stead's work through Bakhtinian theory remain largely undeveloped.

As the quotation from Brydon above suggests, Stead's work has been likened to that of Rabelais, and other critics have seen connections with Dostoevsky's work (Geering 1962,

196; Jarrell in *TMW* 13). Stead herself had read both Rabelais and Dostoevsky, and she admitted to admiring Dostoevsky's work in particular (*Letters I* 216). On his suggestion of a resemblance between *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Stead told Ron Geering that *Seven Poor Men*:

owes nothing to Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*; ie. I mean, I had not read that, at that time, though I was a great admirer of Dostoevsky all my life, still am. . . . What wonderful freshness and enthusiasm one meets as he attacks each subject! (*Letters I* 216)

Although Dostoevsky's influence may be indirect, it is again apparent in a letter to Thistle Harris where Stead outlines plans to write "an American Karamazovs' story, and a female picaresque"² (*Letters I* 91). Jonathan Arac, too, perceives the influence of Dostoevsky in the narrative of *The Man Who Loved Children*:

Following Bakhtin, its play of voices comes closer to Dostoevsky than to Dickens or Twain, in presenting alternative ways of life, embodied ideologies, among which the choice is not obvious. (123)

Stead alludes to Rabelais in many of her novels. The epigraph to part one of *I'm Dying Laughing*, for example, is "I'm thirsty!" from *Gargantua*. There are also references to Rabelais in *Letty Fox* and *House of All Nations* (*LF* 166; *HAN* 550). All this evidence suggests that there are valid theoretical connections to be made between Stead's novels and the work of Rabelais and Dostoevsky. It is not the purpose of this thesis to bring direct connections from the novels of those two writers to bear on Stead's work, but through Bakhtin's analyses in *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* it is possible to perceive an affinity between Rabelais and Dostoevsky and the novels of Christina Stead.

² This could very well be *Letty Fox*.

Stead's narratives have been interpreted variously through the genres of "realism", "modernism", and even "socialist realism". Indeed, her work does seem to embody some of the elements of each of these movements. The tracing of various literary movements in Stead's texts is not the focus of this thesis (although there is some analysis of her work in terms of genre), but an outline of the critical reception of her work in these terms provides a useful introduction to her narrative technique and the content of her novels. Bakhtinian theory is then offered as a productive alternative to these limited categories.

There has been great debate over whether or not Stead's narratives should be called realist. Those who wish to talk of Stead as a realist focus on the sociological minutiae contained in her novels, the dialogues which almost read as transcriptions of speech, and her Marxist politics with its philosophy of socialist realism. Judith Kegan Gardiner, for instance, argues that Stead "joins the leftist anti-modernist reaction that returns to older traditions of realism and of individual character in the name of progressive human values" (1989b, 59). Michael Wilding states:

Her impulses were always firmly realist, and her rejection of narrative pattern – though not of narrative flow, which she marvellously sustained – came from her commitment to rendering and revealing human motivation and behaviour. (1989, 172)

It is argued in this thesis that Stead's leftist political strategies cannot be denied, but to see her solely as a serious and polemic writer is to deny the humour, parody, and play in her texts. Wilding's description of Stead's rejection of narrative structure in favour of "flow" and her commitment to the portrayal of human behaviour is perceptive, but

Stead's narratives also seem to incorporate fantasy and other elements which cannot be said to be strictly "realist".

The categorisation of Stead as a realist is often opposed by those who wish to define her as a modernist. For example, Don Anderson states that her texts "move out of realism into what might be described as a parody of realism that contains its virtues but goes beyond it into a mode that transcends and contains it" (1979, 38). Later, in his article "The Intellectual Environment", he terms this technique "hyperrealism" (1988, 90). There, Anderson places Stead firmly in the modernist camp, as an anomaly in an otherwise conservative (realist) literary Australia (1988, 91). Certainly, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* with its urban setting, post-World War One despair, Michael Baguenault's angst, its lyrical passages and Joycean language, is largely accepted as modernist. That Stead was acclaimed as a modernist writer is suggested by Clifton Fadiman's proclamation in 1936 that she is "the most extraordinary woman novelist produced by the English-speaking race since Virginia Woolf" (69).³

An interpretation of Stead as a modernist would account for the fantastic elements in her novels. There are many bizarre episodes in these texts such as the extraordinary scene of the Somnambulists' Club in *The Beauties and Furies* (328), the curious "sand-storm" Michael Baguenault experiences on a walk with a "friend" in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*

³ Stead herself disliked Woolf's presentation of characters because they were not *real* or living people, but essences: "Her characters are never real persons as she said; she depersonalises them; they were freaks of light and dark, images painted for an instant on the fluid of her genius" (qtd. in Geering 1990, 418). These comments suggest a divergence in their artistic philosophies.

(269), the strange cry from the madman Teresa hears on her visit to cousin Ellen in *For Love Alone* (158), the weird, sudden flood which inundates Dilley's place in *The Rightangled Creek* (PG 167), and so on. Indeed, many of the stories of *The Salzburg Tales* deal with marvels in the manner of fairy tales. Her use of fantasy, then, ranges from the purely marvellous to the grotesque or uncanny. Yet, on the whole, these events are embedded in otherwise predominantly realist narratives so that the two strains of fantasy and realism seem incongruous. For example, M. Barnard Eldershaw declare:

it is not fantasy in a world of fantasy, but fantasy in a world of reality and reality in a world of fantasy. The historical mingles with the imaginary, the real with the unreal in bewildering confusion, and the author behaves as if both worlds, or all worlds, were of the same value. (165)

While critics such as M. Barnard Eldershaw view this unconventionality in a negative way, Rodney Pybus interprets this incongruity as positive because "valuable":

The hallmark of *Cotters' England* and the other novels . . . is what Dostoevski called the "tragicofantastic element"; [Stead's] recognition of it, and the tension between it and reality in the conventional sense, are what make her novels valuable. (1969, 33)

This reference to Dostoevsky is significant, as will be demonstrated in chapter one.

The reviewers of Stead's novels often seem to criticise her for an inability to conform to the realist conventions of fiction. For instance, one reviewer of *The Salzburg Tales* criticises Stead for her lack of conformity because of her "extreme mannerism":

Miss Stead's style is extremely mannered. She relishes mockery, fantasy and tenuous philosophical implications. On the other hand she evidently disdains the old-fashioned rules of story-telling with their emphasis on clarity and the development of suspense and climax. (De Kay 7)

Anyone reading for suspense and climax in Stead will often be disappointed; the texts seem to run out of impetus rather than reach a dramatic conclusion. Again, Stead's work

confounds a reader's expectations of drama and excitement, as this review of *House of All Nations* intimates:

a virtuoso performance, a prodigious *tour de force*, an epic exercise of sheer writing will . . . Yet it is one of the dullest novels which it has ever been my misfortune to read. (Chamberlain 255)

M. Barnard Eldershaw criticise the excesses of Stead's early novels when they write that the books "all but strangle in their rich luxuriance" (166). They go on:

Their very variety forces them to a sort of sameness; they are continually effacing themselves in their magnificent riot; one effect treads too fast for comfort or proportion on the heels of another. Valuable qualities lose themselves in the undergrowth. It is to this over-luxuriance that I attribute the author's failure to create living people. (166-7)

Barnard Eldershaw's criticism seems to concentrate on what might be called Stead's modernist attributes. Their view about Stead's inability to "create living people" seems akin to Georg Lukács' criticism of modernist characterisation which fails to consider social development and thus is perceived as static and unable to portray "lasting human types" (Lukács 57). It is as if Barnard Eldershaw have mistaken a lack of psychological depth and individualism in some of Stead's early characters for a lack of dynamism. They exclude any discussion of the collectivity of characters and the heated world of talk and argument in which Stead's characters exist. However, their perception of luxuriant or metaphoric language in these early works is not misleading. Yet they understate the socio-political aims of these texts and the existence of realist aspects in which that project is performed.

Joan Lidoff summarises Stead's "flaws" as those of "excess":

there is often too much talk, too many characters, too much detail in her novels, which seldom seem to be edited in accordance with a controlling idea or plot structure . . . her narratives scan a panorama of events without settling on just one set of people or just one scene. (1978, 375)

As Lidoff suggests, Stead's work is commonly regarded as unedited and ill-disciplined because her narratives seem to ramble, and include seemingly ineffectual episodes. The length of the novels and the repetitions in the narratives have driven many a reviewer to despair. For example, one critic writes of *Cotters' England*:

Miss Stead has a fiendish talent for spinning the flimsiest matter out to intolerable length, making her points and remaking them, then making them once again, so that page after page reads like pages before. (Matthewson 4)

These repetitions hinder the metonymic movement of the narrative but their purpose is not to inscribe metaphoric connections or meaning as a modernist text might. While Stead's work does contain elements of fantasy there is rarely symbolism, particularly in the later and more realist works.⁴ Unlike the modernists, it is not just because Stead takes *metaphor* to the extreme that her texts are described as difficult and unreadable.

While much of the metaphoric language in her narratives is self-reflexive, Stead's belief in objective truth, and her clear historical and political purpose, mean that her novels can be distanced from the non-referentiality of some modernist works. As Angela Carter argues, "language is not an end-in-itself", but is a "tool" in Stead's novels (11). Nor does Stead use modernism's stream-of-consciousness technique; her monologues⁵ and dialogues take place largely between independent characters in the external world.

⁴ The hops vine in *The People With The Dogs* is an exception (150; 341).

⁵ These monologues are spoken aloud, and with an audience in the vicinity, and therefore are not presented as internal speech. See chapter two.

The existence of metaphoric language, particularly in Stead's earlier novels, suggests that she shares modernism's faith in aesthetics and in the hierarchical delineation of "literature" over mass culture. Yet, as we shall see, there are also elements of Bakhtinian "slum naturalism" or "grotesque realism" in Stead's work which have an affinity with popular culture (PDP 115). For John Docker:

modernism maintains that history shows the necessity of aesthetic hierarchy, a hierarchy of forms and genres,⁶ with the tragic as supreme effect, the summit of art, answering to the fallen nature of the contemporary world, where time delivers defeat, fate destroys, and every relationship is destined to disappointment, menace, failure, loss. (1994, 169)

It is argued in this thesis that there are elements of laughter in Stead's novels which disturb any interpretation of her work as entirely "serious". There *are* elements of tragedy, of a humanist perception of alienation in the contemporary world, and of the importance of the artist and aesthetics, but these act in tandem with a more carnivalesque world-view. It is necessary to see in Stead's "literature" the very anti-authoritarian discourses that Docker perceives at work in Australian popular culture.⁷

As has already been suggested, there appears to be a chronological shift in Stead's work between the metaphoric approach of her early novels and the prosaics of the later novels.

Both Angela Carter and Ron Geering cite *House of All Nations* as a specific point of change in Stead's technique. Geering argues that the exuberances of style in the early

⁶ James Joyce is perhaps an exception here. Arguably his language strategies employ a carnival subversion of all that is "high" (White 132; Kristeva 1980, 71).

⁷ Docker's use of Bakhtinian theory is not confined to popular culture because in his article "Antipodean Literature" he perceives carnival at work in the mix of genres in a number of Australian writings (1986).

fiction begin to be curbed in *House of All Nations* while the picturesque elements of that early work are translated into dialogue:

From now on her fiction becomes increasingly naturalistic in approach and expression and, while showing no abatement of interest in character, pays more attention to society and the world at large. (1962, 199)

Yet, he suggests that Stead's excesses are still there in that "in her desire for social documentation she has gone too far towards naturalism and has ended by overcrowding her canvasses" (1962, 199). *House of All Nations* does rely more on dialogue and less on lyrical, or metaphoric passages, yet these are to be found again in *For Love Alone* and *The Man Who Loved Children*, two texts which succeed *House of All Nations* in their publication. Nor is it possible to say that the later works in Stead's *oeuvre* entirely dismiss the fantastic. It can be argued, however, that *House of All Nations* marks a movement away from the use of metaphoric language in Stead's novels towards realism.

For our purposes this shift has no particular significance because polyphony and carnival can be discussed in relation to all of Stead's texts, including the early, more modernist, novels. This suggests that the change in Stead's technique is largely a shift in style rather than any profound alteration to her artistic project, particularly because the emphasis on character is still prevalent. However, narrative descriptions in the early novels make way for direct dialogue in the later texts. The later narratives lose any pretence to "artistic" or self-referential language to become almost documentary-style exposés of characters. In other words, the narrator's own discourse is not foregrounded.

Carter's argument is somewhat different; she states:

the elaborately fugal plotting of *House of All Nations* is beginning to dissolve of its own accord, just because too much is going on, into the arbitrary flux of event that characterises Stead's later novels. (1982, 12)

Here Carter suggests that Stead cannot sustain her control of the polyphony (evinced in the metaphor of the musical form, the fugue)⁸ epitomised by the long and unwieldy *House of All Nations*. This seems a rather unlikely conclusion just because so many of the novels, early and late, are not determined by plot. While it may appear that Stead abandons the idea of the immense polyphonic project after *House of All Nations* by focusing on a sole protagonist, or major protagonists, these “major” characters still exist in a world of *many* characters all of whom are given a voice.

As Geering’s comments indicate, Stead has also been described as a “naturalist” due to her propensity “for social documentation”. This argument proceeds not by discerning Stead’s connections to the literary school of naturalism, but by highlighting her claim that she possesses scientific objectivity, a gift from her father who was an ichthyologist and conservationist. Stead herself cultivates this perception of inheritance in interviews (Giuffré 25; Wetherell 436). This view of Stead seeks to explain the scarcity of direct narratorial comment or authorial interjection in her work, as well as the almost sociological detail she uses in dialogue and character description. To Rodney Wetherell Stead argues that she does not take a moral stance towards her characters, when she says:

I was brought up by a naturalist, and I *am* a naturalist. I see what I see. . . .
What I mean is, you don’t criticize dingoes for being dingoes. . . . They

⁸ The origin of Bakhtin’s use of the term polyphony is musical (*PDP* 21-2). Stead herself uses a musical metaphor for her technique when she says: “One must be ever so careful in attributing ideas to writers, because to a certain extent a drama builds itself up as a symphony builds itself up and, although everything is relevant, every word doesn’t carry a message, you see” (Whitehead 241). This statement emphasises the distance of the author from the voices or ideologies in the text and a polyphonic notion of language.

are, and they exist that way, and that is the only way to see things truly, in my opinion. (441)

Stead's claim to objectivity in our post-structuralist times may seem illusory and we may successfully divine implicit judgements of some characters on the narrator's part. Yet there is a definite difficulty in discerning the narrator's position in Stead's texts. Nor is it easy to delimit her stories as moral tales.

Socialist realism is a movement which might explain Stead's use of social documentation and her depiction of the "oppressed". However, while she describes her political affiliations as left-wing, she is also keen not to define her work as party-political or polemical. For instance, she states:

I am not puritan nor party, like to know every sort of person; nor political, but on the side of those who have suffered oppression, injustice, coercion, prejudice, and have been harried from birth. (qtd. in Kunitz 1330)

In various interviews Stead answers the question of her political commitment by admitting the socialist influences of her father, as well as the Marxist influences of her partner, Bill Blake, but stops short of identifying her own party-political allegiance.⁹

When Rodney Wetherell asks her if there are Marxist influences in her novels she replies:

I don't doubt that they exist because I adopted or felt my husband's point of view. All our friends were Marxians in New York. . . . But I'm not political in the sense of . . . not the go to meeting type. I think this may be simply that I don't like argument, dispute and dissertation and all that. . . . It's not that I object to people taking sides. (443)

She repeats this sentiment in her interview with Joan Lidoff in 1973, and goes on to state that she dislikes men "jawing" all the time, giving her father as her particular example:

⁹ Stead did belong to the radical League of American Writers although she dismisses this political participation by telling Wetherell, "They asked me to join. I joined. That was all" (443).

"As I was the daughter of a *very great orator*¹⁰ I had enough of it already" (Lidoff 1982, 183). Thus we should not be surprised to find an absence of polemic and party-political rhetoric in Stead's work. Her connection between talk, argument, oration and polemic viewpoints suggests that Stead considers these to be positions anterior to her ideal of political speech or action.

In her 1935 report on the first international "Congress of Writers for the defence of culture", "The Writers Take Sides", Stead calls upon the young writers to abandon their solipsistic musings and to:

study worldly subjects, enter the political arena, take lessons from workmen and use their pen as a scalpel for lifting up the living tissues, cutting through the morbid tissues, of the social anatomy. (1935, 454)

In a devout Marxist manner Stead sees the political turmoil of the post-World War One period as indicative of the throes of disappearing capitalism (1935, 456). Yet she does not appear to advocate a strict socialist realism as the means by which a writer might reveal "the social anatomy". She sides with the liberal and non-partisan Aldous Huxley when she states:

Writers are not properly propagandists, as Mr. Huxley justly remarked, but their influence is immense: it is essential to creation that the writer should think himself [sic],¹¹ as a writer, individual. This belief gives power, pungency, joy to his writings. We cannot therefore expect writers to take a purely political view. . . . (1935, 458-9)

¹⁰ In this thesis the emphases are those of the original unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹ Any gender specific language occurring in quotations will be pointed out, however, American spelling in quotations will not, as all translations of Bakhtin's work, and many of Stead's novels, use American spelling.

This comment appears to sit uneasily with the earlier, more partisan, rhetoric in the essay.

On the whole, Stead's work does not fulfil the criteria of Stalin's socialist realism. Working-class characters in her novels, such as Nellie Cotter, Jonathan Crow, and the Marxist sympathisers, the Howards, are not treated uncritically. In this way Stead's work disdains the dictates of socialist realism by laughing corrosively at Party ideology and hypocritical or unthinking devotees. Her characters are from a broad spectrum of social classes and her novels do not all focus on the struggles of individual working-class heroes. In her 1939 piece, "Uses of the many-charactered novel", Stead concludes the essay by asking:

The great story, the writer may think, would be this – a sea of many lives, the world of today, from which rises a greater life, drawing sustenance from them, acting, sinking, back to them – Dimitrov, Lenin, the section organiser? (1994, 199)

Hazel Rowley notes that this conclusion, with its uncertain question mark, is an "awkward genuflection" to socialist realism (1993b, 46). Indeed, this uncertainty underscores the fact that Stead appears to be more convinced of "a sea of many lives" as the subject of novel writing than any espousal of the "greater life" in which individuals, even working-class ones, take centre stage and change history. Her view of society as a collective, and her inability to take on board an uncritical acceptance of working-class figures just because they are working class, distances Stead from the ideal of the portrayal of the individual working-class hero.

In *Marxism and Literary Criticism* Terry Eagleton argues that Marx and Engels had a less restrictive view of the political role of the author; if the author “reveals the real and potential forces *objectively* at work in a situation, he [sic] is already in that sense partisan” (1976, 47). Stead’s friend, Ralph Fox,¹² also notes that Engels and Marx had contempt “for that form of writing which substitutes the opinions of the author for the living actions of human beings” (1945, 89). Stead seems to share this project of presenting situations objectively by not interfering in her texts with a polemic voice. Whatever Stead’s relation to Stalin’s socialist realism, her novels do emphasise the depiction of social and historical “forces . . . at work in a situation” and so arguably evince a Marxist perception of history and society.

Yet Stead’s novels do not just seek to “reflect” society; they involve themselves in a society in which language and discourse are dynamic, and so the novel is involved in this complex interaction of meaning. Simon Dentith sees this same process at work in Bakhtin’s theory of the novel:

Unlike some other historicizing accounts of literature, especially simplified Marxist ones, Bakhtin’s does not see the novel in a passive, “reflecting” relation to the history that surrounds and produces it. On the contrary . . . the novel is conceived as an active intervention in the heteroglossia in which it lives and moves. (62)

In slightly different terms Raymond Williams praises V.N. Voloshinov’s interpretation of language in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.¹³ Firstly, he notes the “general Marxist orientation” of the work (35), and then argues that Voloshinov goes beyond

¹² See chapters five and seven for discussion of Stead’s relation to Fox’s version of socialist realism.

¹³ This is one of the disputed texts which may have been written by Bakhtin himself (Clark and Holquist Chapter Six). Whether or not Bakhtin was the real author, Bakhtin shares Voloshinov’s view of language.

models of “reflection” to suggest that reality is grasped “through language, which as practical consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity, including productive activity” (37). Similarly, Stead’s novels do not merely mirror her society, but interact with that world. Therefore, her novels, as “productive activity”, must be examined for their relation to language and society.

Thus, modernism, realism, and socialist realism in themselves seem to be unsatisfactory categories with which to define Stead’s novels. This is not to deny the existence of the influence of each of these movements in her work, but when taken as isolated, or single, reading positions these categories seem incapable of embracing the multiplicitous nature of Stead’s texts.¹⁴ We have begun to see how Stead’s novels are characterised by a mixture of fantasy, realism, direct dialogue, linguistic play, politics, historical specificity, philosophy, repetition, anti-climax, a lack of unified structure or plot, and more. It will be demonstrated that Bakhtinian theory, while it cannot account, of course, for every aspect of Stead’s work, is a highly productive method of interpretation. Therefore, this thesis sets out to delineate the ways in which Bakhtin’s theories of carnival, polyphony, and language can explicate these characteristics already perceived in Stead’s work.

Christina Stead’s novels are *gargantuan* texts. As has just been shown, they have been perceived by some critics as “monstrous” in their unconventionality. They are also gargantuan in their size, density and scope. However, this thesis suggests that the monstrosity of these novels is ambivalent in a carnivalesque manner: this monstrosity is

¹⁴ See chapter six for a discussion on Bakhtin’s view of the dialogics of genres themselves.

a result of their very carnival nature, and is not only “repulsive”, but is also “positive” and “joyful”. Stead’s texts are, in fact, indicative of carnivalesque literature in their challenge to convention. They embody a dialogism of voices, genres and discourses. They encompass “a sea of many lives” (Stead 1994, 199): a multiplicity of characters and their voices. They also represent, and argue with, a monstrous epoch. This is an era which is at the same time vital, dynamic, and terrifying. In their “motley . . . diversity” (Bakhtin *PDP* 107) Stead’s novels are heteroglossic chimera.

This thesis interprets the structure and content of six of Christina Stead’s novels. These novels have been chosen largely for the readings they offer in relation to Bakhtinian theory. With the exception of *For Love Alone*, the novels have also been selected because of the small amount of critical attention they have received. Each chapter is designed to present a different argument in order to propose diverse slants on possible Bakhtinian interpretations of Stead. However, there are also connecting themes which are continued throughout the chapters so that comparisons and detailed arguments may be made. A primary theme, for instance, is the argument concerning the appropriateness of Stead’s technique to her epoch. Therefore the socio-historic setting of each novel is considered in order to support this contention.

In the first chapter the Bakhtinian theory to be employed in the thesis is outlined. Bakhtin’s concepts of carnival, polyphony, language, and the novel are introduced. As a means by which to facilitate the discussion, this chapter also begins to interpret specific

examples from Stead's novels using Bakhtinian theory. It is argued that Stead's works are "carnavalesque" and that she employs the structural technique of "polyphony".

Chapter two continues the discussion of Stead's polyphonic technique, begun in chapter one, by seeking to explore, in depth, the nature of Stead's garrulous characters who dominate some of her novels. These verbose characters are found to be "monologic". However, Stead's artistic goal of objectivity means that they are not portrayed as wholly monstrous: there are carnival elements in the depiction of these characters as well. The chapter includes an analysis of Sam Pollit and Nellie Cotter, but its primary interest is the protagonist of *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, Robbie Grant. The interpretation of Stead's characters offered here is continued and developed throughout the thesis.

Chapter three analyses the "double-voiced" nature of the first-person narrative in *Letty Fox*, and the carnivalesque personality of the main protagonist, Letty. The carnival interpretation of character begun in a brief way in chapter two is developed more fully in regard to Letty's ribald nature. However, Letty cannot be considered to be Stead's figure of the subversive "woman on top" because Letty's bourgeois ideals are undermined by the narrative. The narrative itself challenges bourgeois morality by creating "scandal". In Bakhtin's terms, Stead's novel is "parodic" rather than "satiric" because the laughter of the text is not entirely negative or cynical. However, the novel's positive "pole" of laughter does not nullify its political intention.

Chapter four continues the argument that Stead's humour must not just be delimited as sardonic, but must also be appreciated for its carnivalesque elements, without limiting the political potential of her work. Thus the chapter traces the carnivalesque and comic nature of characters in *The Little Hotel*. As in *Letty Fox*, the bourgeois ideal of the isolated individual is challenged by the polyphonic nature of the narrative. The chapter also analyses Stead's depictions of banquets and madness, two themes which are examined again in the proceeding chapters. The discussion of Stead and her epoch is extended by stressing the notion of crisis and carnival "potential" which is, in turn, carried on in chapter five. Through the figure of Lilia Trollope chapter four also suggests ways in which Bakhtinian theory might be adopted by post-colonial theory.

Chapter five raises the issue of Stead's Marxist perspective in relation to the criticism of capitalism offered in *House of All Nations*. Yet, it is argued, this Marxist view is accompanied by a carnivalesque depiction of the bank as marketplace and casino, and of the principal character, Jules Bertillon, as an ambivalent villain or hero. Both interpretations do not act antithetically but, together, challenge and oppose capitalism as a dominant ideology. The themes of vanishing, facade, and ethereality in the text signify, firstly, capitalist nihilism, but also suggest carnivalesque metamorphosis and a fluidity which challenges bourgeois perceptions of solidity.

Chapter six interprets the motifs of laughter and crying in *I'm Dying Laughing* as indicative of the novel's dialogue of tragedy and laughter. Stead's text cannot be considered entirely serious or tragic, nor wholly comic; rather the text evinces

“novelism” through its mixing of modes. Emily Howard is analysed as a female Gargantua and down. Yet her (ambivalently) tragic end, and her failure to reconcile the contradictions of her world and her politics, mean that her subversive potential as a clown and a humorist is lost. The text itself, however, in its very dialogue between political tragedy and laughter, is an answer to Emily’s struggle for artistic, comic and political integrity.

Chapter seven turns to the autobiographical novel, *For Love Alone*, to examine again the relationship of the narrator to the main protagonist. The chapter combines arguments used earlier in the thesis concerning elements such as eating, monologic characters, and heteroglossic discourses, to construct a comprehensive reading of the development of Teresa Hawkins as subject. It also considers the epic structure of *For Love Alone* and the way that the classical epic is “refunctioned”, firstly, by the existence of a female hero, and, secondly, by the very “novelism” of the text. It is also argued, however, that the conclusion of the novel, and her journey to England, in some ways limit the subversive carnival potential of Teresa as hero.

Chapter One

"A Sea of Many Lives"¹ Bakhtinian Theory and Christina Stead

This chapter delineates the Bakhtinian theory to be used in this thesis, particularly the concepts of "carnival" and "polyphony". It is in some senses artificial to separate carnival from polyphony because, as Krystyna Pomorska points out, carnival underscores Bakhtin's idea of "the novelistic principle" (RHW x). In other words, carnival's anti-authoritarian essence can be found in the presence of multiplicities of style, discourses, and voices in the novel. Pomorska further argues that Bakhtin's theory of dialogue "is opposed to the 'authoritarian word' . . . in the same way as carnival is opposed to official culture" (RHW x). Graham Pechey, too, summarises the theoretical connections between Bakhtin's concepts in this way:

Any sociopolitical project of centralization or hegemony has always and everywhere to *posit itself against* the ubiquitously decentralizing (centrifugal) forces within ideology. "Carnival" is the name Bakhtin gives to these forces in so far as they find expression in consciously parodic representations across a range of signifying practices; "the novel" is the name he gives to their entry into the forms of *writing* at any time in history but most influentially in the case of Rabelais and the line of comic fiction descending from him. (62-3)

It is possible to outline a number of oppositions in Bakhtin's work: the novel versus lyric poetry; dialogism versus monologism; polyphony versus homophony; heteroglossia versus monoglossia; carnival versus the official world; the grotesque body versus the classical body; and centrifugal languages versus centripetal languages. Each of these

¹ The title is taken from Stead's "Uses of the many-charactered novel" (1994, 199). There is also an intended connection with Stead's metaphor "ocean of story". As well as this, Bakhtin uses the phrase "an ocean of heteroglossia" in his essay "Discourse in the Novel" (DI 368).

terms has a specific meaning, but there are broad connections between those concepts which are anti-authoritarian in their opposition to authoritarian discourses or forms. Yet, in order to facilitate a comprehensive discussion, carnival and polyphony are dealt with separately in the next two sections of this chapter, beginning with Bakhtin's concept of carnival presented in *Rabelais and His World*.

Carnival

As the discussion in the introduction to this thesis demonstrated, one could say of Stead, as Bakhtin says of Rabelais, that her work requires "the renunciation of many deeply rooted demands of literary taste, and the revision of many concepts" (RHW 3). Here Bakhtin is arguing that Rabelais was misunderstood by his latter-day readers who viewed him as a mere satirist and who perceived the "popular-festive" forms in his work as vulgarity and crudity. Therefore Bakhtin's analysis focuses on the popular-festive forms in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in order to re-conceive Rabelais's work in the milieu of his times. Stead does not face the same dismissal of her work as "mere" humour; if anything her novels have been interpreted too "seriously" – the laughter in her texts is either ignored or misinterpreted.

In the Renaissance, Rabelais's age, Bakhtin argues that medieval folk laughter found its way into literature before any distinction between "high" literature and popular fiction manifested itself (RHW 64). Rabelais's work, then, is "carnavalesque" literature.

Bakhtin's term "carnival" is broader than any specific event or festival as it incorporates various forms of popular-festive culture such as parody, feasts, banquets, abusive language and violence, marketplace cries, and figures such as clowns, fools, devils, to mention but a few aspects (RHW 218). His theory rests broadly on the concept that there is a division in medieval society between official culture: the church, the state, the universities and other institutions of authority; and unofficial culture which mocks and ridicules officialdom (RHW 4). Bakhtin stresses the importance of the role of laughter in folk culture in its opposition to the "monolithic" seriousness of state institutions and authoritarian figures (RHW 9).

Bakhtin argues that laughter in medieval folk culture is not solely negative; it is ambivalent. As he tells us, it is "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (RHW 11-12). Parody, as an example of one form of laughter, mocks objects of authority, but, at the same time, invested in its form are images of regeneration and rejuvenation. Bakhtin opposes ambivalent laughter to modern forms of "reduced laughter" such as "satire", which are not rejuvenating or joyous, but are merely negative, moral and critical (RHW 12).² This is why, he argues, Rabelais cannot be defined simply as a satirist (RHW 12).

Carnival, whether through its temporal forms in feast days, festivals or fairs, or in its performative or literary forms such as parodies and *diablerie*, or even in the marketplace speech and gestures of the everyday, results in the upturn of hierarchies. This is a

² See chapter three for a discussion on Bakhtin's concepts of satire and parody in relation to *Letty Fox*.

“world inside out”, where fools play kings (*RHW* 11). In fact there are no hierarchies among the people as a collectivity; according to Bakhtin the people enter a “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (*RHW* 9). Authority is relativised by carnival’s sense of “gay relativity”³, and by the immortality of the people who, as a body, extend beyond finite state powers and so challenge authority’s belief in its own fixity (*RHW* 11; 256).

Bakhtin’s concept of ambivalence in carnival imagery is founded in his view of cyclical time: the cycles of life and death, the seasons, and so on (*RHW* 25). For example, because of these cycles Bakhtin argues that medieval folk culture did not invest in individualism, or “the bourgeois ego” (*RHW* 19),⁴ as such, but centred on the people as an immortal collectivity perpetually renewed in spite of death, thus confounding the fear of death, and acting in discordance with linear, historical and finite time (*RHW* 88). Therefore, circular imagery, in which something can be turned upside down or inside out, is an integral part of carnival ambivalence and is opposed to spatial representations of power based on linear hierarchies. In carnival, hierarchies are inverted, but, more than this, Bakhtin’s use of the images of the clown’s “cartwheel” (*RHW* 353), and of “masks” (*RHW* 39), suggests a continual process of metamorphosis and transformation.

According to Bakhtin, popular-festive culture is also manifested in language concerning the morphology of the body. The “carnival”, or “grotesque”, body is opposed to the

³ “Joyful relativity” and “gay relativity” are differing translations of the same Russian term. “Gay” and “joyful” are used synonymously in this thesis.

⁴ Bakhtin is in dialogue here with the bourgeois epoch.

aesthetics of the "classical" body with its closed, polished and clean attributes and its emphasis on the head or mind rather than "lower" bodily functions (RHW 25). Thus the grotesque body parades its apertures, its genitalia, excrescences, and highlights its "low" functions: excrement, sexual intercourse, reproduction and so forth (RHW 21; 26). This body is eternally "becoming" and is opposed to the static and finished nature of the classical body, as well as the "bourgeois conception of the completed atomized being" (RHW 24):

The grotesque body . . . is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world. (RHW 317)

Rabelais's work is permeated with such images of the "material bodily stratum". Yet this "grotesque realism", as it is also called (RHW 18), is, like laughter, not merely negative because these bodily images are also positive and rejuvenating (RHW 24). For example, Bakhtin says of excrement:

Excrement is gay matter; in the ancient scatological images . . . it is linked to the generating force and to fertility. On the other hand, excrement is conceived as something *intermediate between earth and body*, as something relating the one to the other. It is also an intermediate between the living body and dead disintegrating matter that is being transformed into earth, into manure. (RHW 175)

In other words, these images are not just meant to arouse disgust but are also joyful, and are connected with the cycles of life.

This distinction between high and low in carnival imagery is founded in a topographical division between Heaven and Hell in the medieval world-view so that folk culture, in its opposition to the "high and mighty", utilises images of the underground, of devils rather

than angels (RHW 21). In accordance with this notion, laughter and abusive language rely on “debasement” or “degradation” – on bringing all that is high to earth (RHW 19; 21). Similarly, Bakhtin talks of characters who are “de-crowned”, or “uncrowned”; that is, figures of authority who are removed from their “thrones” through mockery (RHW 197).

Thus, in summary, carnival subverts through inversion, travesty, parody and relativisation. Bakhtin’s concept of carnival highlights the importance of laughter against official bodies, the consequence of the people as a collective body, the “unfinalisable” and changeable nature of the people and of the grotesque body, and the ambivalent nature of all carnival’s laughter and imagery. As Bakhtin writes, this positive element of carnival is significant for carnival cannot be reduced to a nihilistic enterprise:

Carnival (and we repeat that we use this word in its broadest sense) did liberate human consciousness and permit a new outlook, but at the same time it implied no nihilism; it had a positive character because it disclosed the abundant material principle, change and becoming, the irresistible triumph of the new immortal people. (RHW 274)

These elements of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival will be discussed throughout this thesis in relation to Stead’s novels.

Many of these carnival attitudes, strategies and images can be found in Stead’s work.⁵ Stead parodies institutions and figures of authority in a carnivalesque manner. She appears to share her character Baruch Mendelssohn’s view when he says⁶:

⁵ In a letter to Ettore Rella Stead expresses knowledge of *Commedia dell’Arte* (Letters I 415). This “old Comedy”, as she calls it, can be considered to have generic links with medieval carnival. Stead discusses

There would be a row if real situations were reproduced; it would undermine the State. The State is built on grotesque comic-opera conventions which no one dares mock at. (SPM 242)

By portraying “real situations” Stead does dare to mock the “grotesque comic-opera” of the State by revealing its artifice and relativising its conventions through carnival means.

This project is also apparent in her partner, Bill Blake’s, description of her world-view:

[Bill] says he knows how I see the world; like a fireman in a sewer. How is that? A lot of flames and a mass of crap. (Stead 1994, 185)

This is a carnivalesque statement *par excellence* with its scatological images and its connection with the underworld or Hell through the description of flames. Stead further explains that Blake had connected her with Dante by telling her, “if you had been Dante your poem would have been Hell, Heller, Hellest” (Stead 1994, 185). These statements are also resonant with humour which again indicates a carnivalesque viewpoint. Stead, both in her work and the personal statements which will be used in this thesis, seems to evince a “carnival sense of the world” (PDP 107).

Bakhtin emphasises the importance of the marketplace or the town square in regard to carnival, but adds that “streets, taverns, roads, bathhouses, decks of ships, and so on [could] take on this additional carnival-square significance” (PDP 128). Stead’s texts seem to abound with this marketplace atmosphere through a stress on community rather than isolated individualism. Her novels are peopled by “carnival collectives” of characters (PDP 171). Conversations in Stead’s novels take place on the busy streets of

Rella’s play in which the Last Supper is parodied in a feast involving a chicken. She also talks of phallic images, masks, Harlequin and Pierrot, and the “endless uptilted [wine] bottle”.

⁶ This is not to say that Stead *identifies* with Mendelssohn or that all his words represent her views.

New York, in restaurants, hotels, or in Parisian cafés. Private homes, such as Nellie Cotter's or the Pollit household, are often just as hectic as public places. Indeed, Eliza Cook describes Nellie's house as "one big tent" where "people walk in and out" (CE 195); a statement which also evokes the circus with its direct roots to medieval festive culture (PDP 131).

The underground nature of carnivalesque settings and the fairground collection of clowns, fools and rogues are summarised succinctly in Bakhtin's list of carnival backdrops and characters:

The adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplaces, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults, and so forth. . . . The man of the idea – the wise man – collides with worldly evil, depravity, baseness, and vulgarity in their most extreme expression. (PDP 115)

Carnavalesque literature is also full of misalliances of all sorts such as "the virtuous hetaera, the true freedom of the wise man and his servile position, the emperor who becomes a slave, moral downfalls and purifications, luxury and poverty, the noble bandit, and so forth" (PDP 118). Thus, carnivalesque heroes embody the ambivalence of the carnival world. As far as Stead's work is concerned, her novels seem to share these carnivalesque settings and heroes. It is entirely appropriate, for instance, that *House of All Nations* takes place in a bank which is consciously connected with a Parisian brothel of the day through the novel's title (Geering 1990, 405). Jules Bertillon could easily be defined as a "noble bandit" as his financial unscrupulousness is at odds with his charm. Michel Alphendéry is a wise man both free and enslaved because of his ideological dilemma as both Marxist and banker. There is a constant flow of characters in and out of

the bank all intent on wealth through playing the stock market. This suggests the festive and “market” atmosphere of the carnival, the joy of anticipation and speculation among rivals and friends.⁷

Stead herself describes her predilection for carnivalesque characters as opposed to figures of authority:

I only cultivate comical and independent people: I can't bear the profs, big-bugs, the prosy and those who wag the world; I really prefer gangsters to them. (*Letters* I 74)

Stead also states that she approaches characters from the point of view of their vices rather than their virtues: “I do not mind vice but pick on a vice to get hold of a subject (virtue, not interesting makes people yawn)” (Stead 1994, 185). Her characters have whimsical, even humorous names like Adam “Constant”, Mrs “Trollope”, or the “grotesque”⁸ Miss “Grimm” and Jonathan “Crow”. In “A Writer’s Friends” Stead describes her idea to compile an “Encyclopedia (of Obscure People)”, “a sort of counter Who’s Who” (OS 496). Bakhtin cites a similar parody in the medieval text, “Letters of Obscure People” by von Hutten (RHW 14).⁹ While Stead’s project never, apparently, came to fruition, her *oeuvre* incorporates this focus on obscure people thereby disrupting the social importance placed on powerful and historical figures, most likely to be men, reconfiguring the protagonists suitable for literary and textual depiction. Those men in

⁷ See chapter five for a discussion on Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival marketplace and Stead’s portrayal of Banque Mercure.

⁸ “Grotesque” is meant in its ambivalent positive-negative sense here.

⁹ Stead recounts that her idea for the encyclopedia came from a text called *Lives of Obscure Men*, the origin of which is unstated (OS 496). Yet it could very well be von Hutten’s parody for in *For Love Alone* Jonathan Crow intends to compile a book of his own letters entitled “Letters of an Obscure Man” (FLA 323).

her novels who are powerful, such as Robbie Grant and Jules Bertillon, are represented as rogues and confidence tricksters.

Stead disrupts etiquette¹⁰ and ridicules social structure following the “world inside out” strategy of carnival. The scene of Malfi’s wedding in *For Love Alone* is a pertinent example of Stead’s parody of serious social occasions. In keeping with Rabelais’s use of the French custom of the “gauntlet wedding” where the guests were free to cuff each other, and *charivari* where a rough serenade was made with kitchen implements to deride an incongruous marriage (RHW 219), Malfi’s wedding consists of the unexpected. While the guests are waiting for the couple to arrive at the reception various characters tell jokes about the impending wedding night as well as dirty limericks, all evidence of “lowly” carnival speech. Aunt Bea embarrasses her virginal nieces with sexual innuendo.¹¹ Meanwhile, all the guests are sweating profusely in the extreme heat making absurd their fine clothes and manners. This is a kind of Hell, and the heat may be seen as metaphoric for the heat of sexual intercourse. For instance, Kitty and Teresa are described drifting “through the carnival, surreptitiously, in the crush, picking their dresses from their wet breasts and screaming thighs” (25). One of the guests has given a pair of chamberpots as a gift and there follows a raucous discussion on the issue for two pages, including a description of a chamberpot with painted eyes. (This chamberpot is

¹⁰ Kate Macomber Stern’s work on decorum in Stead’s texts is surprising because it focuses on the characters’ *concern with* etiquette rather than the narrator’s parody of these characters (184).

¹¹ The following is an example of one of Bea’s jokes:

“Knock, knock,” said Aunt Bea.

“Who’s there?” came an interested voice, Teresa’s.

“Fornication.”

They giggled. “Fornication who?”

“Fornication like this you need champagne.” (FLA 49)

an example of carnivalesque debasement whereby the “high”, or classic, features of the head are combined with that of the lower stratum).¹² In general, there is a carnival atmosphere in the group dynamics and Bacchanalian drinking. Significantly Teresa and Kitty are shocked by the obscene talk and drinking,¹³ thus the scene also operates to mock their naivety, and both characters must be distanced from the narrator’s evident delight in the depiction of the scene.

The women have a particular importance in the scene due to an explicit connection between marriage, intercourse and reproduction. There is a curious anecdote told by Aunt Bea in which an old woman, walking down the street, is mistaken for a young woman from behind by a man who attacks her with the intention of rape (28). The tone of Bea’s story is not tragic or emotional but light-hearted, incorporating the “grotesque” image of the old woman’s face on a young body. There is a spinster figure present at the wedding – Aunt Di – who is ridiculed by all because of her implicit sterility. As a result Teresa determines never to be the next “Miss Hawkins”. Aunt Di is contrasted with the bride Malfi, so diminutive she seems like a “little girl” (43). Aunt Bea summarises the thematic confusion of old women, reproduction and children when she talks of babies coming from weddings: “you might almost say it is the baby who is being married” (30). (Indeed we later find that Malfi is pregnant at the time of the wedding.) The cycle of life and death, which Bakhtin saw in the Kerch terracotta figure of the pregnant old woman who is laughing, is evident here (*RHW* 25).

¹² There is also, of course, a connection between the eye and the anus.

¹³ Teresa’s swig of wine signals her intention to get beyond this naivety, and also to disobey her father’s puritan dictates (37).

The mockery of the occasion continues when it is discovered the bride is failing to fulfil her joyous role at the reception because she is crying in the cloakroom. When, finally, she appears, Malfi loses a shoe which flies across the room leaving her lop-sided. And when the bouquet is thrown the women literally battle for it so that it disintegrates.¹⁴ Significantly, Teresa is found to be standing on a portion, a gesture of debasement, which indicates her disdain for the fiasco of marriage, but also for the family and its “familiarity” from which she needs to disassociate herself. She may “be next” but her defiant stance suggests that it may not be in quite the way intended.

Bakhtin perceives the origins of medieval popular-festive forms in the “archaic grotesque”, or pagan rituals, and the cyclical time of “natural and biological life” (RHW 24-5). In other words, for Bakhtin, carnival takes place in the market square but is connected with nature through its historical foundation in harvest festivals where the seasonal cycles symbolise rejuvenation and the interconnectedness of life and death. In the main, Stead’s stories take place in the modern city, largely separated from the country. Yet it is possible to read *The Rightangled Creek*, one of her novellas, in light of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival and nature. This is yet another example of the carnivalesque character of Stead’s work.

¹⁴ Bakhtin cites many examples of mock battles in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (RHW 208). This scene in *For Love Alone* is even more of a parody considering it is performed by women in pursuit of flowers. The fight is figuratively for the next chance to marriage and its corollary, reproduction.

The Rightangled Creek centres on “Dilley’s place”, a country residence, and its many tenants. The property has a garden of extraordinary abundance. One of the tenants, Clare Parsons, finds this restful and pleasing, but for other characters the garden’s malignancy is fearful. In the hot, oppressive summer the fecundity of the place seems disturbingly excessive,¹⁵ but Clare describes it in this way:

nature breeds horrors; and this is where you feel the multitudes, the creeping and running, the anthills and wasp nests, the earth breeding at every pore, there’s a sort of horror in fertility and rioting insanity in the hot season. I love it. (PG 147)

Dilley’s place is at the same time a kind of Eden and Hell, indicating its carnivalesque ambivalence.

There is a carnivalesque interdependence of life and death at Dilley’s place also.¹⁶ Clare, who, it is pointed out, is childless, revels in the fruitfulness of the place, as the narrator tells us:

Once or twice, when alone, she herself lay down naked in the centre of the weed patch, to get all the sun, lay there drowsy thinking of fertility, surrounded by all the life and love of the beast and plant world, part of the earth life. (PG 162)

¹⁵ The environment at Dilley’s place could be a suitable metaphor for Stead’s literary technique in its abundance, fecundity, density, excess, and ambivalently “grotesque” nature. This is the “luxuriance” of which Barnard Eldershaw speak (166). The analysis of Clare Parson’s role in *The Rightangled Creek* is therefore a parable for how we might read Stead’s work.

¹⁶ The positive and negative aspects of Dilley’s place could be symbolised well by the flood which causes the Parsons to leave for a time. As William Taylor points out, the storm which causes the flood is “weird” and “phantasmagoric” (177). The flood enforces a reading of the immense power and cycles of nature; it is death as well as new life. The water connects with the story’s themes of thirst, drink, desire, fertility and volubility (Taylor 191). Laban Davies’s drinking problem raises the issue of thirst and desire in keeping with Rabelais’s Pantagruel. While the description of Laban’s alcoholism sometimes focuses on its Bacchanalian aspects, it is mostly described as a *problem* with all its accompanying tragedy and self-destruction. Laban’s drinking undermines no authority but himself. His demise might be tragic, yet it is part of the overall carnivalesque nature of the story. See the chapter on *I’m Dying Laughing* for a further discussion of desire and thirst.

Joyce Jermyn believes she will “get pregnant” on her visit to Dilley’s place, but her view is influenced by fear: “the place is alive,” she shudders (PG 175). Hilda Dilley has lost her baby, and then her mind, through syphilis¹⁷ and so this place of extraordinary profuseness is at the same time stalked by the phantoms of sterility, violence and insanity.

Fred Imber’s death, from poison-ivy, is treated rather cursorily in the narrative. It is depicted without any sense of tragedy but with a curiosity and distance which strikes the reader, used to being asked to be emotional at death, as peculiar. Imber foolishly tries to deny nature’s authority to kill, and so rolls himself in poison-ivy, thus suffering an inglorious death by toxic weed. While the description of this event has no tone of humour, indeed hardly any tone at all, the absurdity of the situation makes it comic to a degree. This humour is incongruous only if one reads Dilley’s place for its negative, “Gothic” and tragic aspects, rather than for its life-affirming attributes. This issue is raised again when Clare breaks her arm and succumbs to the “curse” of the place herself. The event takes a somewhat amusing turn when, while she is waiting for the doctor, she gets drunk only to find the doctor is drunk himself on arrival. Even though Clare returns to the city, just as the other tenants before her, her approach to an otherwise sinister setting is remarkable.

¹⁷ Bakhtin calls syphilis a “gay [joyful] disease”, a result of over-indulgence (RHW 161). Yet Hilda Dilley’s contraction of the disease is more tragic than joyful, but it is argued here that the overall ambivalence and grotesquerie in the story is carnivalesque.

Thus there is a division in the story between characters who perceive Dilley's place as fearful and Clare who is fearless. Bakhtin argues that carnival culture overcame fear. In a footnote he outlines this argument:

Cosmic terror is the heritage of man's [sic] ancient impotence in the presence of nature. Folk culture did not know this fear and overcame it through laughter, through lending a bodily substance to nature and the cosmos. (RHW 336)

The Rightangled Creek is subtitled "A Sort of Ghost Story", and "sort of" is correct for it does not fulfil the expectations of the Gothic genre. The ghost is transfigured from the impression of the "huge hairy man" in the attic (PG 143) to the spectre of Hilda Dilley who is in fact very much alive.¹⁸ In this way a Gothic reading cannot be sustained as reference must be made to the ambivalence, the positive as well as the negative, in the story which reinforces its cyclical elements, its reliance on nature and the seasons, and on life and death.

The story's emphasis on cyclical time as opposed to chronological time is evident in a conversation between Bill Jermyn and Clare. Bill has a masculine image of the malignancy of the place when he says to Clare: "That imaginary man in the attic – you're overlooked by the dark bushy hairy hill. It's lonely here, lonely and timeless, or it has jungle time, millennial time only, dangerous to man"¹⁹ (PG 172). Clare dismisses his

¹⁸ The fact that Hilda is alive reinforces the idea of carnivalesque literature as contemporaneous by removing any element of monologic myth or legend. However, Thornton's narration of the Dilleys' story defers to the past and creates an aura of myth and significance by pretending to be central to the story. Yet the importance of his narration is diffused and decentralised by the very multifariousness of the plot.

¹⁹ There are many issues of gender which can be considered here, not least of which is the alignment of women with nature. Julia Kristeva's essay "Women's Time", which could easily have its philosophical basis in Bakhtin's theories given Kristeva's work on Bakhtin, is a pertinent argument in such a discussion. Clare situates herself within "cyclical" and "monumental" time thus positing herself in terms of reproduction and motherhood and not with (masculine) linear or historical time (Kristeva 1986, 187).

fear by exclaiming: "Oh, no. It's millennial time we managed very well with . . . and I am not afraid". The story does not dismiss elements of tragedy or the Gothic, but overall its tone is one of carnival ambivalence and grotesquerie. In other words, the elements of tragedy²⁰ and the Gothic are incorporated and refunctioned in the carnivalesque narrative structure.

Bakhtin defines the Gothic as "an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation" particular to the Romantic period in literature (RHW 37). In his historical schema of literature offered in *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin argues that Romantic literature opposed the "self-importance" of classicism and the Enlightenment, but he also argues that Romanticism transformed carnival grotesque into a negative, terrifying form because of the loss of carnival's joyful, regenerating aspects. The advent of individualism, in which the fearless collectivity of the folk was missing, led to feelings of isolation and alienation. Bakhtin states that in Romantic grotesque, "Laughter loses its gay and joyful tone" and the "mask of joy" becomes the "eyes of angry satire" (RHW 38). In the Romantic view the monster becomes entirely horrifying: "The world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man [sic]" (RHW 38).

Stead employs some elements of the Gothic in her work. As we shall see in the chapter on *For Love Alone*, Jonathan Crow takes on a Gothic-like disguise. In *Letty Fox* Lucy Headlong's attempted seduction of Letty Fox takes place in Headlong's eerie manor house. And in *Cotters' England*, the night on which the women dance naked under the

²⁰ See chapter six for a discussion of Stead's use of tragedy in *I'm Dying Laughing*.

moon becomes a horrifying one for Caroline Wooller. Because Stead is a twentieth-century writer it may be argued that there are Romantic influences in her work. Yet Stead's characters do not exist in a terrifyingly alien world, but continue to interact communally and to be constituted by their socio-historic milieu. Even her "egotistical monsters" (Malouf 36), do not become anything larger or less than human. On occasion Stead does use the Gothic to evoke fear and hence to elicit sympathy for those victims of these "monsters", but this is only one facet of multifarious plots and characters whose positive aspects cannot be ignored. Indeed, Stead's use of the grotesque is not always negative. Michael Wilding calls Malfi's wedding "nightmarish" (1967, 30). So it may be, but only from Teresa's perspective. As we have seen, the *narrator's* description of the event is ribald. Stead's use of grotesque realism is ambivalent in the Bakhtinian sense and is inextricably bound up with her use of fantasy. Her macabre is not merely equated with alienation, or intended only to arouse disgust.

Despite Bakhtin's view of the diminished role of laughter in literature since Rabelais; in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* he suggests that elements of carnival can still be found in post-Renaissance literature, although in reduced or renewed forms. Bakhtin argues that while Dostoevsky's polyphony did not exist as a novel structure in Rabelais's day, it is a structure which has carnivalesque literature at its heart, albeit in a new and modified way (PDP 121). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin outlines the carnivalesque nature of "serio-comical" novels which are linked generically to such "dialogic" forms as Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire, and from which Dostoevsky's work stems. Bakhtin defines the serio-comical novel in this way:

For all their motley external diversity, they are united by their deep bond with *carnivalistic folklore*. They are all – to a greater or lesser degree – saturated with a specific *carnival sense of the world*, and several of them are direct literary variants of oral carnival-folkloric genres. The carnival sense of the world, permeating these genres from top to bottom, determines their basic features and places image and word in them in a special relationship to reality. In all genres of the serio-comical, to be sure, there is a strong rhetorical element, but in the atmosphere of *joyful relativity* characteristic of a carnival sense of the world this element is fundamentally changed: there is a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism. (PDP 107)

Thus, if Stead's novels are indeed "serio-comical", we should not be surprised to find an absence of polemic in her work in favour of a *dialogic* approach.

According to Bakhtin, these carnivalesque novel forms challenge orthodoxy, evident even in their structures. They are opposed to dogmatic and "monologic" or classical forms such as the epic, tragedy and legend (PDP 108). These narratives are "multi-styled and hetero-voiced" in their mix of high and low, serious and comic genres (PDP 108). This "hetero-voiced" nature is the basis for the structure of polyphony and for the interaction of voices which is "dialogism". Implicit in Bakhtin's view is that truth is not to be found in closed, authoritarian discourses, but in collective dialogues. For instance, referring to the structure of Socratic dialogue, he says: "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (PDP 110).

Bakhtin's characterisation of "the menippea", or carnivalesque literature,²¹ emphasises the incorporation of fantastic elements. He writes that this kind of literature:

²¹ In Bakhtin's work the terms "serio-comical" literature and "the menippea" are practically synonymous with "carnivalesque literature" and are used in this way here.

is free of legend and not fettered by any demands for an external verisimilitude to life. The menippeia is characterized by an *extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention*. . . . Indeed, in all of world literature we could not find a genre more free than the menippeia in its invention and use of the fantastic. (PDP 114)

Bakhtin adds that the menippeia embraces “*experimental fantasticality*” where “observation from some unusual point of view, from on high for example, . . . results in a radical change in the scale of the observed phenomena of life” (PDP 116).²² Bakhtin states that the absurd episodes found in Dostoevsky’s work are “organic” and not “contrived” because they have their basis in “a profound carnivalistic sense of the world, which gives meaning to and unites all the seemingly absurd and unexpected things in these scenes and creates their artistic truth” (PDP 146). Thus the “tragicofantastic” element of Stead’s fiction, as Pybus referred to it (1969, 33), is an organic part of her narratives and is evidence of her use of carnivalesque strategies.

It is also perhaps effective to talk of a “dialogism” of fantasy and realism in Stead’s novels whereby the two are not in a dialectical struggle which is resolved, but work in unison. The two modes are not synthesised either but are of the “same value” (Barnard Eldershaw 165). In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* Rosemary Jackson uses Bakhtinian theory to argue that fantasy is in dialogue with bourgeois realism and challenges realism’s “closed” nature:

The fantastic exists as the inside, or underside, of realism, opposing the novel’s closed, monological forms with open, dialogical structures, as if

²² Such a perspective is evident in the scene in *The Beauties and Furies* where Coromandel’s mother looks down upon Oliver and her daughter through her glass floor (172). The glass floor/ceiling is in itself best explained by carnival’s incongruities. Both those positioned high and low have opposite views of the other: the mother looks upon their heads, and without the rug, those below would have a view of her “lower stratum”. In *House of All Nations* Alphendéry and Jules, on occasion, look down from the mezzanine upon the carnival throng of the stock exchange floor (107).

the novel has given rise to its own opposite, its unrecognizable reflection.
Hence their symbiotic relationship. . . . (25)

Stead's use of realism is not representative of bourgeois ideology in the same way because of its very anti-bourgeois politics. Yet, as Randall Jarrell reminds us, Dostoevsky says, "Almost every reality, even if it has its own immutable laws, nearly always is incredible as well as improbable. Occasionally, moreover, the more real, the more improbable it is" (qtd. in *TMW* 6). Similarly, the fantastic elements of Stead's work and her own "fidelity to 'truth'" undermine and relativise "the heart of a public 'reality'" (Jackson 135).²³

Bakhtin's assertion that "for all the naturalistic qualities of the representation, the universal symbol-system of carnival is in no danger of naturalism," seems to hold true for Stead also (*PDP* 128-9). The episode of the Somnambulists' Club in *The Beauties and Furies* is an example exemplary of a fantastic episode in Stead's texts which demonstrates her novels' carnival roots. The scene strikes the reader as absurd given the otherwise realist depictions of characters and events in the novel. Yet when the demonic Marpurgo takes Oliver Fenton out drinking their adventure becomes increasingly bizarre. Bakhtin analyses many scenes of drinking and intoxication in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in which he emphasises the irreverence and joyfulness in such escapades (eg. *RHW* 228). The drunk makes no sense, can lose all sense, and what senses he or she may still possess are distorted in keeping with the topsy-turvy nature of the carnival world.

²³ In this way the fantastic, or anti-rational, elements of modernist fiction may be seen as a challenge to the "rationality" of the dominant order.

As Oliver and Marpurgo drink they abuse each other verbally, but in an ambivalent way because their language is infused with both "hate" and "hilarity" (BF 324). Bakhtin argues that praise and abuse are "two sides of the same coin" (RHW 165). To Marpurgo, Oliver laughs: "You despise me! Oh, Christ!" That's funny" (324). Their talk contains carnival imagery: dirt, constipation, dung, disease, putrefaction, corpses, mouths, grimaces, and so on. Marpurgo uses the language of the lower stratum to abuse Oliver: "your haunches pull you back towards your chair and your stomach pulls you forward towards your dinner" (324). As well as accusing Oliver of laziness or inertia, and the debasing reference to his posterior indicated by the word "haunches", Marpurgo highlights the belly which represents many things in carnival terminology including food and abundance, bodily products, and guts and tripe (RHW 162).

Marpurgo is a devil figure who leads Oliver to the underground.²⁵ This is confirmed by the descriptions of Marpurgo; for example, Oliver asks, using various images of devilry:

How the devil did I get so intimate with you, Marpurgo? . . . You come in like a demoniac old grandmother, bandying our fates, giving advice, diabolically near the truth, pestilentially impertinent. (323-4)

²⁴ Billingsgate which has religious imagery at its heart is opposed to religious seriousness (RHW 149). Yet this abuse is not wholly spiteful because such figures are brought down from their heavenly abode to commune with the people.

Religion is not a primary concern in Stead's novels, but in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* there is one religious character, Joseph Baguenault. His faith is not mocked as one might expect of carnival literature, but is merely presented as part of his philosophy, as part of his polyphonic constitution. This is probably because he is an "obscure man", rather than a figure of authority.

Kristeva argues that the modern novel, free as it is of the monologic nature of "God" and religion, is able to release its dialogic force (1980, 85). While God may indeed be absent from Stead's novels, there are other monologic discourses which her work seeks to challenge, as we shall see.

²⁵ Ron Geering views Marpurgo as "Munchausen-figure" (1979, 58). This is not far from the perception of this character as a devil. However, in an earlier piece, Geering fails to comprehend the role of fantasy in the book, blaming Marpurgo for its existence: "The trouble with this book is that the fantasy is apt to run riot and to work against, instead of for, the clarification of analysis and the establishment of character. Much of it stems from the bizarre and rather repulsive middle-aged Italian lace-buyer, Annibale Marpurgo . . ." (1962, 198).

Marpurgo also has a “large nose” (328). Bakhtin interprets the nose as a representation of the phallus due to a theory in medieval medicine which understood the size of the nose to indicate the size of the penis; hence the origin of jokes relating to the nose (*RHW* 316). Therefore, to describe a man as having a large nose is to debase him – to bring him down to the lower stratum. Later, at the café, Marpurgo offers Oliver some “devil’s elixir” which seems to have mysterious, hallucinogenic qualities (332). The cafe even refills of its own accord (338). Thus their drunken adventure extends beyond intoxication into magic and dream.

On the way to the café where the Somnambulists’ Club convenes Oliver begins to lose his senses, underscoring the instability of the carnival self. “I am not myself”, he says, “Literally” (327). He also begins to have visions:

Other voices seemed to join in the responses of Marpurgo: his sense reeled: scenes which he had seen long ago, and strange fancies, and reminiscences of old romances floated before him through the dark. . . . (326)

Once they arrive at the Somnambulists’ Club events take an even stranger turn. The notion of the sleep-walker is a suitable carnival image in its ambivalence: it is a state between sleep and wakefulness, where the world of dream becomes part of the day-time world so that night and day, phantoms and reality are muddled. The conversations of the members of the club are parodies of discourses including philosophy, science and theology. There are all sorts of carnivalesque characters present such as a priest who is an expert in gambling (336), and a man who believes himself to be a demon (338). Even the objects in the room begin to speak. The spittoon voices its view from the lower stratum. For example, it abuses the clock, who of course is all face (and therefore is

indicative of the classical body): "Well, well, old pissface, if you have no posterior, you must have a queer front: I prefer not to think of such an anatomy!" (341). It goes on to describe itself in typical carnival fashion:

I am all for ejaculation, for my head swarms, yes, literally swarms with ideas, and every one of them pregnant. I understand the very guts of every man, and if I gave my advice . . . your apothecaries and your sawbones would go to the devil in a week, and your proctors and sublunatic doctors would get dizzy with gripes from absence of dinner. . . . (341)

In keeping with Bakhtin's theory of carnival the language in this scene becomes playful, ridiculous and non-sensical. Marpurgo's name even becomes more fabulous in Oliver's stupor: "his stomach whirled, all whirled about him: his head danced with the waltz of giant spindles. Suddenly he found Marpurgo's name: it was MANARAGO BLUREPIN!" (342). Marpurgo's speech to the assembly resembles the long lists of abusive and colourful words used by Rabelais's characters prone to exaggeration.

Marpurgo begins by addressing his audience:

Pagans, heterodocts, nonjurors, calvinists, catholics, sciolists, smatterers, dabblers, obscurantists, state-co-ordinaters, you who make a domiciliary visit of hearts, beds, purses, ballotboxes, you thumb-wrenches, tax-screws, conscience-purges, spruikers, lickhaunches, parademen, truncheoners, gunmen, sabremen, tarrers, tiaras, featherers and fezes, you cowls, masks and sacred aprons, nose-thumbers, treble-singers, double-facers, monomaniacs, you smutsnickerers, sluthavers, pillars of all orders, bridegrooms of paralogy, asses, racists, ignoramuses. . . . (339)

This carnival language is full of neologisms and images of the lower stratum are prevalent: beds, sluts, noses and thumbs (also resembling the phallus), "lickhaunches",

and, of course, that infamous image of carnival foolery, the ass.²⁶ According to Bakhtin this linguistic play results in the "gay relativity" of language:

Objects and names, freed from the chains of a dying philosophy and granted their independence, acquire a peculiar gay individuality; their names are brought nearer to appellations. (RHW 462)

This view of carnivalesque linguistic play suggests an answer to those critics of Stead who state that "at times the use of language and imagery seem to get the upper hand, the vocabulary luxuriating in the deliberately unusual" (Pybus 1969, 36). The interjections of "Bless you, Amen!" by the crowd at the Somnambulists' Club intimate Marpurgo's speech is a parody of a gospel lesson (340). Its title, "Discourse on the Immateriality of the Earth and the Reality of the Beyond", is indicative of world and reality turned on its head. Indeed, this is a world "ruled" by disorder, as Oliver declares, "There are countries where this is state policy. This is but cuckoo lore" (338). This scene, then, epitomises the "world inside out" perspective of carnival.

Bakhtin suggests that there is "moral-psychological experimentation" in the menippea where insanity destroys "the epic and tragic wholeness of a person and his fate" (PDP 116). Oliver's stable self, for instance, is undermined in his sojourn at the Sonambulists' Club. Yet the fantastic elements of the menippea cannot be reduced to being a mere projection of the "unconscious" in psychoanalytic terms. Indeed, the fantasy in Stead's novels exists externally and materially rather than internally and individually, even though these fantastical events may be extensions of a character's psychic viewpoint at the time. Dostoevsky saw the categorisation of himself as a "psychologist" as reductive:

²⁶ Bakhtin cites the example of the "feast of the ass" where the ass who carried Mary and the infant Jesus into Egypt is commemorated in a mass accompanied by comic braying (RHW 78).

"They call me a *psychologist*; this is not true. I am merely a realist in the higher sense, that is, I portray all the *depths of the human soul*" (qtd. in *PDP* 60). Stead's statement, "I'm a psychological writer, and my drama is the drama of the person" (Raskin 75), might be read in a similar manner because she cannot be seen to adhere to a fixed school of psychology, and it seems that her notion of the "psychological" interpretation of character is meant more broadly.²⁷ Her characters are the emphasis of her fiction, yet they are constituted in socio-historic terms and as part of a social collective rather than in any individual or entirely psychological sense. In this way Stead shares Bakhtin's concept of subject development in which a person is constituted through external social and historic languages, some of which are interiorised and which thereby form thought and the "unconscious".²⁸

Historically speaking, Stead, of course, cannot be said to be as closely linked as Rabelais to the popular-festive sources of which Bakhtin is talking. It could be argued that images of the lower stratum do not appear in Stead's work to the extent that they do in that of Rabelais, and therefore her images could be said to have been toned down in accordance with bourgeois tastes. However, as has already been indicated, there are elements of the lower bodily stratum in Stead's work which show an inheritance of Rabelaisian ribaldry.

These may have been toned down to some extent, (the obscenities by characters in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* are represented by ellipsis, for instance), but the carnivalesque

²⁷ While Stead had studied psychology she did seem to view aspects of it as reductive. For example, on Freud she wrote: "I wish we could ditch Freud and all his works. He succeeded in making every thought, every act guilty. . . . Life is not guilty; no form of life or living is guilty" (*Letters I* 409).

²⁸ See chapter two for more detail.

nature of Stead's work serves nonetheless to challenge the dominant ideologies of her era, including bourgeois taste itself. Her attack on authority is the essence of her carnival spirit rather than any direct laudation of, or participation in, folk culture. Stead's relation to carnival is evident in her imagery, her humour, parodies, fantasy, and in the polyphonic structure of her work.

There are, of course, many and varied theoretical problems with Bakhtin's concept of carnival. For instance, he has been criticised for idealising the folk and treating the peasantry as a utopian community (Glazener 114). His depiction of real carnival, (as opposed to the abstract concept), is criticised, too, for carnival rituals may actually have reinforced social hierarchies, firstly, by providing a "safety valve" after which order and normality were restored, and secondly, by victimising minorities or the disadvantaged, such as Jews and women (Stallybrass 19). As well as this, some feast days and carnivals are thought to have been "sanctioned" by the state which allowed them to co-exist with officialdom (Bernstein 106). As Terry Eagleton remarks in his criticism of Bakhtinian theory, quoting from *Twelfth Night*: "There is no slander in an allowed fool" (1981, 148).

Various enthusiasts of Bakhtin's theories answer these claims by arguing that carnival must be talked of in terms of *potential*. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White suggest, for instance, that carnival, "given the presence of sharpened political antagonism", may act as a "catalyst" and "site of actual and symbolic struggle" (14). This is apparent in Natalie Zemon Davis's work when she argues that some carnival rituals could be said to reinforce the subordinate place of women in early modern French society, but that others

could undermine this hierarchy (131). However, it is also clear that Bakhtin's abstract concept of carnival must be distinguished from actual carnival and, therefore, must be examined as a political strategy in its own right. For example, while *Rabelais and His World* deals with medieval culture, it is in dialogue with the bourgeois epoch, and with the authoritarian nature of Stalinism. Stead has a similar dialogic relation to these elements of her era. It is assumed, then, that the potentiality Bakhtin's theory of carnival offers greatly outweighs its limitations, and Stead's work will be discussed in regard to its carnival *potential* while making, it is hoped, reasonable claims about the extent of its subversiveness.

It is also apparent that Bakhtin's work, on the whole, ignores the question of gender. This, Wayne Booth asserts, is surprising given Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, or the "multi-voiced" nature of language, in which gender can be considered a significant factor (54). Critics such as Ruth Ginsburg also argue that Bakhtin's theory of carnival reinforces the subordinate place of women in medieval society by inscribing them as objects of ridicule and by determining women through their biological functions, as child bearers and so forth (369). Indeed, Bakhtin argues that woman is representative of the "grotesque" body, a figure of the "lower bodily stratum":

she is the incarnation of this [lower] stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb. Such is woman's image in popular comic tradition. (RHW 240)

Yet Bakhtin is arguing here that “the popular tradition is in no way hostile to woman and does not approach her negatively” (*RHW* 240). Instead, woman is indicative of carnival ambivalence in her connection with biological cycles, with life and death.

Stead’s depiction of women is complex and fraught with difficulty because her female characters, like her working-class ones, are not spared the barbs of her critical eye. It is not the purpose of this thesis to examine exclusively Stead’s relations to her female characters, and to feminism, but it is suggested that her “carnival sense of the world” extends to her female protagonists. As was demonstrated in the discussion of Malfi’s wedding, a carnival interpretation of Stead’s women is productive. It may be also be appropriate to “poach”²⁹ Bakhtin’s theories for feminist purposes by asking whether Stead utilises the carnival potential of woman’s “lowly” position by creating her female protagonists as subversive. The grotesque carnival woman may highlight her opposition to patriarchal discourses and the closed, classical body of the dominant body politic. Thus Letty Fox, Emily Howard, and Teresa Hawkins are examined for their subversive carnival potential.

²⁹ This is a term used by Laurie Finke to signify the woman mystic’s assumption of the classic masculine body in order to allow herself the right to speak. In a similar way Finke poaches Bakhtin’s theories in order to talk of women’s subversion of dominant discourses.

Polyphony

In his essay "Discourse in the Novel" Bakhtin extends his theory of the novel to incorporate his theory of language – "heteroglossia". In this essay he describes the novel itself as a conglomeration of social and ideological discourses and forms in dialogue with each other. He writes:

The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice. In it the investigator is confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls. (DI 261)

Graham Pechey summarises Bakhtin's argument in this way:

the novel is the self-consciousness and (at least partial) thematization of dialogism; it is the form of writing in which what is signified is discourse itself. The novel foregrounds not the technical materiality of language but the social materiality of discourse: the irreducibly plural material of social relations – of contradiction and historical becoming – is at once the irreducible material of the novel and its object of representation. (68)

The novel may also be in dialogue with other novels, or with other genres and forms in literature, thereby creating an intertextual dialogue or the refunctioning and relativisation of other genres and literary structures. As well as this abstract concept of the novel, Bakhtin reiterates "novelism's" foundation in carnival, where language is relativised, as he says:

on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all "languages" and dialects; there developed the literature of . . . street songs, folk sayings, anecdotes, where there was no language-center at all, . . . where all "languages" were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face. (DI 273)

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the first edition of which was written prior to "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin sees Dostoevsky as a unique exponent of polyphony in the novel. However, "Discourse in the Novel" defines the novel as an *inherently* heteroglossic, or multi-voiced, form. Dostoevsky's work, then, becomes not an entirely unprecedented phenomenon, but one of the most overt examples of novelism. As was mentioned earlier, Bakhtin largely rejects literature since the Renaissance in *Rabelais and His World*, but other works, such as "Discourse in the Novel" or *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, modify this dismissal by emphasising the possibilities of the novel's heterogeneous nature and the novel's generic links with carnival.

Bakhtin's theory of language is opposed to the work of linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who favoured *langue*, or the structure of language, over *parole*, or utterance, as the site of linguistic study (Morson and Emerson 125). Instead Bakhtin privileges the utterance and emphasises the multiple "accents" on a word. Whereas Saussure concentrated on the relationship between addresser and addressee, Bakhtin highlights the hidden meanings behind any dialogue. For instance, some of the words which are uttered in any conversation may have been borrowed from elsewhere, may have different socio-historic nuances, may indicate a specific "speech genre" or jargon, or may be spoken with an ironic or satiric tone. According to Charles Schuster, Bakhtin modifies Aristotle's "rhetorical triangle" of speaker-listener-subject through his concept of an interactive circle of meaning:

Like planets in a solar system, each element affects the orbits of the other whirling participants by means of its own gravitational pull. The rhetorical triangle, with its three distinct points, is transformed by Bakhtin's theory into a rhetorical circle with speaker, hero [subject], and listener whirling around the circumference. (596)

Simon Dentith describes Bakhtin's³⁰ theory of language in this way:

It sees the process of language production as dynamic and value-charged; it situates it in the sociologically significant relationships between people; and it retains an epistemological dimension (that is, it retains a strong sense of the reference language makes to the world). (30)

Stead shares this same emphasis on sociological relationships between people represented through language-as-dialogue in her narratives. Her novels emphasise social utterances and a complex matrix of meanings.

Bakhtin contrasts the inherently dialogic or heterogeneous nature of language with "centripetal" discourses – languages which suppress otherness and heterogeneity in order to impose themselves as fixed and homogeneous. This "monologic" approach refuses and denies dialogue, and by extension, misrepresents truth in its one-sidedness. The human subject must combat competing discourses, taking aboard some and rejecting others; it must struggle against those monologic discourses which seek to suppress its alterity. In Bakhtin's work there could be said to be a contradiction between an idealistic view of dialogism as benevolent discursive exchange and an acknowledgment of the coercive "struggle" between discourses. This is perhaps best solved by the recognition that some discourses seek to operate in a hierarchy while Bakhtin's ideal is a plane in which subjects act as equals³¹ on a horizontal discursive field.

³⁰ Dentith is actually speaking about V.N. Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.

³¹ This is not to say that these subjects are *equivalents* as a specific identity at the level of discourse and experience is inevitable.

Despite Bakhtin's emphasis on the inherent heterogeneity of the novel *per se* it is also important to recognise that some novels may conform to, or espouse, languages of authority and invest in an ideal of unity and finalisation.³² In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, for instance, Bakhtin talks of Tolstoy's novels as "monologic" (71-2). It is therefore a question of whether or not novels seek to be heterogeneous or whether they suppress the extant voices of otherness in language and discourse by assuming a homogeneous controlling voice. As Dentith writes: "Bakhtin is celebrating the novel *insofar as* it aligns itself with the centrifugal forces of language and becomes a mobile, linguistically various, anti-dogmatic, relativizing and dialogistic form" (54; emphasis added). As with carnival, it is necessary to talk of the subversive *potential* of the novel without granting the novel this immanent right.

Stead's narratives embrace the heteroglossia of language. She uses her famous image of an "ocean of story" to suggest the immensity and enveloping nature of language. For her, short stories are full of "sketch, anecdote, jokes cunning, philosophical, and biting, legends and fragments", and every person, professional writer or not, is able to tell a story (OS 3). The metaphor of the ocean befits the density of the language, the multiplicity of voices, and the variety of life found in Stead's work. Stead delights in a play of languages throughout her novels. Foreigners, such as Solander Fox's mother in *Letty Fox*, mix their national languages and distort syntax. Louie Pollit constructs written languages and codes. The narrative voice often indulges in verbal plays, employing vast

³² David Lodge argues his way out of the dichotomy set up by Bakhtin in which the novel is dialogic and lyric poetry, monologic, by suggesting that some texts, including poetry, foreground this dialogism while others assume a monologic authority (1990, 98).

numbers of adjectives, or elicits allusions from other Stead texts. As we have seen already, her heteroglossia also embraces the language of carnival through the use of coarse or unofficial language. She also emphasises her dislike of “monologic” texts in accordance with Bakhtin’s view of the novel in which “classicism” is opposed:

I dislike polite letters, self-conscious classicism, pseudo-philosophers (among writers), and the monosyllabic mucker-pose. . . . The essence of style in literature, for me, is experiment, invention, “creative error” (Jules Romains), and change; and of its content, the presentation of ‘man alive’ (Ralph Fox). (Kunitz 1330)

But Stead’s works are not just representative of “novelism” in any general sense because their artistic construction is based in the more specific form of “polyphony”.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* Bakhtin defines Dostoevsky’s polyphonic project. In a polyphonic work authors³³ do not assert their voice as the controlling factor in a plot but allow the characters to speak for themselves. This polyphonic structure allows each character to express his or her own subjectivity rather than be “objects of authorial discourse” (PDP 7). Thus Dostoevsky’s heroes “speak themselves”³⁴: they describe the world from their point of view, they give the reader their own histories, and even describe their own physical appearances (PDP 48). This polyphonic structure does not mean that there is no design on the part of the author. On the contrary, Bakhtin tells us that “this independence and freedom of a character is precisely what is incorporated into

³³ The concept of the “author” in Bakhtin’s work is complex and the author here should not be simply equated with the person, Christina Stead. Rather, the voice of the author in a text is “authorial discourse” and this may or may not be related to the narrator’s discourse. In a polyphonic text the author’s voice remains outside of the text but he or she does not disappear entirely, as David Lodge remarks: “The writer is a person who knows how to work language while remaining outside of it; he [sic] has the gift of indirect speech” (1990, 7).

³⁴ This phrase is borrowed from Susan Sheridan (1988a, 12), but is used here for its multiple meanings.

the author's design" (PDP 13). Bakhtin argues that each character "has his [sic] own order, his own logic, which enters into the realm of the author's artistic intention but is not infringed upon by the author's whim" (PDP 65). This does not mean that an author cannot have sympathies or that there is an entire absence of authorial comment, for the author is an entity capable of dialogue with the independent character within the novel (PDP 63). Thus, Bakhtin does suggest the author's entire absence, but "objectivity", in a polyphonic framework, means that the goal is to portray characters with as much objectivity as possible. As he says, "The issue here is not an absence of, but a *radical change in, the author's position*" (PDP 67). This means that if there is any authorial judgement it is often hidden or implicit in order not to impose or encroach upon the independent voices of the characters. In this way these texts cannot be reduced to an anarchic cacophony in which no truth can be established, but nor does the author interject with direct moral judgement or control.

Bakhtin's concept of polyphony is based on an ethical position of allowing the other subjectivity and the capacity to speak (Dentith 43). The aim of *objectivity* means that characters are allowed to speak for themselves, and this must be contrasted with *objectivisation* in which the authorial discourse creates a character as object. As Bakhtin says, "to affirm someone else's 'I' not as an object but as another subject – this is the principle governing Dostoevsky's worldview" (PDP 10).

Dostoevsky's characters are "ideologues" in that each embodies philosophical positions which, in the dialogue enacted between characters in the novel, becomes a dialogue of

philosophies or socio-historic ideologies. These characters, while undoubtedly individual consciousnesses, are nonetheless constituted in a social collective. They are engaged in unfinished dialogues with each other. As Bakhtin writes: "In Dostoevsky, consciousness never gravitates toward itself but is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness" (PDP 32). He also states: "The fundamental category in Dostoevsky's mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution, but *coexistence* and *interaction*" (PDP 28). Dostoevsky's characters are not only externally dialogic but internally dialogic as well; different voices and discourses inform their internal conversations and dilemmas, but all discourses have their origins in the social milieu.

In her draft of a paper to be given at the third Annual Congress of the League of American Writers, entitled "Uses of the many-charactered novel", Stead's description of this type of novel closely resembles Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. She echoes Bakhtin's idea of "novelism" when she writes that "the novel is eternally young because it never was classic" and that the novel can be "the most ingenious, most instructive, useful and philosophic sort of imaginative writing, in its liberty and in its length" (1994, 196). She even foresees the kind of criticisms many-charactered novels would receive from critics and readers:

The many-charactered novel, if it is not to be a follies or the oil-painting of a historic occasion, has plenty of difficulties. In the first place, the writer finds it difficult to properly order the idiosyncrasies of so many creatures: in the second place, the critics who chiefly live on blurbs are sure to find the thing inchoate. . . . This is the more so, because once the writer has opened the door, he [sic] loses caution and characters begin to troop in and to spring up all around. (1994, 197)

The final sentence emphasises the independence of the characters from authorial control as they “troop in” of their own accord; that is, *they* take over. Stead also remarks on the distance of the author and the absence of explicit judgement on the author’s part, when she says:

He [sic] is eternally fertile and he is in the position of an impartial, disabused and merry god. There is little need to become prosy and hand down the tables of the law, for the characters provide all morals and checks by their many-sidedness. (1994, 197)

The reader is the one who must “draw his [sic] own conclusions from the diverse material, as from life itself. The author is not impartial, but not minatory, either” (1994, 198). Importantly, Stead argues that the distance of the author in polyphonic novels means that any critique is “sidelong” and “mostly ironic” (1994, 198).

Like Dostoevsky, Stead seems to give her characters free reign; they talk unconstrainedly and their ideas seem free and independent of authorial control. A recognition of the polyphonic nature of Stead’s narratives enables us to support her notion of herself as an objective “naturalist”. Bakhtin sees a documentary, prosaic style of narration as a result of the distance of authorial control:

Wherever the narration does not interfere as an alien voice in the heroes’ interior dialogue, does not enter into an interruption-ridden union with the speech of one or another of the characters, then it presents facts without voice, without intonation or with conventional intonation. Dry, informative, documentary discourse is, as it were, voiceless discourse, raw material for the voice. (PDP 250-1)

As was stated in the introduction to this thesis, Stead’s work, particularly in the later novels, has this tone of social documentation. Under the guise of science Stead stakes a claim to artistic objectivity in order to underscore her dialogue with material reality. Her

aim is to present her characters with as much objectivity as possible. Yet her description of her viewpoint as that of a scientist is somewhat misplaced for the “objects” of her novels are, in fact, *subjects* who are given a speaking voice.

Diana Brydon describes Stead’s attainment of this polyphonic goal:

She is remarkably successful in creating an illusion of objectivity, perhaps because, in her writing at least, she appears to be non-judgemental, capable of recording the most monstrous behaviour with no sign of revulsion. Profoundly sceptical of all claims to authority, she balances every statement recorded with a counterstatement that carries equal weight. (1987, 24-25)

Brydon’s emphasis on “counterstatement” is significant in that it highlights Stead’s dialogism and the equivalence of import in the presentation of discourses. However, Bakhtin emphasises the fact that dialogism is not the same as dialectic. In his view, dialectic is a unified, evolutionary sequence, indicating a philosophical whole (*PDP* 25). Gina Mercer’s article on thesis and antithesis in Stead’s work falsely determines Stead’s *oeuvre* as a dialectic unity. Such a reading removes the specificity of Stead’s characters and the context of each novel. While there are undoubtedly thematic connections, and dialogues, between Stead’s novels these should not be mistaken for a single rhetorical intention. Similarly, individual characters within a novel cannot be said to have ultimate authority as one character’s speech is balanced by the counterstatements of others.

Stead made it clear that she used actual people she had met as prototypes for her characters.³⁵ In their interview Joan Lidoff asked Stead: “Are all your characters based

³⁵ Some of these people were understandably upset by their printed portraits. For example, see Sandra Hall’s article on Florence James’s reception of herself as Eleanor Herbert. In Bakhtinian terms Stead treated these characters/friends as “natural objects” seemingly allowing them no dialogic response. Stead’s portrait of Eleanor is not entirely malevolent, but certainly the novel is a parody of Eleanor on the

on people you knew?", to which she replied, "Oh yes, you can't invent people, or they're puppets" (1982, 217). Likewise Bakhtin says that Dostoevsky "freely and creatively reworked [actual people] into living artistic images of ideas" (PDP 91). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin sees this reliance on "real" people as an example of Dostoevsky's ability to discern and utilise actual social voices of his epoch (PDP 90). Stead attempted to be true to the dialects and accents of her characters, undertaking research to this end (Rowley 1993a, 213; Rowley 1993b, 41).³⁶ Whatever her success, Stead's works are full of dialogue which seeks to display the idiosyncratic voice of each character influenced by background, nationality and personality. She shares this creative process with Dostoevsky whose plans showed in detail his search for words for the hero (PDP 39).

Stead's polyphonic narrative structure means that the voices of her characters seem to run away with the text. While it is not its only structural formation, polyphony places great importance on direct dialogue. Critics have noted Stead's reliance on talk in her novels. For instance, Brydon notes that "talk becomes more fascinating than story" (1987, 21). Sheridan writes that "the characters speak themselves and their world into

whole. Thus there is an irony here: the real-life models believe themselves to have been *objectified* while Stead believes she has been *objective* in allowing each character subjectivity. The underlying parodic voice in *Miss Herbert* also questions the possibility of absolute objectivity, but this does not undermine the goal of objectivity in which the character's voice is constructed independent of direct criticism. The problem rests rather with the real person's perception of themselves and the gap between that perception and Stead's artistic presentation of them.

³⁶ The success of Stead's aim of depicting socially situated voices is questioned by Suzette Henke who argues that while Stead successfully placed *The Man Who Loved Children* in a geographical sense there are British and Australian idioms in her text which jar for the American reader (2).

textual existence" (1988a, 12). "Stead's characters are always articulate to the point of prolixity," writes Laurie Clancy (1981, 36). Gribble, also, has this to say:

Granted an unusual degree of autonomy, her characters provide a surface of talk which, in the absence of overt narrative interpolation, presents novels that appear spontaneous but shapeless. (1994, 6)

This prolixity, which some critics seem to despair at, is not just evidence of an excessive, naturalist project, but represents the independence of Stead's characters, and the construction of her narratives which allows them to speak. While this strategy may result in narratives which are tiresome to an ear used to stylistic control and unity, the value of this dialogic project should not be underestimated.

The author's distance from characters, the absence of any judgement or evaluation, means that there is no "surplus vision" or omniscient "perspective" from which these characters are portrayed (*PDP* 251). This leads to the detailing of minutiae and repetition because there is no summarising voice. Bakhtin writes that these narratives:

with the most tedious precision, register all the minutest movements of the hero, not sparing endless repetitions. The narrator is literally fettered to his [sic] hero; he cannot back off from him sufficiently to give a summarizing and integrated image of his deeds and actions. (*PDP* 225)

Thus there is no let up from the talk, no cessation of voices. Therefore, polyphony explains the "prolixity" of the characters in Stead's novels, and her narratives' reliance on talk.

In *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* Adrian Mitchell describes Stead's characters in this way:

The disposition of her characters to indulge their neurotic anxieties, to coerce rather than to persuade, ceaselessly to talk, the very barrage of

words in which they signal their confusion, deceit, fear or anger, proves exhausting. (133)

The reason these characters need to “speak themselves” is because they often appear to be “ideologues” who battle each other through their world-views. It is the “barrage” or “battle” between these ideologies, the characters’ adversarial dialogues, which proves exhausting. It can also be frustrating for a reader used to a unified narrative when no one voice is invested with authority. Mitchell’s recognition of coercion is perceptive because many of the dialogues between Stead’s characters exceed benevolent exchanges of ideology. Indeed, some of the characters may even be said to be “monologic” in their attempts to suppress the voices of others around them.³⁷

According to Bakhtin, carnivalesque literature examines contemporary circumstances and does not define itself in terms of authoritarian legend or myth which are mired in the past, as do the classic forms of epic and tragedy (*DI* 23). Julia Kristeva argues that carnivalesque literature “is a kind of political journalism of its time. Its discourse exteriorizes political and ideological conflicts of the moment” (1980, 83). This is true for Stead whose characters openly discuss the politics of the day, or whose voices represent historically situated ideologies. Each of her novels is explicit about its historical setting in order to underscore the historical specificity of the ideologies held by its characters.

As was suggested in the introduction, these voices do not amount to modernist stream-of-consciousness writing evinced as they are externally and between independent

³⁷ See the following chapter for a discussion of Stead’s “monologic” characters.

subjects.³⁸ Even the ostensibly interior monologues are “spoken” with a “sideways glance” at other interlocutors, or are evidence of interior dialogue (*PDP* 32). For instance, the section “Catherine’s Narrative” in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* begins in her voice, without quotation marks, but goes on to include dialogue between Michael and Catherine and the narrator’s interjections. The narrative itself is directed at Baruch who comments on it once it ceases (*SPM* 264). Adrian Mitchell admits to a confusion over the fate of the characters in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*: “What Stead fails to resolve . . . is whether these are to be explanations primarily of character, or of social philosophy” (135). This confusion results from the fact that the characters embody social philosophies so that their fates are *both* social and personal.

In a magazine article Stead discusses the polyphonic attributes of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* whose characters “do not express in their conversations my view of life, but, I hope (or rather, intended) various views of life, according to their temperaments” (Williamson 14).³⁹ Each of the characters in the novel is balanced by the voices of the others so that none of them can be considered the major protagonist; all are of equal importance. Stead’s other early work, *The Salzburg Tales*, has an obvious polyphonic

³⁸ Stream-of-consciousness writing is not opposed to Bakhtinian theory in the sense that it can be viewed as a representation of interior dialogue. Indeed, Bakhtin argues that the generic characteristics of the menippea or carnivalesque literature can be found in modern literary movements (*PDP* 137). Whether modernism entails a carnival sense of the world is a separate question. However, it is argued here that Bakhtinian theory is a more useful way of defining Stead’s approach especially given that so much dialogue takes place externally.

³⁹ Stead also states that *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* involves “a cast of characters battling through daily life, as much passion being expended on the small accidents of daily life as on any one of the great tragic themes” (Williamson 14). This emphasis on the obscurity of the characters, and the importance of their daily life, opposes itself to an ideal in which “high” and “tragic” events should be the subject of the novel.

structure: a gathering of people where each tells a tale without any authorial interjection within a minimal frame-work. But *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is more problematic because of the impression of underlying despair and isolation, resonant in Catherine's quotation from Nietzsche as she slashes her wrist: "They are alien, . . . so alien that they cannot even speak their difference to each other" (SPM 311).⁴⁰ Yet this view of isolated voices is not part of the novel structure itself which is in fact built on dialogic interaction between characters despite this individual character's expression of malaise. This is not to dismiss the evident darkness of the novel's vision, but to emphasise the polyphony and community in the novel's structure.

Stead's polyphonic project means that plot is not the over-riding controlling feature in her novels. According to Bakhtin, plot is a monologic structure combining "finalized images of people in the unity of a monologically perceived and understood world" (PDP 7). Instead characters and their ideologies are the focus of these texts, but they should not be thought to be entirely without structure, as Bakhtin writes:

It is precisely as ideologemes that discourse becomes the object of representation in the novel, and it is for the same reason novels are never in danger of becoming a mere aimless verbal play. (DI 333)

⁴⁰ Nietzsche's influence on Stead's work is significant. Stead talks of allowing a character's will to express itself: "My job, the writer's job, is to let the character develop his will" (G. Smith 1980, 215). She also talks of her characters as "fountains of passion" (Williamson 14). Just how much this Nietzschean influence leads to a Romantic individualism on Stead's part is debatable. Certainly Nietzsche's work can be enlisted into Bakhtin's theories in some ways. There can be a connection drawn between Dionysian revelry and carnival for instance (Kristeva 1980, 78). Michael Bernstein argues that there are carnival images in *Beyond Good and Evil* and that Nietzsche's philosophy also leads to a breakdown of ossified hierarchies (100). Yet Nietzsche's expression of individual will is opposed to community oriented carnival and to the multi-voiced project of polyphony. For a further discussion on Nietzsche's influence see the chapter on *For Love Alone*.

Stead frequently asserts that her novels are driven by character. In an undated typescript she writes: "The novel is a study of character to such an extent that it can even lack a plot if the character [sic] are strong enough" (qtd. in Allen 335). And to John Beston she says:

I write twenty or thirty plans, but never stick to one, for the characters are going to alter it. I wouldn't dream of working to an end—you can't write according to a plan. I let the novel tell itself; I don't control it. (89)

To Jonah Raskin she describes herself as an observer who does not "interfere": "I watch the characters and the situation move and don't interfere. I'm patient. I'm lying low. I wait and wait for the drama to display itself" (75). Indeed, a myriad of characters "troop in" and out of Stead's narratives at the expense of a unified plot. For instance, Peter Hoag is the focus of the opening of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* but is rarely mentioned again. In section 11 the narrative moves to the March family home in great detail but never shifts there again, nor do the March family warrant narrative attention much after this. These examples serve to emphasise Stead's attempt to portray a world of characters and their voices. While novels such as *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* have central protagonists, Stead cannot resist situating these characters amongst others, in their social and ideological milieu.

On finishing *I'm Dying Laughing* Stead said: "I don't want to kill and maim. I never did really; or ever come to a conclusion, because a 'conclusion' is just another scroll in the pattern and it will unroll itself farther on" (*Letters I* 380). What does this mean for our reading of the endings of Stead's novels? Perhaps one of the reasons that *The Man Who Loved Children* has been seen to be Stead's masterpiece is because of its apparent climax:

Henny's suicide/murder and Louie's exile (Jarrell in *TMW* 20). It is also possible to argue that Stead's texts are not entirely open-ended because they must conform in many ways to the inherently metonymic form of prose and the immanent finality of the novel structure. It could also be argued that her endings sometimes insist on moral conclusions. For instance, both Robbie Grant and Emily Howard appear to suffer fates which, from a moral viewpoint, appear inevitable. Yet Stead's novels seem to embody a repetitiveness which dismisses linear formations. There is also a sense in which Stead's endings are not governed by morality at all, but by the characters who come to their own, independently determined, ends. In her interview with Rodney Wetherell Stead calls herself "a character writer" and adds: "I'm interested, not in plot but what they do with their lives and what their lives do with them. I never twist a character to suit an end, because they come to their ends" (444).

Bakhtin recognised the problem any formal conclusion to a novel might pose to his theory of dialogism when he perceives in Dostoevsky's novels:

a unique conflict between the internal open-endedness of the characters and dialogue, and the *external* (in most cases compositional and thematic) *completedness* of every individual novel . . . almost all of Dostoevsky's novels have a *conventionally literary, conventionally monologic* ending. . . .
(*PDP* 39)

Bakhtin reads a number of conclusions of Dostoevsky's novels as monologic as a result of this view, but it might be possible to interpret even structural endings as open or inconclusive, as integrally related to the polyphonic content of the novel. For, as Bakhtin himself argues, carnivalesque literature in general is open and denies finality:

the carnival sense of the world also knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of *conclusive conclusion*: all endings are merely new beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again. (*PDP* 165)

Inconclusiveness is immanent in dialogic structures and results in non-causal movement. For example, resolute movement is halted by the perpetuality of dialogue in which there is always the anticipation of the other's response, thus allowing no final word, no finalisation. On this Bakhtin states:

Thanks to this attitude toward the other's consciousness, a peculiar *perpetuum mobile* is achieved, made up of his [sic] internal polemic with another and with himself, an endless dialogue where one reply begets another, which begets a third, and so on to infinity, and all of this without any forward motion. (PDP 230)

Yet, while words or dialogue may be continuous, the specificity of their context as utterances, to whom they are directed for instance, is not always identical. However, because dialogic exchange is endless, plot cannot determine the construction of dialogue in a narrative because it would lead to finalisation:

The potential endlessness of dialogue in Dostoevsky's design already in itself answers the question why such dialogue cannot be plot-dependent in the strict sense of the word, for a plot-dependent dialogue strives toward conclusion just as inevitably as does the plot of which it is in fact a component. (PDP 252)

The dialogic nature of Stead's novels must therefore, to some extent, explain their inconclusiveness.

Bakhtin perceives contemporaneity as one of the important facets of Dostoevsky's work. As Dostoevsky's novels are set in the contemporary world they are immanently open-ended because connected with a "world-in-the-making" (DI 30). Furthermore, evolving sequences, or causality, make way for simultaneity allowing events and characters to be counterposed and juxtaposed. This results in "the catastrophic swiftness of action", the

“whirlwind motion”, the “dynamics of Dostoevsky” (PDP 29). Similarly, Stead’s texts are not ordered by causality, so that “each following sequence is determined by the preceding one” (Kristeva 1980, 72). While there is some linear and evolutionary movement through her novels there are also many instances of repetition and seemingly irrational connections in the narratives. Stead cannot be said to possess a “swiftness of *action*” if only because action or event is, in itself, not the aim. But she does share with Dostoevsky a frenetic pace, a dynamism of multi-voiced life portrayed in the present tense. Thus there is a combination of swiftness and anti-linear movement, an incongruity Barnard Eldershaw recognise when they write:

for all this surface impetuosity these books move slowly, working themselves out fully, like glaciers that flow faster on the surface than beneath and, for all their apparent smoothness, grind their way through rock. (162)

Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky’s polyphonic approach is founded in his historical epoch because it could have been “realized only in the capitalist era” (PDP 19). He perceives Dostoevsky’s work to be a “struggle against a *reification* of man, of human relations, of all human values under the conditions of capitalism” (PDP 62). The abrupt application of capitalism to Russia in the nineteenth century resulted in “worlds thrown off their ideological balance” in which ideologies collided “with one another”, creating an environment of “multi-voicedness” and “multi-leveledness” (PDP 20). This was a social epoch of “*opposing camps*” and conflict (PDP 27). In Bakhtin’s view, Dostoevsky’s individual position as a journalist, “*déclassé intellectual*”⁴¹ and “social wanderer” aided

⁴¹ Stead herself writes, “the artist is always a *déclassé*” (1994, 198).

his ability to discern the multiplicitous discourses of his era and to hear “their dialogic interaction” (PDP 30; 90).

While there is a generation between Stead and Dostoevsky, the historical period in which her texts are situated is certainly tumultuous. Her works are positioned amongst the competing ideologies of the early twentieth century, from the Depression until the postwar 1950s.⁴² Stead’s polyphonic novels are set in the cities of Paris, Sydney, London and New York in an era of political strife in which the tenets of capitalism were under scrutiny and ideologies were literally in conflict. Stead herself connects the many-charactered novel with the metropolis because of the sheer number of humans (New York is her example), and to a world of “strife” (1994, 198-9). The capitalist foundations of the city and the economic relations between people are also an issue in her focus on the metropolis. In this way Stead’s work largely leaves behind the carnival view of nature offered in *The Rightangled Creek* to focus on the struggle of discourses evident in the city. Therefore, Stead’s self-professed left-wing politics allow us to consider her technique as part of her dialogue with capitalism.

It could be argued that, like Dostoevsky, Stead may have been better able or better placed to discern the heteroglossia of her times. Perhaps her position as an outsider – as a traveller, an Australian in Europe and the United States, and as a woman – allowed her an expert ear to hear the discourses of her era. Her wandering life introduced her to

⁴² Stead did publish after the 1950s (for example, *The Little Hotel* was published in 1973), but her texts (including *The Little Hotel*) are predominantly set in this period.

many cultures such that she could only acknowledge the arbitrariness of language, and could perceive the relativity of cultural truths. Bakhtin says of “multi-linguagedness”:

such external multi-linguagedness strengthens and deepens the internal contradictoriness of literary language itself; it undermines the authority of custom and of whatever traditions still fetter linguistic consciousness; it erodes that system of national myth that is organically fused with language, in effect destroying once and for all a mythic and magical attitude to language and the word. A deeply involved participation in alien cultures and languages (one is impossible without the other) inevitably leads to an awareness of the disassociation between language and intentions, language and thought, language and expression. (*DI* 368-9)

Stead’s antipodean position may correlate with her “world inside out” viewpoint, with her ability to undermine and relativise the authority perceived in cultural powers. It might also be possible to argue that as a woman Stead was relatively divorced from participation in historical and state authority which enabled her to apply a distant and critical eye to their conventions. However, this thesis puts such biographical questions aside now, as befits a distant author, to focus on Stead’s novels.

Chapter Two

“Delirious Monologues” Christina Stead’s “Egotistical Monsters”

There were coarse, hasty blandishments, and arguments whose strong, greedy intention immediately crudely appeared: a verbosity approaching surely morbid conditions, a repetition, excitements false and real, frenzy, and almost delirious monologues as if the words came out without any censorship. (*IDL* 102-3)

Stead constructs polyphonic narratives in which many characters speak and interact, yet some of her novels present characters whose voices dominate. They are not sole protagonists, and some do not even possess more space in the narrative than other characters, but they are garrulous and voluble figures whose dominant voice means that they appear to claim the text. These “egotistical monsters”, as David Malouf calls them (36), talk in long and exhausting monologues. Yet these characters do not attain a position of authority in these novels; their views are not presented as truth and the narrator is distant from them. The texts themselves and the structural presentation of the characters are by no means “monologic” but Stead portrays characters with monologic world-views and this monologism is undermined through the polyphonic narrative structure in which they exist. The excessive loquaciousness of these characters is also explained by the author’s attempt to portray their monologic natures. This chapter deals primarily with one of Stead’s most domineering and tiresome characters, Robbie Grant of *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, a character whom Laurie Clancy has called “the most odious . . . in all of Stead’s fiction” (1982a, 12). The chapter also refers to two more of Stead’s

“egotistical monsters”, Sam Pollit and Nellie Cotter, in order to compare them with Grant.¹

Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism rests on its distinction from its opposite term “monologism”. He perceives monologism in strains of contemporary Western ideology where there is a reification and systemisation of ideas as truth (PDP 80). A monologic position is one where there is a unitary and finalised view of the world, resulting in the detriment of others’ perceptions. Bakhtin defines the monologic viewpoint in this way:

Everything capable of meaning can be gathered together in one consciousness and subordinated to a unified accent; whatever does not submit to such a reduction is accidental and unessential. The consolidation of monologism and its permeation into all spheres and ideological life was promoted in modern times by European rationalism, with its cult of a unified and exclusive reason, and especially by the Enlightenment, during which time the basic generic forms of European artistic prose took shape. (PDP 82)

Monologism can be manifested in literature in various ways. For instance, the author may be the dominant and controlling consciousness in the novel, and the characters subordinated to this controlling discourse. Bakhtin argues that in this form of the novel there is only “*one cognitive subject, all else being merely objects of its cognition*” (PDP 71). Thus the characters have no independence; ideas are placed in their mouths and are not interpellated into a character’s personality and world-view. These ideas are abstract and

¹ This is not an exhaustive list of Stead’s characters who are prone to monologism. Emily Howard is discussed in chapter six of this thesis, and Jonathan Crow and Andrew Hawkins are talked of as “monologic” in chapter seven. Letty Fox, a similarly egotistical character, is dealt with separately in the following chapter because of the first-person narrative of *Letty Fox*, an important structural difference which means that Letty’s voice necessarily dominates. Monologism involves discourse as coercion; therefore those characters who are defined as “monologic” must have this same relation to the structures of power.

gravitate "toward the systemically monologic worldview of the author himself [sic]" (PDP 79).

The compositional form, the monologue, has its genesis in monologic ideology as the voice is contained in a structure which is closed, and distinct from more interactive structures or dialogues (PDP 88). Yet in a text *as a whole* the ideas, or the character's voice, presented in a monologue may interact dialogically with others in the narrative structure (PDP 88). In other words, the use of monologue in itself does not mean that the work is correspondingly monologic because this depends on the overall design and outlook of the text. In the case of Stead's egotistical monsters the prolonged monologues are indicative of their own monologic dispositions. Their incessant talk suggests their inability to listen to, or recognise the validity of, the voices of others. But these monologues do not delimit the texts themselves as monologic.

In chapter one it was argued that the prevalence of talk in Stead's narratives can be explained by her polyphonic project. In a polyphonic novel structure the characters are not objects controlled by an over-riding consciousness but are allowed to express their own subjectivities, and this leads to a great deal of direct dialogue in which they voice their ideological beliefs and their personalities. The author's goal is to present characters with as much objectivity as possible and in this way the characters' talk underscores the distance of the author who has given up monologic control. If the hero, or a main protagonist, dominates the text it is a consciousness which is not the author's own; it is a free and independent voice. In this way Bakhtin argues that "the hero's self-

consciousness, once it becomes the dominant, breaks down the monologic unity of the work (without, of course, violating the artistic unity of a new and nonmonologic type)" (*PDP* 51). Stead's characters, similarly, are given free reign to express their subjectivities "without any censorship" (*IDL* 103).

The repetitions and circularities in the speech patterns of these characters can also be explained by the structure of polyphony. As was noted earlier, polyphony is constructed through simultaneity and contemporaneity where voices are counterposed in dialogue. This leads to the frenetic "whirlwind motion" of these narratives (*PDP* 29). Because the characters are left to speak for themselves they present all aspects of their personalities through their talk – all detail, important and trivial, is described by them. The simulation of independence can lead to "endless repetitions, reservations, and long-windedness" (*PDP* 212). As Ron Geering writes of Nellie Cotter:

Once Christina Stead becomes engrossed with one of her creations (as here with Nellie) she keeps on hammering away and is liable to repetition. Again, she gets so immersed in the process of establishing the detail and texture of her characters' lives that the novel sometimes seems to go round in circles instead of forward. (1968, 34)

Part of the loquaciousness of characters such as Robbie Grant can therefore be explained by Stead's polyphonic approach with its dedication to the independence of the character's voice. Yet her "egotistical" characters seem excessively garrulous: they ramble, shout, babble, and repeat themselves endlessly. Therefore, it is argued, the circularities and repetitions in the speech patterns of these characters prone to monologue are also indicative of their egotism and monologic world-views.

A Monologic Personality

As has already been stated, the voice of Robbie Grant dominates *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. The title of the novel comes from one of his many pick-up lines: he constantly entices women to his apartment by inviting them up for “a little tea, a little chat” (eg. 15).

Grant is an incessant talker and he is forever repeating himself, droning on at his cronies on the same topics. The narrator tells us, in a description typical of Grant’s monologues, that: “Grant rejoiced, and began talking fast, telling the whole story over again, mixing up his ideas . . . ” (57). As an example of Grant’s speech take this monologue in which he hounds Edda Flack to write a play about his own life for him:

“You see, you got to give the man some constructive traits, he’s a no-good, a jerk, Kincaid, you can buy him for five cents in some respects, but in other respects, he has a streak of gold. You can have the woman make him over if you like. You’re the artist. And the girl’s got to have character. I say to the blonde, ‘You’re beautiful, but I don’t love you, you can’t hold me: you gave me too much pain, and it’s character that counts.’ And the other is famous, but she is real Egyptian sakel and she prefers to come home and make breakfast for me. I have character too – a renunciation scene, very good – ‘No, no, no,’ I say – ‘no for you, and no for me – I mightn’t love you if you weren’t famous.’ ‘No, no,’ she says, ‘fame means nothing to me, I want to come home, make breakfast for you, I prefer that as a career. Besides, I owe it to you. You paid for me at the start. Now I love you. That’s your profit.’ ‘All right,’ I say, ‘then we’ll both do something glorious, we’ll go back and rebuild Europe, Poland, Italy, somewhere, I’ll show them how to grow or distribute cotton. I’ll show them cotton machinery. Even the Soviet Union would do–’ I go and find out about the *saboteurs* – and you sing, or dance, or act – you are famous, you take your fame with you.” (45)

Despite the heteroglossia of this passage – the many voices and discourses which Grant calls upon – all other voices are consumed by his own and are made to serve his egomania. His talk is representative of his power; his wealth and influence, in

mercantile circles at least, make him the kind of man that must be listened to for fear of his disfavour. Very few of his listeners tell him to stop, so he talks without any regulation. Even if he is asked to halt his monologues he ignores the interjector and continues. Indeed, Edda's harried response to the monologue above is, "Let me think, don't talk any more, Robbie, let me think" (45), yet, after pausing briefly to fix her a drink, he proceeds with his monomania. These monologues are often too much for his listeners who either pity him, laugh at him, or burst into tears in despair. In this case Edda literally cries, and exclaims, "Like a drum, your one crazy idea. Like a bad headache" (46).

Grant is monologic by nature because of his infuriating inability to listen to others. While the depiction of him in the novel focuses on his existence in a social collective in its polyphonic structure, he does not recognise the subjectivity of the others, or their equal importance. For example, when David Flack asks Robbie to consider his and his daughter's troubles Grant halts his narrative briefly to consider them but then reverts quickly to talk of his own concerns (168-9). While the world in this novel is certainly not a representation of Grant's solipsism, it is clear that Grant perceives the world only through his eyes and sees others only in relation to his own needs. In Bakhtin's terms this is a monologic approach to the world:

Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another *I* with equal rights (*thou*). With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) *another person* remains wholly and merely an *object* of consciousness, and not another consciousness. . . . Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive* force. Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materializes all reality. Monologue pretends to be the *ultimate word*. (PDP 292-3)

Characters such as Grant, Nellie Cotter or Sam Pollit do not engage in dialogue with others and this is, in a sense, a sign of an absence of depth, or an indication of immaturity. These are child-like personalities in accordance with Lev Vygotsky's² description of the child subject in *Thought and Language*. Vygotsky judged that the egocentric speech of a child is not representative of the externalisation of internal thoughts, but that such internal speech has yet to develop (228). As the child grows older egocentric speech is no longer vocalised but is internalised and forms the subject's "inner speech" (228). Both inner speech and egocentric speech are characterised by condensed and disjointed syntactical formations because the focus of this speech is not communicative, thus it is largely incomprehensible to outsiders (235). The topic is assumed and known by the "speaker" so that subjects are dispensed with and this speech "becomes governed by an almost entirely predicative syntax" (244). Grant's monologues often dispense with subject markers so that the listener (or reader) is frequently at a loss as to his meaning.³ Vygotsky also argues that egocentric speech does not occur when the child is alone but is spoken *as if* it were a communicative act; the speaker presumes the attention and comprehension of his or her listeners (231). Indeed, the only time the narrator presents Grant alone it is made clear that he is strangely (for him) silent (*ALT* 300).

² Vygotsky is thought to have influenced Bakhtin's ideas on subject development and language (Morson and Emerson 1990, 205).

³ In *House of All Nations* the character Henri Léon has a similar "elliptical" manner of speaking (394). But there the narrator sees it, more benevolently, as evidence of the brilliance of Léon's mind when it comes to financial deals (410). However, Alphendéry has to translate Léon's ideas for Jules.

Vygotsky's model can be applied to Stead's egocentric characters because they do not learn by engaging in dialogue, they do not change,⁴ but use external speech incessantly as if they are incapable of inner speech and thought. In this way Sam Pollit can be interpreted as a "man who loved children" because of his child-like tendencies; as Terry Sturm argues, "his egotism has much in it of the ego-centredness of a child" (18). These characters speak loudly, they cannot hear others; they speak without the subtlety of the softly spoken. Grant cannot keep secrets and talks so that the whole town knows of his affairs. When he leaves his apartment to escape Barbara's efforts to involve him as a co-dependent in her divorce, he hides himself only to ring her up and meet her as soon as he gets the chance (267). Gilbert tells us that his father "has never quite emerged from that cloud of infantile personality. He is obsessed by his own impulses. He sees the world as driven by the same, and he attributes these impulses to others" (125). The narrator also describes Robbie's inability to comprehend others in this way: "He listened, smiled eagerly and vaguely like a five-month-old infant" (36).

Nellie Cotter continually demands that other characters around her "introspect" and "confess". Yet her own talk is voluble and shallow and she excludes any exploration of her own personality traits. The absence of an inner life in the depiction of these characters does not necessarily mean that they are monologic personalities as characters might express their inner thoughts aloud. Yet in the case of Stead's egotistical characters

⁴ Of Sam, Randall Jarrell writes, "About him there is the grandeur of completeness: beyond Sam we cannot go" (TMW 15). Thus he is unlike Bakhtin's ideal hero: the "unfinalisable" and continually becoming subject.

the proliferation of surface talk indicates an absence of self-criticism and inner life.

Indeed, the narrator in *Cotters' England* tells us of Nellie:

There was something missing in her; she lacked self-criticism. She was always talking about introspection by which she meant drool; and confession, by which she meant spinning interesting lies, or sifting out people's secrets. To her that was truth: that was what she meant by truth. (270)

Nellie's sessions where she challenges the other character to express themselves to her are like instances of torture and inquisition for her victim. But Nellie cannot hear any truth but her own. For example, she refuses to believe that Marion is anything other than a "hoyden" in her interrogations of Tom:

A hundred points of the mystery she struggled to clear up, by cross-questioning, by stabbing at inconsistencies, by petulance, argument, by sweetness, by speaking her abhorrence of lies and by weak and piteous ways so that the tears came into his eyes. She begged him to "introspect", to look into himself and remark on the weakness and cowardice that had made him for eight years live with a scheming woman. . . . (128)

Like Robbie Grant's speech, Nellie's is infused with her own jealousies and desires: her dangerous egomania.⁵

These egotistical characters may be "child-like" but they are not "innocent" children who seek to learn by asking questions of the world.⁶ Although there appears to be something

⁵ It would appear that Stead does not treat her female egotistical characters any differently to her male ones. Nellie, like Robbie, is prone to the same megalomania and monomania; she also drives her listeners to tears with her talk. Nellie is as predatory as Robbie, signified in the physical descriptions of her as a bird of prey: a "black raven" (189). As Phyllis Edelson says: "Although Nelly [sic] feels herself a victim of male control, she is revealed in a stunning uncovering of layers as predatory" (247). Although Nellie, as a woman, has a different relationship to the economic and political structures in her society than a non-working-class male character such as Robbie Grant might have, she has the power to intimidate those around her. She not only controls the lives of women about her, but also seeks to control Tom, and exposes her breasts at Uncle Sime in order to ridicule his age and impotence (29). Therefore it seems that Stead perceives egoism in both male and female characters, and does not allow her female ones the excuse of victimisation.

of an innocence or naivety about them, they are also creatures of “vice” who must be held responsible for their actions. In other words, while the characters can be seen as child-like and egocentric personalities, they must also be appraised as figures of authority in the sense that they seek to coerce and dominate others. By constructing them as immature personalities Stead undermines these figures of power. Inherent in this characterisation is the implicit, ethical criticism of monologism as infantile.

The focus on these characters’ egotism might lead us to presume that Stead’s stress is on individual origins of personality rather than the social forces which influence her characters. Yet, Vygotsky’s view of egocentric speech in children is not founded in a biologically or psychologically determined definition of the human subject. Rather, as in Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia, social interaction is the focus of subject development and as such individual acts cannot be separated from social utterances. As Robert Stam writes, “Bakhtin posits consciousness as a sociological fact rather than as the product of an autonomous self-generating cogito” (119). Similarly Stead’s egotistical monsters cannot be divorced from their social or interactive milieus to be seen as figures with expansive egos in an exclusively psychological sense. While the word “ego” is used here in its association with personality, it is, more precisely, used as a term which is useful in its indication of monologism – a finalised and unitary viewpoint which dismisses the possibility of others.

⁶ Sam Pollit might be an exception here in that his monologism is accompanied by a great curiosity about the natural world. However, he imposes his answers upon the others.

In his early essay, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity", Bakhtin discusses the creation of a subject through its relationship with an other. He argues that the subject cannot define itself wholly, but that this subject requires the external vision and definition of itself by others before the self can be conceived (1990, 105). In this way the subject can only be perceived as a whole through these dialogic viewpoints – the subjects themselves have no privileged access to this perception. So when Gilbert says that his father has never looked at himself from the outside (121), and is, in general, deaf to the voices of others, it is clear that Grant is incapable of envisioning himself in anything other than personal and egotistical terms. This is in spite of his continual "sideways glance" (*PDP* 205) to make sure his cronies are watching him. Therefore, he cannot know the whole truth about himself. The novel itself, however, constructs him as a subject through its multiple views.

Monologism is an Illusion

Stead's voluble characters appear to be monologic consciousnesses who take over the text itself and seek to possess it. Yet, as has already been noted, this ownership of the text is illusory because the structure of the novels in question is predicated on a distance between the main character and the author. Within the text itself other characters' voices and the narrator's voice act against the dominant character to varying degrees. So, the polyphonic text itself, in its multi-voicedness, undermines the dominance of the imperious characters.

The egotistical characters are not immune to the social construction of subjectivity as Bakhtin perceives it in his theory of heteroglossia. They do not exist in isolation but are situated in a milieu of other characters. While they appear not to listen and to ignore others, they are at all times positioned in a social collective. In general, Stead's characters are also seen to take on board the voices of others, or to utilise various social discourses, in their speech. This heteroglossia – the socio-historic discourses of the times – integral to all of Stead's novels, subverts the unitary and closed voice of the egotistical character by relativising the authority of that voice, by making it appear less certain, solitary and original than it purports to be.

Bakhtin's very theory of heteroglossia means that monologic viewpoints are illusory because they necessarily suppress those positions which they do not claim for themselves. Bakhtin's alternative to monologism is dialogism:

It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature *full of event potential*⁷ and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses. The monologic way of perceiving cognition and truth is only one of the possible ways. It arises only where consciousness is placed above existence, and where the unity of existence is transformed into the unity of consciousness. (PDP 81)

As dialogism is a different means of attaining truth, it cannot be equated simply with "relativism" (in which all truths are relativised). For our purposes here, Stead's texts, through their depiction of many voices and social discourses, seek to construct truth

⁷ Morson and Emerson define the phrase "full of event potential" as the "'eventness' of the event", that is, its "unfinalisability" and potentiality (1990, 236).

through nonmonologic means, and in so doing subvert any pretension to monologism on the part of the egotistical character.

This multi-voiced construction of truth can be seen in the structure of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. The novel is primarily a portrait of one character, Robbie Grant. Yet this portrait does not come to us via a monologic narrator who presents and summarises his attributes, and nor is the text a first-person narrative, a structure which might suggest one character's control of the text. Instead Robbie's characterisation comes from his own monologues, which are not valorous or objective but driven by self-gratification. He is also presented to us through the reactions and conversations of other characters about him. While he is undoubtedly the focal point around which most of the action and conversation revolves, his position is one without any inherent authority.

It is ultimately the reader who must draw the conclusions, moral or otherwise, from the information the text provides in order to define Robbie. The distance of any summarising narratorial voice means that the novel can be somewhat enigmatic. Material facts are distorted depending on who is telling the story. For example, Barbara Kent appears more calculating than she perhaps is when she is described by Grant. At one stage he has absolute faith that she is a German spy and the evidence he provides and is given by his crony, Hugo March, seems to support this interpretation of Barbara. Yet it becomes clear that March, and Barbara herself, have taken financial advantage of Grant's desire, fear and delusions by providing him with false information. In one of the infrequent narratorial passages we are told:

Barbara . . . naturally did not appear to herself as an adventuress, as Grant did not appear to himself as a lecher. Barbara, for example, believed that she was in the center of a kind of exchange of values: she was the broker.
(194)

The stress in the narrative is on the discourses of the characters about themselves and about others. This does not mean there is an absence of material fact in the narrative; for instance, Myra Coppelius's suicide is presented by the narrator and not through the speech of a character. Yet the ways in which *Grant* chooses to tell the story is of more importance in the text than the event itself. Although the absolute "truth" is sometimes difficult to discern in this novel because of the diminished role of an omniscient narrator, there is enough in the story's construction and presentation to have readers make their own judgements from the evidence (portrayed in the various voices) at hand. The narrator's use of the terms "adventuress" and "lecher" when referring to Barbara and Robbie is perhaps an indication they are meant to be seen as such by the reader, even though the interest in the text rests on the manner in which they do not define themselves this way.

The other characters' perceptions of Robbie are varied, and in keeping with their respective viewpoints. For instance, David Flack needs Grant's business patronage and so pities and defends him. His daughter Edda, while also bound by financial need to Grant, is more openly critical. She draws a cartoon of Robbie in which his nose and belly are accentuated in carnivalesque fashion (32; 103). To her, Grant is a greedy, lecherous, capitalist who deserves to be parodied. Grant's own son, Gilbert, along with Edda, is one of the few characters who criticise him to his face. One of Gilbert's pastimes is "analysis", as he calls it, and he uses those skills when he says of his father:

Dad, I say, never looked at himself from the outside once in his life. An extrovert, pure and simple. The first act of the thinking man, I hold: "What am I?"⁸ Dad doesn't know what he is! (121)

Gilbert adds that Grant does not or cannot change; Grant constantly proclaims that he has been shocked by the actions of others, yet he keeps these same associates: "He gets a shock and tomorrow he'll trust the same pack of criminals and scoundrels he's trusting today" (121). While we might agree with this analysis of Grant's disposition we must remember that it belongs to Gilbert and does not necessarily have the support, or otherwise, of the narrator. In general, the dialogic voices intersect to construct some common truth about Grant; the final authority is not left to him or the narrator. Yet, unlike Stead's other novels in which direct opposition to the overbearing character is more prevalent, Robbie's voice is so dominant that very few voices are heard speaking out against him.

There is a structural difference between *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *Cotters' England*, for instance, in that Nellie is given much less narrative space than Robbie because her brother Tom is of equal importance and speaks back to Nellie, expressing her faults. Tom, like Nellie, is also a "crooner" using empty words to charm his various women; he and Nellie are a pair: "the singing brother and the singing sister" (262). This variation in novel structure is not a result of the gender difference between Robbie and Nellie as is evidenced by the fact that Sam Polli's voice, too, is tempered by Henny and Louie who combat his domination. Yet, Gilbert does not take up the role of Louie Polli who

⁸ Kristeva argues that Bakhtin's model of subjectivity is: "I speak and you hear, therefore we are" (1980, 74). However, Robbie's egotism is based on the following: "I speak! You listen! Therefore I am". Thus, the listener, harangued by his imperatives, merely serves to reinforce his ego.

challenges her father, for, despite his unflattering analysis of Grant, Gilbert wants to learn his business in order to fulfil his position as the inheritor of patriarchal wealth. Thus, Grant's wealth, because it is sought by many of the other characters, denies a dialogic environment in which his opinions would be challenged. The subversion of Grant's monologic voice is largely contained, then, in the narrative structure of the novel itself.

In the scene where Grant flees to another apartment in order to escape Barbara and, there, has his associates sew shoe covers for him and search for misplaced keys, the narrator tells us:

He babbled on, as he tried the keys one after the other, kneeling in front of them, and snapping his fingers, lifting his eyes to them, asking for this and that, insisting upon their attendance, stopping in his narrative if anyone absented themselves for a moment. He dropped clues, lifted masks, showed his tracks, all through his discourse, and then seeing what he had done, doubled back on himself, made false scents, artfully mixed in incompatibles, but not with any true idea of dodging them, but of keeping their minds intent on himself and his romantic situation. He did not care what they saw as long as they kept looking and wondering at him. He felt all kinds of rich emotions, a sentimental innocence, in the pleasure of showing himself to them as a creature they had never dreamed of – more sorrowful, wickeder, gayer, more romantic, more lecherous, more bewildered. (272)

Here the narrator emphasises the fact that Grant's long-winded and unwieldy speeches are power-plays which necessitate he be the centre of attention.⁹ It is of course possible to see in this narratorial passage the same prolonged verbosity at work in Robbie's speech. This can be explained by the fact that the narrator's voice takes on Grant's speech rhythms and mimics and mocks them. While there are some controlling passages

⁹ There is also a certain emphasis on carnivalesque role-playing through the motif of the "mask". As Bakhtin says, "all languages" are "masks" (*DI* 273).

on the narrator's part in the text, the novel as a whole has very few of these passages, thus allowing Robbie's voice to continue uninterrupted. Yet, at times the narrator is explicit in demonstrating that the construction of Grant's monologues is a conscious and intentional device to reveal the inconsistencies and egocentrism of his speech.

Grant's monologues represent his manic egotism. His demand that a play be written about his own life reflects his egotistical and selfish nature; he wants the whole play to be his, from production to casting to performance. Robbie employs Karel Karolyi, a refugee fleeing from the war in Europe, to write the play but is unhappy with Karolyi's manuscript which he deems to be lacking in dialogue. Therefore Grant fills in the blanks with his own voice. However, the narrator ironises Grant's relation to "his" dialogue in the play by stating: "He gave them another frenzied *monologue*, praising '*my dialogue*' and '*my smash-hit*'" (275; emphasis added).

A recognition of the parodic elements of the text leads to a perception of the narrator, or author's, parody of Grant's voice, or utterances. Through his very inability to regulate his language Grant is mocked. The *profusion* of monologue serves to undermine the monologism of Grant's speech by consciously parodying and mimicking that logic. His "lines" are repeated so often and to so many different women that they become farcical and meaningless. His words, the signifiers in his speech, are rendered numb and valueless, detached from their signifieds. Indeed, the character Livy Wright employs mimicry to demonstrate her frustration at Grant when she regurgitates all his one-liners

to his face (220).¹⁰ This parody and mimicry in the text serve to disrupt Grant's sinister control of language.

Grant's monologues represent more than just his desire for power or his position of power. It is uncontrolled verbosity, often mad and ridiculous; at times Grant's speech extends from the repetitive and garrulous to the nonsensical. In a scene with Gilbert the narrator tells us that "Grant looked curiously up into the young face, and began to gabble, beset by a sudden need. . . . He chuckled suddenly in a senile way . . ." (225). Grant's need to control the lives of others is great, and his desire for women and wealth greater, so that his speech indicates the forces which drive him:

The talk of love had become a daily hunger with him, he was starving, never satisfied; and he needed the lavish affection and hopes of women; thus, he was obliged ever to talk bigger.¹¹ (195)

Barbara Kent tantalisingly frustrates his desire, and when she keeps eluding him his language becomes correspondingly befuddled and anxious. He must speak about her over and over again to each of his cronies. His desires take hold of him and his language; his ideas become mixed and irrational, he comes out merely with "a surge of mutter" (113). Grant's mad talk is not an eruption of the speech of the disempowered, of the hysteric or madman whose speech challenges and mimics the dominant order. Instead his speech is overloaded with the desires and ideologies of that order. This saturation speaks the order's irrationality, its fundamental uncertainty.

¹⁰ Grant is largely oblivious to this affront, but his one, typically carnivalesque response is to say: "I deceive no one who doesn't ask to be taken in and sold for tripe" (221). Tripe, Bakhtin argues, is a carnival substance *par excellence* in its association with the belly, food, life, and defecation (RHW 163).

¹¹ There is a sense of phallic engorgement here in the way Grant's talk becomes "bigger" and more anxious. Thus, Stead's portrait undermines his authority by denying him his satisfaction, and by having his desires drive him mad.

In its spinning velocity Grant's speech loses its controlling centre and becomes "centripetal" speech switched into over-drive so that it is in danger of imminent collapse. According to Bakhtin the dominant order seeks to enforce a unified language which suppresses heteroglossia, the voices which speak against that order's authority. Yet the "centrifugal" languages which cannot be encompassed by the centre of authority are always and inevitably extant, even if they are denied. As Bakhtin says, "Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work" (DI 272). In *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* Stead has the character whose speech seeks to be centripetal spin out of control: because Grant's all-consuming ego is not regulated through dialogue it threatens to expand into oblivion, to consume itself.

Monologic Times

Grant is not the only character in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* to spout monologues of babble. Karolyi calls Grant constantly on the phone and speaks in a mixture of English, German, Dutch, French, and other languages (231). His monologues have no beginning and no end; when Grant picks up the phone Karolyi is in the middle of a tirade (236).

The narrator describes it as an expulsion of sound:

Suddenly this macaroni poured from his mouth, rolling like quicksilver, at first fiery and then faster and faster, until the ear caught little but the cadences of a sinewy voice speaking for itself, a discourse, nonsensical but oddly composed, in fact, little but a piece of music *extempore* rushing out of the mouth. (232)

In all probability Grant's continuous and unreasonable demands on Karolyi have led to this breakdown. Yet Karolyi's mad mix of languages suggests that his mental despair is indicative of his status as a refugee from war-torn Europe. His is the desperate speech of a dissonant Europe at war with itself. While Karolyi's is a sickness of his world and his times, Grant's appears to be individual manic egotism, but it is also one which flourishes in that socio-historic world. It is no coincidence that Stead's egotistical characters should be portrayed in and around the Second World War when monologic ideologies led to conflict.¹²

This is a world in which its very polyglot nature indicates agitation and uncertainty. It is also a time in which monologic voices unceasingly seek to assert themselves. In his essay, "Epic and Novel", Bakhtin argues that the novel arises out of a "polyglot world":

In this actively polyglot world, completely new relationships are established between language and its object (that is, the real world) – and this is fraught with enormous consequences for all the already completed genres that had been formed during eras of closed and deaf monoglossia. In contrast to other major genres, the novel emerged and matured precisely when intense activation of external and internal polyglossia was at the peak of its activity; this is its native element.¹³ (DI 12)

Stead challenges this view to some extent by suggesting in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* that the polyglot political voices of the era are to a degree monologic discourses in coercive struggle. In other words, this is not benevolent or democratic heteroglossia in which

¹² Stead transposed her autobiographical novel, *The Man Who Loved Children*, from the time of her childhood to the late 1930s and the build-up of war when Sam Pollit's ideologies take on a more sinister tone (Sheridan 1988a, 27).

¹³ This seems a more benign view than that of the world of "opposed" and "colliding" discourses Bakhtin sees embodied in Dostoevsky's work (PDP 19; 27). It may also be contrasted with his statement, mentioned earlier, that "the basic generic forms of European artistic prose" arose during the Enlightenment, a period he sees as permeated by monologic rationalism (PDP 82).

ideologies are equal voices in dialogue; rather this multiplicity of social discourses is in actual and figurative battle. However, *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* does not assert itself as a monologic voice amongst this conflict because it is polyglossic in its representation of multiple viewpoints. In this way it epitomises Bakhtin's concept of the heterogeneous novel.

Grant's speech, and the talk of all the characters, is impregnated with the ideologies of their society: the United States during the 1940s. Their world is illustrated through discussions on Marxism, socialism, fascism, African American rights, *laissez-faire* economics, American isolationism, the war, and so on. Grant, of course, has something to say on all of these matters, but his monologic rhetoric appears to have a dangerous affinity with fascism. For instance, he apparently admires Mussolini, as Flack indicates: "I tell him he's going nuts when he begins to think he's Mussolini. He goes to all newsreels in the hope of seeing Mussolini behaving like a chimp on a stone balcony" (80). And one of Grant's crimes, though never verified, is the sale of alloys hidden in his cotton bales and transported to Nazi Germany (382).

Critics have associated Stead's egotistical characters with fascism because they suffer from narcissism, megalomania, monomania, and the dangerous desire to impose their wills. For example, Michael Wilding calls Sam Pollit a "type of fascist demagogue" (1970, 415). Certainly Sam partakes in what Teresa de Lauretis has termed the "violence of rhetoric" (1987, 33) in trying to mould his children in his own form, and by invading their privacy and inhibiting their independence. While Sam is not a fascist in any party-

political sense, much of his talk does have fascist undertones, and he voices ideas which were incorporated into fascist ideology; his espousal of eugenics is an example (TMW 85).¹⁴ *The Man Who Loved Children* suggests that a philosophy like eugenics is based in the suppression of human difference, and, similarly, Sam is monologic in his inability to acknowledge the otherness and subjectivities of those around him. Randall Jarrell describes Sam's monologia in this way: "Sam's vanity is ultimate: the occasional objectivity or common decency that makes us take someone else's part, not our own, is impossible for Sam, who is right because he is Sam" (TMW 12). As a result, the Pollit family suffer at Sam's attempts to suppress their alterity.¹⁵

Fascism may certainly be monologic in its oppression of other voices, but it is not the only ideology or discourse to do so. Nellie Cotter's socialist beliefs equally could be seen to be critiqued for their dogmatism when they are viewed as part of her monologic nature. It might also be argued that the monologic rhetoric of Sam Pollit and Robbie Grant is symptomatic of patriarchy. Part of Robbie's appalling behaviour involves his objectification of women; and Sam, of course, is a patriarchal figure in extreme. Indeed, there is a connection to be made between the dominant patriarchal order which suppresses the voices of women and monologism's systematisation of truth and

¹⁴ Significantly Louie responds to Sam's plan for the extermination of all human difference (the product of which he calls "*Monoman* or *Manunity*") by calling it "*Monomania*" (85). This expulsion of otherness is one of Sam's dangerous philosophies. Louie speaks from the realm of the "other" (she is all that her father does not wish her to be), and so she must challenge her father's oppressive definitions of her.

¹⁵ *The Man Who Loved Children* was also transposed in terms of place, so that the Australia of Stead's childhood becomes the United States. Thus, Sam may be seen as "Uncle Sam", and his monologia is therefore a comment on American society.

experience. Patriarchal discourse is similarly “autocratic rather than democratic” (Woodward 1990, 253).

Wendy Woodward argues that some of Stead’s women characters (Nellie and Letty) are “male-identified” (1990, 251), meaning that they have an allegiance with men and partake in “masculine-gendered discourse” which “narcissistically celebrates itself” and “leads to autocratic rather than democratic behaviour” (1990, 253). However, apart from patriarchy’s monologic approach, there is little in Stead’s work to suggest that the speech by these women is inherently *masculine* if only because the assumption that these women have an allegiance with men, and men only, is tenuous given that in a heteroglossic world all humans must share some common ideologies and utterances.¹⁶ Instead it might be more productive to argue that a woman may tap into discourses of misogyny prevalent about her, but this does not explain entirely Nellie’s egotistic speech. If she speaks “like a man” it is because monologism is inherent in the ways in which power is implemented, and in which patriarchy invests. Therefore, Nellie is utilising monologic speech in her desire to assert power, rather than patriarchal speech *per se*.

In summary, it is possible to talk of fascism, socialism *and* patriarchy as “monologic” when they are shown to be dogmatic, “closed”, and deaf to the responses of others. If monologism is indicative of the times, then the times are not going well. Yet, it has been argued that Stead undermines Grant’s monologic world-view through her polyphonic

¹⁶ It is also a tenuous assumption given the facts of the novels. Nellie can be read as a lesbian which opens up another entire field of discussion. Letty comes from a big family of women with whom she identifies. Letty can also be distinguished from Nellie’s tendency to coercion.

framework. This strategy might also be effective against the structures of patriarchy and other dogmatic ideologies which have monologism at their foundation, especially when the "centrifugal" voices of others are shown to combat "centripetal" discourses.

Stead's novels reveal the sinister results of the monologism of characters such as Robbie and Nellie Cotter. Both of them cause another character to suicide, such is the dominance and maddening nature of their personalities. Grant's fictitious versions of Myra Coppelius's suicide indicate his deceit and self-interested fear, as well as his evident satisfaction at the despair he has caused a woman. This is not satire in any directly critical sense, but the reader is led to discern the perils of a monologic approach.

Yet, as was stated earlier, the novel removes all authority from Grant's words and thus he is rendered less dangerous. While Grant's monologic rhetoric has an affinity with fascism, it is also clear that, as Gilbert tells us, "he cuts his cloth to suit his company" (217). Indeed, he is exposed as a political hypocrite because his rhetoric changes to suit his avarice and desires. For instance, in order to seduce Celia Grimm he joins in on her talk of equal rights for African Americans and goes with her to a "mixed" club where he seduces Mrs Wood. He later spurns this African-American woman and his language makes it clear he is racist (56; 128). Grant also uses leftist rhetoric because it is fashionable, and in order to attract women whom he need not spend much money on because they are Marxists: "It became Grant's fashion to call himself a Marxist too, but only among people with empty pockets and few chances" (31). Grant himself tells us, in

an amusing juxtaposition of definitions, that he is “not a Red, mind you, but a bit of a Marxist, good philosophy, helps you to see things in the right perspective. Made money for me, being a Marxist” (19).¹⁷

Perhaps just as Grant cannot be considered a Marxist he also cannot be seen as a fascist, for it seems that his personal use of the ideological positions available to him is not based in sympathetic belief. By divining when Grant is employing ideas to suit his self-aggrandising aims the reader discerns his actual philosophies.¹⁸ Ideas are placed in Grant’s mouth, not because they are the author’s ideas as they would be in a monologic text, but because characters such as Robbie enlist social discourses to their own unscrupulous ends. This construction leads to a parody of these characters by exposing them as hypocrites, as sham ideologues, who nonetheless speak their egotistical ideologies.

Indeed, the portrayal of Grant serves not as a critique of fascism as such, but as a criticism of capitalism. His mimicry of various discourses serves only to reveal his own ideology of capitalist greed. Therefore, his egotistical personality is part of this avariciousness; capitalism, as Marx and Engels state, has led to the “icy water of egotistical calculation” (6). From the American point of view the war provides great financial opportunity. The narrator describes New York at the time:

¹⁷ Elizabeth Perkins points out that Grant is a perversion of his namesake Robert Owen, a social reformer and socialist (1992, 17).

¹⁸ Some of the characters around him, however, are less discerning readers who do not see as much of him, or are charmed by him, and so take him at his word.

Everyone scooped greedily in the great cream pot of war. All criminals drove their trades in the open, carried their banknotes from store to bank, and loaded their women with precious stones and furs. The town reeked of easy, greasy "dough". (228)

Both Robbie and Barbara are from the "Land of Grab", as Grant tells us himself (21). Thus the novel not only criticises Robbie for his personal avarice, but sees him as representative of a rapacious society.

The portrayal of New York in the novel befits its role as the centre of capitalist fervour. This is the "New World" centre of capitalism where new money is made fast and the accumulation of wealth is a consuming passion; capitalism is its essence.¹⁹ It is also an immense metropolis where large numbers of people act and interact at a frenetic pace. New Yorkers are seen moving, constantly seeking apartments, signifying demand, impermanence, futility, and vigour. Despite its energy, it does not appear to be a flattering portrait of the capitalist world. This is a reading supported by Stead's comments in her article, "It's All a Scramble for Boodle", written on her first visit to the United States in 1935, where she paints a scathing picture of that society:

here where the love of money is brutally outspoken and crassly advertised, no illusions are offered to the workers: they see quite plainly, through numerous scandals . . . that it is all a scramble for boodle and nothing else, that gangsters get away with it if they can pay, that ignoble and corrupt lawyers whose lives stink are permitted to practise, that the richest men live outside the law and that money openly covers all sins. Not even the faded rugs of an aristocracy exists as it does in France to cover reeking sores. (1992, 23)

¹⁹ In his book *An American Looks at Karl Marx*, Stead's partner, Bill Blake, argues that "pure capitalism reigned from the foundation of the Republic" because the United States was "free of feudal trappings" (64).

Here she employs images of the lower stratum in her metaphors to *deride* what she sees: the society stinks, reeks, is corrupt and diseased. The influence of money in human relationships is also seen by Stead to be a particularly American trait, and it can be seen in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat*, as well as *Letty Fox*:

Everything is expressed in terms of money; (I am) shocked by women's pages where the money-value of divorce, security value of a suitor, and advice concerning a reluctant alimony-payer are discussed, and where women are told that when they have lost their husbands' love, they have nothing to rely on but coercion to alimony, where the money value of children is discussed. This is horrible, revolting. It certainly exists in every country but nowhere else is human love discussed in terms of the stock market. (1992, 23)

In this reading New York is an immoral place, devoid of values, except those of capitalism. In Stead's fiction in general America suggests itself as a place of democratic and polyglot potential in its multi-voicedness, but at the same time this is limited by a monologic tendency to avarice and greed in which people are objectified as commodities. In this way the velocity and volume of Robbie's talk might represent the "whirligig" (*ALT* 47) of capitalism.²⁰

While *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* might share the sentiment of "It's All a Scramble for Boodle", it refrains from that article's rhetoric or polemic. Rather, Grant is left to voice his own greed and therefore any judgement of him is left to the reader, and is found in implicit criticism within the text. In this way any moral judgement on the part of the narrator, or in the authorial discourse, is relatively distant. Yet, there is an implicit criticism of characters, such as Grant, who are not all that they purport to be – their own

²⁰ See the chapter on *House of All Nations* for a further discussion on capitalism, war, and the "whirligig" of the times.

actions and words make apparent their artifice, and so their languages are shown to be “masks” (Bakhtin *DI* 273).

Monsters?

The discussion so far in this chapter has focussed on Stead’s critical treatment of her egotistical characters through her use of polyphony. Yet it is also possible to interpret these characters through Bakhtin’s theory of carnival in which they can be seen to be mocked and ridiculed. At the same time the portrait of these egotistical characters is not wholly negative and satirical because there is a certain amount of enthusiasm, even fondness, evident in their depiction. They are characters who are not entirely “monstrous”. These characters, while targets of parody,²¹ are not unequivocally criticised. The laughter in the texts is simultaneously ridiculing and redemptive: it is ambivalent.

Grant’s claim to authority is also ridiculed through carnival means. This is apparent in Edda’s caricature of Grant where he is portrayed as “avaricious, long-nosed, thin-haired, with a sniffing belly” (103). The narrator joins in by accentuating Robbie’s nose in any descriptions of him, “a square-set fleshy nose of extraordinary size” (10). Grant’s many hours in the bathroom spent grooming and preening himself are undermined by the narrator’s depiction of his nose and of his aging body, both of which signify a

²¹ For a more detailed discussion of parody and satire in Stead’s work see the following chapter on *Letty Fox*.

“grotesque” rather than “classical” body (*RHW* 320). In this way Grant’s “senile” babbling becomes part of the subversion of his authority by underscoring his mortality (225). The narrator also describes Robbie’s dream in which he envisages sinking into mud (375); thus Grant is associated with dirt and is debased in the carnivalesque sense whereby his pretension to purity and cleanliness is subverted.²²

While Grant causes real harm, in the suicide of Myra Coppelius for example, this is of course a fictional world of comic bunglings and grotesque events. Bakhtin’s aphorism in his “Notes Made in 1970-71” that “violence does not know laughter” (1986, 134) does not apply to carnival violence which is fantastic rather than serious and is suffused with images of regeneration (*RHW* 203). Myra’s suicide does not function in the text as a punishment for a figure of authority because she is not one, but as a result of her death we are given Robbie’s preposterous stories which we may laugh at; they reveal the deceptive nature of his discourse. In a similar fashion Karolyi’s demise into madness is followed only by Grant’s selfish ploys to retrieve his silk scarf (353). There is no tragedy in the depiction of these events as they are merely a vehicle by which Grant is revealed as a laughable character.

There are many comic scenes in the novel. When Grant misplaces the key to his hatbox, and orders his cronies to find it, the event becomes farcical (261). In another scene, Gilbert catches his father phoning several different women in succession, using the same lines and pleas (201). Later on, Alf Goodwin hounds Grant for having bought him the

²² See the chapter on *House of All Nations* for a more detailed interpretation of Bakhtin’s opposition between “grotesque” and “classical” bodies.

wrong type of underwear (358). These scenes do not just arouse laughter in a simply comic way. They are comic and expose Grant for his ludicrousness, yet they are also disturbing and grotesque examples of his infuriating nature. While the tone is not entirely light-hearted, these are parodic scenes with laughter, and not severity, at their core.

The ending of the novel is a wonderful parody of Robbie and Barbara turned domestic in Grant's Brooklyn house. It seems the narrator has the last laugh by concluding the story of the pair with this scene in which age and Grant's disreputable past catch up with the lovers. Gone are their wild days of parties and promiscuity: "the blondine" is depicted knitting, while Grant is described wearing horn-rimmed glasses, reading the paper and retiring early to bed (389). Barbara, at the age of thirty-seven, begins to believe she is too old "for the game" as her physical attractiveness declines. She has moved herself in to Robbie's house by stealing a piece of paper from his hatbox which proves he has already consigned all his wealth to his sons. With this knowledge she can blackmail him, but it is an ambiguous victory because she has no access to this money herself. Stead enforces this rather unclimactic impression of the conclusion of the novel in a letter to Walter Stone: "he ends with her, but she hasn't got any of his money, is reduced to taking his milk bottles back to the shop for the deposit" (*Letters I* 204). Grant's crooked undertakings catch up with him in the form of Hilbertson, but it is a gently parodic ending devoid of scathing moral judgement. Hilbertson, like a carnivalesque figure of Death, knocks at the door and ends Grant's charade of immortality (his continual and vain preening), thus undermining the fixity of his power.

In carnivalesque terms Grant is a “rogue”, a teller of lies and deceptions. Bakhtin argues that the rogue reveals the self-interested use to which language and meaning are put and so undermines ultimate authority in language, or the possibility of “straightforward discourse” (DI 401). He goes on to argue that the rogue parodies languages of power:

Opposed to the language of priests and monks, kings and seigneurs, knights and wealthy urban types, scholars and jurists – to the languages of all who hold power and who are well set up in life – there is the language of the merry rogue, wherever necessary parodically re-processing any pathos but always in such a way as to rob it of its power to harm, . . . by means of a smile or deception, mock its falsity and thus turn what was a lie into gay deception. Falsehood is illuminated by ironic consciousness and in the mouth of the happy rogue parodies itself. (DI 401-2)

In Grant, Stead melds the figure of the merry rogue with the character of the wealthy merchant, but the effect is the same: Stead has Grant’s voice reveal the falsehoods and the self-interest of the merchant’s discourse, and in the process he undermines his own authority. In other words, this figure of power is degraded by being shown to be a disreputable and pathetic rogue.

Grant’s position of authority is also subverted through the characterisation of him as “a frenzied Don Juan”, as Stead calls him (*Letters I* 204). Indeed, his adventures and mishaps in love make him appear ridiculous and thwart his pretension to power by exposing him as a puppet of his own uncontrollable desires. Grant, then, appears to be a wanton, more asinine than dangerous.

While there is a parodic mockery of the voice and character of Robbie Grant there is, simultaneously, an immense enjoyment in, and fascination for, that character perceptible

in the narration. The author revels in the depiction of Grant's voice allowing the character to run away with the text. There is also a certain gaiety in the portrayal of Robbie as a criminal and rogue; he and his fellow gangsters are treated as interesting personalities and are amusingly rendered. The narrator tells us that Robbie:

liked to think himself both a moral and an immoral man. He did this by assuming that the world was a hard-working, well-behaved, respectable place in which few devil-may-care men and women, pricked on by their own temperament, found vice irresistible, discovered, but kept to themselves, the great secret that there is gaiety in vice, like the son of a teetotal father astonished at the worth of wine. (97)

While this description is perhaps an indication of Grant's lack of scruples, the text itself seems to share this relish of "gaiety in vice" which can be distinguished from a moral, binary vision of evil versus good. As was stated in chapter one, Stead herself says that "virtue, not interesting makes people yawn" (1994, 185).

Even the portrayal of New York as a city of "vice" has its more joyous and redemptive side. There is another, fonder, treatment of the United States in Stead's article "It's All a Scramble for Boodle", and a similar affection is evident in her description of New York in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. For her the city is full of story tellers and their stories: "The thing about New York that no one seems to have noticed, but which is absolutely striking, is that they all do *tell tales*" (qtd. in Segerberg 1989b, 15; emphasis added). In this interpretation the tellers of lies and the spinners of stories are engrossing subjects for depiction. There is an apparent fascination for the energy and vitality of New York in the narrative, an enthusiasm for which leads to minute description. It is, after all, a city of wealth, ambition, cocktail parties and prosperity. Frivolous this society may be, but it is also "gay" and joyful.

A Little Tea, A Little Chat is not an unequivocal and scathing satire of the figure of Robbie Grant. As well as the enthusiasm on the author's part evident in the portrayal of him, there are also indications that Grant cannot or should not be seen as an inhuman monster. As Robbie Grant says, laughing, "I haven't always done good, but I haven't done any evil either" (44). The text on some levels asks us to suspend a moral or satiric reading of Grant through the ambivalence in his portrait. It has already been argued that moral condemnation is not a driving force in the plot of a polyphonic narrative because such a narrative seeks to be objective in the creation of its independent characters. Perhaps we should take our lead, in this case, from Robbie himself who says: "With moralizing you don't understand human nature: that's your weakness. Moralists can only understand injustice" (348).

Stead's other egotistical monsters can also claim some redeeming features. Sam Pollit's language games, his zany antics, when divorced from his desire to impose his will, are regenerative and amusing. These games can be interpreted as part of his overall "rhetoric of violence", his desire to be a giant among children, but there is a gently humorous side to Stead's portrayal of him at times. As Randall Jarrell writes: "Christina Stead's understanding of him is without hatred; her descriptions of his vilest actions never forget how much fun it is to be Sam . . ." (TMW 15). Judith Gardiner sees Sam's "Dickensian sentiments" as a disguise (1989a, 391). But if we see him as a complex character rather than as a two-dimensional "monster" this is not duplicity but one of the many aspects of his personality; many of the children do, after all, adore him. Dorothy

Green employs this view when she states: "What saves Sam from condemnation as a complete monster is his capacity for laughter, which makes him unexpectedly human" (1974, 191). The two aspects of Sam are not necessarily incommensurate because ambivalence is part of Stead's portrait of him.²³

There is also ambivalence in the portrayal of Nellie and Tom Cotter. Nellie's predatory nature is balanced by comic descriptions of her as a "marsh bird", or "a big, scrawny, screechy fowl", even a "queer bird, more like a rooster or a turkey" (CE 13; 59). Tom, too, in an appropriate image of ambivalence, is described as "a gilded angel with rotting wings" (168). While the narrator's references to Nellie's "loving heart" are largely ironic, characters such as Eliza Cook are drawn to Nellie's generosity and vivacity. We see Nellie and Tom's ambivalent natures in the distorting mirrors at the circus they attend. In this "Hall of Truth" Nellie is seen as a "black raven" and she does a grotesque strutting dance like a "crawling creature" (189). In the mirror Tom is no longer a charming, blonde heart-throb, but becomes a short and squat "playing-card king" in this "ballroom of the strangest people" (189-90). Tom's experience in the mirror is repeated when he undresses for Frida and sees himself as both a golden youth and a decrepit old man (243). All these views of Tom and Nellie are possible and legitimate ones. They are both "garlanded clown[s]" (256), simultaneously amusing, hilarious and also grotesque, deceptive and menacing.

²³ When we consider that *The Man Who Loved Children* is autobiographical fiction, Stead's portrayal of the father figure is remarkable in its incorporation of some redeeming features for Sam. While the daughter's viewpoint is the centre of empathy and is arguably the conclusive voice of the text, both Henny and Sam are able to express themselves in a tripartite structure which allows each voice to be heard.

Stead's own interpretation of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, where she states that these characters are "simply ordinary people who behave in a worldly way" (*Letters I* 204), is perhaps a model for the way in which we are meant to read figures such as Robbie Grant, Sam Pollit or Nellie Cotter. They are not inhuman or supra-human monsters, exclusively horrific and terrifying as in the Romantic view of the grotesque (*RHW* 37-8). Yet, this is not to dismiss the fact that they can be read as monstrous. As Jonathan Hall argues, "the 'gay monster' is at least double, and must also be apprehensible as a source of terror" (103).²⁴ They are monstrous to some extent, but it is clear that Stead's purpose in the depiction of these characters is not just satirical or founded in moral condemnation. Coupled with the image of the hideous monster is monstrosity as carnivalesque, or Gargantuan.

It has been argued that inherent in polyphony is the goal of objectivity, and the disavowal of moral judgement in the portrayal of the protagonist. Yet it is clear here that implicit in Stead's parody and polyphonic subversion of these monologic characters is a critique of monologism and coercive discourses in their many forms. Indeed, it seems that Bakhtin's ideal of polyphony itself incorporates a polemic against monologic forms and against oppressive voices. Jose Yglesias argues that despite Stead's shifts in "her point of view" and "the tone of her language" and the way in which "she builds a world

²⁴ If we are to think of these characters as monsters, it is not as manifestations of the grotesque, whereby the monster represents sublimations of the lower stratum suppressed and misrecognised by the dominant order, as monstrosity is defined in Jonathan Hall's interpretation (106). Rather these "monsters" are representations of monologism itself which, in Stead's view, is inherently hideous. Her monsters are abominations of power, not figures of alienation.

out of the conflict of opposites" Stead also "tells you exactly what *she* thinks" (370). It is impossible to deny the transcendent control, or political purpose, of the author; but, it should be emphasised, within that political framework Stead allows her characters to speak independently in accordance with Bakhtin's theory of polyphony.

Thus, these novels appear to contain a tension between an objective portrayal of protagonists and a "sidelong" (Stead 1994, 198), or hidden, criticism of those characters. Similarly, the carnivalesque portrayal of characters leads to the impression that these figures are enjoyed by the narrator, rather than derided. Yet, we have begun to see here that the carnival aspects of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, while ambivalent, also serve the novel's political project through the debasement and mockery of Grant.

A Mono-toned Text?

The way Grant takes over the production of the play concerning his own life may be seen, ironically, as a representation of his own role in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. Why should Stead have allowed a character who drives his listeners to despair to dominate, for his monologues have the same effect upon many of her readers? His dominance makes us wish that there could be more emphasis on other voices to temper his own; we seek a character like Louie Pollit to respond to Grant by telling him to "*Shut up, shut up . . . I can't stand your gassing . . .*"²⁵ (TMW 372). Indeed, we want to censor him; Robbie's

²⁵ Of course, Louie is unable to say this directly to her father at this stage of the novel, but can only write it down.

voice is uncensored to the extent that our tolerance is tested – we wish not to have to hear his despicable talk. The way Grant engulfs the text also creates the appearance of a dangerous closeness between him and the narrator (Sheridan 1993, 45). By allowing Grant's voice control of the text it might be possible to argue that Stead creates a monotonous text, a one-voiced text.

However, as is already clear, the characterisation of Grant is a result of Stead's polyphonic project: she allows his voice to express itself freely and without any censorship. The author (or the narrator) is in no way close to the character in the sense that they might be mistaken for each other. It has also been demonstrated that Grant's domination is intended to be indicative of his monologic disposition. This conscious device on the part of the author dismisses any suggestion that the difficulties of the text – its repetitiveness, tediousness and odiousness – are the result of ill-discipline or poor editing,²⁶ or, more broadly, representative of the author's style. While one voice may dominate, it is not the author's, a fact which underscores the character's distance from the author, and the author's goal of objectivity in the portrayal of Grant. Therefore, Stead's text is not monologic because behind Grant's voice is laughter and polyphony which create an underlying multi-voicedness. It is paradoxical that the novel risks being perceived as monologic in its portrayal of the dominance of one consciousness, but as has already been noted, this monologism is found merely in the *surface* talk, in the one

²⁶ There do seem to be some anomalies which cannot be explained by polyphony. For instance, the mysterious character known as "Braun, Arthur" (189) all of a sudden becomes "Brauner, Arthur" on page 310. This does not appear to be a linguistic play on Barbara's part.

voice – beneath this there is the dialogic structure of the novel which undermines the monologic utterance.

It seems that Stead's purpose in writing novels does not principally involve the pleasing of her readers.²⁷ This is evident in the remarks on *House of All Nations* by her publisher, Peter Davies: "I do not think it a book, or perhaps even the sort of book which you ought to write if you desire either fame or success" (qtd. in C. Williams 1989a, 136). At the risk of generalising, a portrait of a loathsome character does not conform to a reader's desire to become intimate and sympathise with a wholesome central character. Stead herself says of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, "I think it's very good: but I recognise it's not very 'nice'. It's merely true" (*Letters I* 121). Stead challenges any pretension to niceties in her texts, and challenges the reader who might seek them.

Is there any "pleasure" in a novel such as *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* for the reader? As Sam Pollit asks at his welcome-home feast, "This has quite taken away my appetite: why can't I be obeyed? I thought this occasion was to give me pleasure?" (*TMW* 281). Like Sam, Stead's readers might hunger for and demand pleasure, but these works require us to be less dogmatic and more flexible than a Sam Pollit if we are to acquire our pleasure from them. In her article on *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, Virginia Blain argues that a "perverse pleasure" can be gained from a reading of the novel (1993, 21). Blain uses Roland Barthes's theories to argue that the excesses of the text, which bore the reader at

²⁷ This is not to say that she does not have an ideal reader in mind as an "addressee" as she writes (see "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity", Bakhtin 1990).

first, accumulate to become a kind of decadence (1993, 22). Tina Muncaster also uses Barthes's work, in particular his idea of the text of "bliss", to define Stead's work (113). Muncaster's thesis of the "appetitic" experience of reading Stead's novels emphasises the unrequited hungers of the reader and the ambivalent anxiety and desire in the reading process (106). She argues that *I'm Dying Laughing* exceeds its surface "prattle" to produce pleasure through the rhythmic nature of repetition (113). Barthes indeed conflates "boredom" and "bliss" when he argues that:

to repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified. But: in order for repetition to be erotic, it must be formal, literal, and in our culture this flaunted (excessive) repetition reverts to eccentricity, thrust toward various marginal regions of music. (1976, 41)

As the argument concerning Bakhtinian carnival in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* demonstrated, it is possible to see a kind of carnivalesque gaiety in these texts, a joyful relativity of language, a polyglot hilarity, which can be pleasurable for a reader who enters into this sense of play. This perception of laughter in the text addresses the charges of those critics who claim that *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* is sterile and severe (Lidoff 1982, 147; Geering 1969, 30). But Stead's texts are not apolitical "prattle": to call these novels decadent is to miss their political significance, their socio-historic grounding, and the principles of Stead's artistic project. Such a reading homogenises the characters with the narration, or the style of the author, and therefore ignores the differing voices and the dialogic processes at work.

Perhaps in asking for pleasure we already enlist an erroneous and loaded demand on the text. But if we are to enjoy *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* it is clear that we cannot entirely

gain pleasure from Grant's monologues because that is clearly opposed to the purpose of their construction. We need to go beyond the surface talk and to engage in the dialogics of the text, to listen to the other, underlying voices speaking out. As well as recognising Stead's dedication to portraying characters in all fairness, we need to hear the mimicry and parody in the text; that is, to read for the ways in which we might laugh at such hideous "monsters".

In the next chapter another egotistical character, Letty Fox, is the focus of attention. However, Letty is not portrayed as a monologic character who needs to assert her will over others. Rather, she is a picaresque heroine whose voice is a source of great entertainment, and her story is one of adventure. As with *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* in which it was demonstrated that there was an implicit subversion of the figure of Robbie Grant, *Letty Fox* also evinces a hidden polemic against Letty's conventional and bourgeois values.

Chapter Three

“A Rabelaisian Time, My Masters!” The *Bildungsroman*, Parody, Scandal, and the “Double-Voiced” Text in *Letty Fox: Her Luck*.

This was not ill-intentioned. It was supposed to be libelous, outrageous, shocking, but not insulting. . . . A Rabelaisian time, my masters! But such was the adult world to us – every day of the week. (LF 165-6)

Letty Fox: Her Luck is not a conventional bourgeois *Bildungsroman* in either its form or content. The dialogic nature of the text subverts the individual and authoritative voice which is the norm in a typical *Bildungsroman*. The novel is dialogic in its incorporation of many voices – in its heteroglossia and polyphony. Most importantly, the text is dialogic in its double-voiced structure in which the authorial discourse has a dialogic relation with the voice of the main protagonist. This dialogic structure is founded in parody, and in the carnivalesque treatment of the hero(ine).¹

The independence of Letty’s voice from that of the authorial discourse means that *Letty Fox* is not a monologic text. Yet the use of a first-person narrative in itself does not mean that there is necessarily a distinction between the character who narrates and the

¹ The ambivalent use of hero and heroine here is employed, firstly, to evoke Bakhtin’s use of the term “hero” in his theories of the novel and the subject, and, secondly, to underscore Letty’s gender, the importance of which will be discussed later in the chapter. In *Writing Beyond the Ending* Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that in nineteenth-century female *Bildungsromane* the *hero*, or protagonist, is made *heroine* at the end of the text when she is tamed by marriage or punished by death (3). It is argued here that Letty’s marriage makes her a typical bourgeois heroine to some extent. See the chapter on *For Love Alone* for a further discussion of the female hero.

authorial discourse; rather the independence of the character lies in the prevailing note of the text. According to Bakhtin the problem of the hero's discourse in relation to the author's discourse:

lies deeper than the question of authorial discourse on the superficial level of composition, and deeper than any superficially compositional device for eliminating authorial discourse by means of the *Ich-Erzählung* form (first-person narration), or by the introduction of a narrator, or by constructing the novel in scenes and thus reducing authorial discourse to the status of a stage direction. All these compositional devices for eliminating or weakening authorial discourse at the level of composition do not in themselves tackle the essence of the problem; their underlying artistic meaning can be profoundly different, depending on the different artistic tasks they perform. (PDP 56-7)

In *Letty Fox* there is no monologic control on the part of the author over Letty's voice – in fact the novel is predicated on an ironic distance between the authorial discourse and the construction of Letty as narrator.² In this way there must be seen to be two voices at work in this text: the voice of Letty, and the authorial discourse which parodies Letty's voice.

The novel also creates itself as scandalous, and therefore directly challenges bourgeois propriety and the American society in which the novel is set. The scandal in the text is bound up with a carnivalesque ribaldry in which such "gay" antics are depicted with enjoyment. Letty is a scandalous hero(ine), but at the same time she epitomises

² It is a mistake, then, to see Letty as an autobiographical character. (Although an author's relation to an autobiographical character is also inherently dialogic; see chapter seven). Rudolf Bader, for example, treats *For Love Alone*, *The Man Who Loved Children* and *Letty Fox* as "one long *bildungsroman*" and draws on Stead's biography to attempt to prove this (1984, 37).

bourgeois values. So the text, in its opposition to Letty, challenges bourgeois values and the bourgeois ideal of the isolated and unequivocal individual.

The Bildungsroman

While *Letty Fox* employs a first-person narrative, and is the story of Letty's youth, the novel in some ways is not a typical *Bildungsroman*. According to Susan Fraiman in *Unbecoming Women*, the seminal *Bildungsroman* is Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (3). This work is characterised by the hero's agency – his choice of friends, wife, vocation – and his journey from apprenticeship to mastery (as his name suggests) (Fraiman 5). As Franco Moretti argues, Meister's story ends in social integration: "everything – episodes, characters, values – finds an unambiguous arrangement within an organic totality" (1983, 230). For Moretti the "classical *Bildungsroman*" represents an exchange between self-determination or freedom from social hegemony, and socialisation or normality, with socialisation the victorious, all-encompassing, value (1987, 16). Thus, in the end, the text and the hero are at one in their commitment to bourgeois society.

Wilhelm Dilthey's famous definition of the *Bildungsroman* is that "a young male hero discovers himself and his social role through the experience of love, friendship, and the hard realities of life" (qtd. in Labovitz 2). Fraiman argues, therefore, that a female protagonist might have a problematic relationship with the *Bildungsroman* because a

woman (particularly in the nineteenth-century novels with which she is dealing) is not afforded the same agency or individual choice. She suggests that these texts involving female protagonists instead “tend to insist that personal destiny evolves in dialectical relation to historical events, social structures, and other people” (10).

Bakhtin himself, in “Discourse in the Novel”, celebrates Wilhelm Meister’s sense of struggle in life, and the *developmental* process of the hero on his way to subjectivity (DI 393). Yet despite the hero’s “heterogeneous traits” (Moretti 1987, 42), which Bakhtin acclaims, Fraiman’s work questions the narrative of the *Bildungsroman* for its presumptions about gender, and Moretti challenges its ultimately conservative politics. As far as Letty Fox is concerned, her gender is significant, as we shall see. The novel seems to disavow the individual agency of a masculine life story by creating Letty’s life through a dialogic process with society and history. It can also be argued, however, that Letty imitates the masculine *Bildungs* through her sexual adventurousness. This is a contrast to the female protagonists of nineteenth-century novels who must resist all sexual encounters according to social dictates (Fraiman 6). Yet, Letty seems to become, in the end, a typical bourgeois heroine through her conservative marriage in which she sees herself integrated with society. However, the text is not *at one* with Letty – it does not support her social aspirations.

Letty Fox and *The Little Hotel* are the only novels by Stead to utilise a first-person narrative. However, *Letty Fox* maintains Letty’s voice and control without the obvious

changes into third-person narration which appear in *The Little Hotel*. Yet, stories of Letty's childhood and of the courtship of her parents are presented with an immediacy arguably inconsistent with the knowledge of the older Letty who is the narrator (Geering 1979, 132). Furthermore, while Letty cannot possibly have been present at certain events she narrates, there is also an absence of a sense of an older Letty looking back on past events, for the narration, while it does employ the past tense, seems immediate,³ as if all the action were taking place in the present. Indeed, the problem of Letty's narration cannot simply be explained by a distance between a narrating "I" and an experiencing "I",⁴ with the experiencing self imagined in the realm of the immediate, despite Letty's vivaciousness and skill as a story teller. Other voices are also involved and intervene in her narrative of her life story.

The narrative moves into the past through the mechanism of having Letty hear of events through her father, Solander. Letty describes him as a "genius as a conversationalist", and as someone who tells his stories "with exuberance, freshness, and astounding detail as if it had all happened yesterday, no, half an hour ago, and Solander had been a witness of it all" (15). Therefore Solander's voice is evident in the narrative, and the simple explanation of his access to events of the past from which Letty borrows is merely

³ This is arguably the "immediacy" or "zone of familiar contact" (PDP 158) of menippean literature in which there is no sense of a mythological past, as discussed in chapter one.

⁴ This is a dialogic structure in itself in the sense that the older self is necessarily distinct from the earlier self which is the object, or hero, of the representation (see chapter seven).

an indication of a more complex network of utterances which undermine the individual authority of Letty's voice.

It also appears that the author's voice sometimes interferes in Letty's narrative. For instance, Ron Geering states that "there are occasions when we feel it is the author and not the character speaking", and he founds this criticism broadly in the discrepancy between Letty the character's credulity and the intelligent omniscience of Letty the narrator (1979, 132). He also argues that the infrequent lyrical or poetic passages in the text do not belong to Letty's voice but are representative of the author's discourse, a continuation of Stead's self-referential language also seen in novels such as *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *For Love Alone* (1979, 133). The fact that the author's discourse is evident in the narrative is not disputed here – what is contested is Geering's assumption that this interjection should be perceived as negative and problematic. Geering's conclusion that the first-person technique of *Letty Fox* "is not adequate to the demands placed upon it" dismisses the importance of the function of Letty's voice in the overall intent of the novel and the dialogic relation between utterances in the text (1979, 132).

This interjection of the author's discourse does not undermine the polyphonic independence of Letty's voice; that is, it cannot be equated with monologic control.

Bakhtin argues that there are some "monologic chunks" in Dostoevsky's narratives, but that these passages do not fundamentally alter the polyphonic text:

The consciousnesses of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed, defined as objects or as things – one can only *relate to them dialogically*. To

think about them means to *talk with them; otherwise they immediately turn to us their objectivized side*: they fall silent, close up, and congeal into finished, objectivized images. An enormous and intense dialogic activity is demanded of the author of a polyphonic novel: as soon as this activity slackens, the characters begin to congeal, they become mere things, and monologically formed chunks of life appear in the novel. Such chunks, which fall out of the polyphonic design, can be found in all of Dostoevsky's novels, but they do not of course determine the nature of the whole. (PDP 68)

In *Letty Fox* the author's control remains implicit and largely hidden allowing Letty to "speak herself". Yet the interjection of the author's discourse is not evidence of the imposition of "monologic chunks" in the narrative in which Letty is "objectivized", but, rather, is evidence of the *dialogic* nature of the text. The narrative has a double-voiced structure in which the author's discourse is in dialogue with Letty's voice, as will be demonstrated.

The novel places a great deal of emphasis on the various social discourses of the era in the subject development of Letty. Thus the heteroglossia of Letty's world is of more importance in Letty's story of herself than other processes of subjectivity which focus on the individual, such as psychology. All around her discussions occur on education for children, free love, communism, the Popular Front, Zionism, polygamy, and more. While these discourses are adopted or acquired by Letty in rather shallow ways, if at all, and thus do not necessarily affect her identity strongly, their importance is to situate her in her socio-historic world, and, in so doing, to emphasise the social orientation of her life story rather than her origins as an isolated individual. Pamela Law agrees that *Letty*

Fox is a novel “much more about the processes of socialization than it is about individual experience . . . ” (449).

The socially, rather than individually, driven identity of Letty may be the reason the novel contains various references to Letty as “typical”. For example, the author’s prefatory note reads:

This is a work of fiction. The persons and events, other than political, are imaginary. The language and opinions are those of a type of middle-class New York office worker. (N. pag.)

In the opening chapter Letty makes some general statements about herself: “I am just a run-of-the-mill New York girl” (9), and:

I have written everyday facts which, doubtless, have happened in the life of almost every New York middle-class girl who has gone out from high school or college to make a living in the city. (12)

This assertion of typicality incensed some American critics who saw it as a pejorative categorisation of the New York girl (eg. McGrory 24). It is not surprising that these critics should have been morally outraged at the depiction of American values because the novel parodies Letty’s voice and that society, as we shall see. However, for the moment, these statements enforce the purported sociological basis of the depiction of Letty, and in this way emphasise Letty’s representativeness and her social milieu in contrast with “bourgeois notions of the individual’s importance and his [sic] obligation to standards of propriety” (Kern 8).

While Letty's is the controlling voice of the text, the novel is strongly polyphonic in that it acknowledges the existence of other voices and points of view. The text does not limit itself to the depiction of a solitary life where the individual is all-important. Instead Letty lives among a myriad of others, among family and then her numerous acquaintances and lovers. The narrative allows each of these personalities to manifest itself independent of Letty's voice through dialogue, jokes, poems and letters, all of which are constructed so as to appear "transcribed". Bakhtin views this use of "inserted genres" as characteristic of Menippean satire:

Characteristic for the menippea is a wide use of inserted genres: novellas, letters, oratorical speeches, symposia, and so on; also characteristic is a mixing of prose and poetic speech. The inserted genres are presented at various distances from the ultimate authorial position, that is, with varying degrees of parodying and objectification. (*PDP* 118)

This "inserted" material reinforces the "multi-styled and multi-toned", or dialogic, nature of the menippea (*PDP* 118). Bakhtin argues that these incorporated genres "preserve within the novel their own structural integrity and independence, as well as their own linguistic and stylistic peculiarities" (*DI* 321). The letter, inserted in the narrative in this way, can be dialogic: "The letter, like a rejoinder in a dialogue, is addressed to a specific person, and it takes into account the other's possible reactions, the other's possible reply" (*PDP* 205).

In *Letty Fox* Letty's letters to Solander are presented, as are her letters to Clays Manning, Jacky's letters to Letty, letters from Amos, Bobby Thompson and Clays to Letty, and love poems between Clays and Letty. The intention of this incorporation of material is to give

these characters polyphonic independence and, as Bakhtin notes, these can be dealt with by the author with varying degrees of parody. Letty's letters to Solander serve as comic and parodic examples of her precociousness in her various attempts to get money from her father. Like her narrative in general, they display her naivety (she talks of "Freezes" not friezes in relation to a performance (181)), vivacity and humour (she signs off "Letty-Marmalade 'always in a jam'" (180)). Jacky's letters in the text have great importance as they serve as a dialogue with Letty's perception of the world. Jacky's letters to her sister address Letty's views on love and politics and as such constitute a conversation between the two girls on these principles. For instance, in her letter from New Canaan, dated 1936, Jacky challenges Letty's communist beliefs by asking about the place of art under a "soviet government" (212). These letters embody Jacky's romantic, serious and high-minded voice within the text.⁵ The poems between Clays and Letty are a parody of their young, romantic, and naive love; Clays, for instance, comes up with these rather Rabelaisian or Gargantuan lines: "*I, the thirst and the cup;/ You, the wine and the riot*" (283). Such is the attempt to incorporate the idiosyncrasies of each voice that the letters from Amos, a college professor, come complete with his spelling mistakes (313). This may very well be a carnivalesque parody of the professor in his position as a representative of officialdom, and Letty joins in when she calls professors "donkeys" and the university a "cookie shop" (319).

⁵ Anita Segerberg argues that they are in fact a pastiche of Marie Bashkirtseff's diary (1989a, 23).

Therefore Letty's story is not a conventional *Bildungsroman* in its incorporation of many voices – its heteroglossia and polyphony. This is also the case with its overall structure. Letty's narrative is basically chronological: Book One, "With the Others", outlines her childhood and Book Two, "On My Own", describes her life from the age of sixteen until her marriage at twenty-four. However, the narrative is not particularly linear or tightly organised along those chronological guidelines. The novel begins at a point of little importance with Letty having just claimed a new apartment by bribery. Yet this apartment is not the room in which her narrative is written, nor does the narrative circle logically back to this position (despite a reference to the apartment again in the last chapter (509)). In keeping with the analysis of the secondary nature of plot in Stead's fiction proposed in chapter one of this thesis, *Letty Fox* is long and unwieldy, and its plot connections often non-causal. Letty deviates frequently from the telling of her own life by allowing other characters to interest her.⁶ For instance, Chapters IV and V are largely concerned with the antics of Uncle Percival Hogg.

Once more Stead's artistic project emphasises the importance of character over plot. Letty's voice dictates the form of the novel and, in keeping with her character, the narrative assumes her idiomatic, energetic and frivolous voice. The clerk from the Australian Trade and Customs department who had to report on *Letty Fox* described Stead's style as "verbose gabble, full of slang and practically devoid of distinction or

⁶ It is perhaps more appropriate to talk of the authorial discourse interrupting Letty's narration by its involvement with other characters, but, either way, the narrative does not keep to Letty's story of her own life.

variety" (qtd. in C. Williams 1989a, 176). This is, of course, to mistake the author's style for the character's voice. Geering's comments that *Letty Fox* suffers from "an overelaboration of detail" and the inclusion of unnecessary material (1979, 128) can be dismissed to some extent if one considers that Letty's voice and personality determine both the structure and content of the novel resulting, perhaps, in some of the narrative's idiosyncrasies. Letty's is not a "classical" voice but is ribald and gossipy, thus undermining the "proper" language, or the narrative typical of the "classical *Bildungsroman*".

While *Letty Fox* can be seen to undermine the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* it can also be perceived as a *parody* of that genre. Letty *does* seek out the social conventions and rights of passage which would fulfil the demands of the female bourgeois *Bildungsroman*. She frequently tells us that all she wants to do is to become part of society; she remarks, "My supreme idea was always to get married and join organized society" (4).⁷ Yet, like her mother, Letty is faced with the fact that "no learned roles fit experiences" (25). However, despite the dysfunction of her own family and the sexual vagrancies and marital breakdowns around her which undermine any faith in monogamous marriage, she continues to seek to become a mother in a bourgeois nuclear family. So when the novel concludes with Letty's marriage and pregnancy it is a farcical ending and a parody of nineteenth-century novels in which women attain their place in society through

⁷ This view of the novel dismisses arguments which suggest that there is a turning point which makes Letty aspire to marriage and motherhood. For an example of such an argument see Geering's comments on Letty's stay with Lucy Headlong (1979, 125-6).

marriage, wealth, and motherhood.⁸ As Diana Brydon states, “by the time Letty Fox has made the marriage that ends her story, marriage has been totally devalued as a goal and cancelled as an ending” (1987, 29).

As well as this, *Letty Fox* could be said to parody the inheritance structures of novels such as *Jane Eyre* when Letty fritters away her share of the \$5,000 left to her by Grandmother Fox, and the millionaire she marries, Bill Van Week, is disinherited. It is ironic that just when Letty achieves all that she desires – money and a nuclear family which appears, for the moment, to be functional – her new-found wealth is illusory. As with the narrator’s statement that “no learned roles fit experiences” (25), this parody is based in the perception of two discourses at work in comic contrast: one, social convention and aspirations, and the other, actual experience. This structure is also evident in Stead’s ironic statement that Letty finds “promiscuity necessary in her search for security” (Moody N. pag). Indeed, Letty’s very improper methods of seeking social integration are integral to the novel’s sense of parody and play.

⁸ Angela Carter argues that Letty will go on to become a ribald matriarch in the manner of her grandmother, Cissie Morgan (12). There are certainly grounds for perceiving an affinity between them (eg. LF 267). Yet the construction of the ending of the novel, with its “happy” closure, remains a parodic representation of bourgeois aims for women. It is clear that this is the conventional marriage from which Teresa Hawkins shies in *For Love Alone*.

Parody

While it is possible to view *Letty Fox* as a parody of the genre of the *Bildungsroman* as has just been stated, *Letty Fox* is more precisely a parody of Letty herself. Critics have noted that Letty is an enigmatic character because, as Law argues, she seems more naive than would be expected from the breadth of her reading, education, and experience in Europe (449). Similarly Letty is said to readily conform to society while, at the same time, she has the facility to be able to criticise that society (Gribble 1994, 80). It will be argued here that this confusion results from the collapsing of the distinction between Letty's utterance and the parodying discourse of the author. More specifically, the parodic and comic construction of Letty as naive and precocious means that Letty does not always intelligently engage with the world about her, but the author's dedication to the presentation of Letty's heteroglossic world – the socio-historic setting of the novel – means that Letty must perceive and confront these discourses even if she is only to continue in her more flippant adventures. The “intelligent omniscience” of Letty as narrator must, in part, be restated to include the voice of the author who, rather than Letty, is the site of intelligence within the text. In fact, it is Letty's very naivety which is a target of parody.

The parody of Letty extends to her political activities. Letty is a member of the youth league of the Communist Party; she attends meetings and does party-political work. The portrayal of the political situation and the Communist Party's activities in relation to the

Spanish Civil War are part of the socio-historic grounding of the text. However, as far as Letty herself is concerned, her communist politics are not integral to her personality: she is not an “ideologue” in the sense that she is the embodiment of the principles of communism. For instance, her pursuit of Clays Manning seems more important to her than her participation in the Party. The accusation Letty hurls at Susannah Ford, “Radicalism is the opium of the middle class” (398), could just as easily be applied to Letty herself.⁹ Letty’s inability to recognise the import of her times, or to treat politics in anything but a flippant manner, is part of the parody of her character. The text, by explicitly historicising Letty’s world, parodies her picaresque, frivolous pursuits. In other words, the socio-historic detail in the text highlights and mocks Letty’s unconcern with contemporary politics.

The novel is also a parody of Letty’s voice, or utterances.¹⁰ As Gary Saul Morson points out in his essay “Parody, History, and Metaparody” (which deals with Bakhtin’s concept of parody¹¹), the parodist imitates and mocks the characteristics of an utterance:

⁹ Therefore this aphorism might be said to belong to the “intelligent” authorial discourse.

¹⁰ This is a general interpretation of the parody of Letty’s voice. Yet Letty’s story may very well have had its genesis as a parody of “The Story of Mary MacLane”, part of which is anthologised in Stead and Blake’s *Modern Women in Love* published a year before *Letty Fox*. In their introduction to the excerpt they state:

Mary MacLane was fired with ambition to surpass her model [Marie Bashkirtseff], to rival St. Teresa in intensity, and to plumb all depths, scale all heights, and conceal nothing. Her diabolical worship, absolute egoism, and disdain for the social vestures of modesty burned through her pages. (18)

Stead seems to have divided these characteristics between Jacky, Teresa Hawkins and Letty, with Letty most evident in the last sentence. Letty seems to share the precociousness of MacLane’s voice, an example of which follows:

I am a rather plain-featured, insignificant-looking genius, but I have a graceful personality. I have a pretty figure. I am well set up. And when I choose to talk in my

The parodist recognizes language as dialect or idiolect, as *characteristic* of some group or speaker. Taking speech as an index of its speaker or listener, he or she selects and draws attention to whatever most clearly uncovers their affectation or folly. (Morson and Emerson 1989, 73)

Letty's voice, then, is a "speech genre": it is indicative of her class, her times, her society.

Therefore, this explains the notion of her "typicality".¹²

Bakhtin's discussion on *skaz*, or "an orientation toward oral speech" (PDP 191), is a useful analytical tool in this case. While Letty is known to be a writer and journalist, her story sounds as if it is spoken to us; Letty's voice is full of the idioms of oral speech and is that of the story teller rather than the writer. In Bakhtin's analysis *skaz* is dialogic when it is the representation of "someone else's speech" and no encroachment is made upon that speech by the author (PDP 191). Bakhtin also talks of "parodistic *skaz*" in which a character's voice is the object of parody:

To ignore in *skaz* its orientation toward someone else's discourse and, consequently, its double-voicedness, is to be denied any understanding of those complex interrelationships into which voices, once they have become vari-directional, may enter within the limits of the *skaz* discourse. Inherent in most cases of contemporary *skaz* is a slight parodic overtone. (PDP 194)

charmingly original fashion, embellishing my conversation with many quaint lies, I have a certain very noticeable way with me, an "air". (18)

Stead and Blake do not seem to perceive "The Story of Mary MacLane" as a parody in itself. Therefore, if MacLane imitates Bashkirtseff, then *Letty Fox* parodies them both in a subversion of the precocious female protagonist's *Bildungs*. While the novel is strongly polyphonic, Letty's is an egotistical voice in its limited horizons and evident self-interest.

¹¹ Morson concentrates on Bakhtin's interpretation of parody in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* as "double-voiced" rather than on Bakhtin's analysis of parody as carnivalesque. Both of Bakhtin's concepts of parody are studied here.

¹² The target of parody must in some senses be made "typical" in order to highlight and mock its traits. However, Bakhtin's ideal hero is one who is not "finalisable" in this way. This is a hero who relativises society by being unable to be contained by its definitions (see PDP 104; DI 37).

The issue of the “double-voicedness” of the text is important here because Letty’s voice is simultaneously distinct from that of the authorial discourse, and is the target of the author’s parody.

In chapter five of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, “Discourse in Dostoevsky”, Bakhtin turns his attention from the carnival aspects of parody to its “double-voiced” nature. Here he argues that parody involves two voices: one the author’s, and the other the parodied utterance. Thus parody is dialogic because of the two discourses at work, and must be contrasted with *imitation* in which “the two voices are intended to merge completely so that only one is heard” (Morson and Emerson 1989, 65). Bakhtin states that the two discourses in parody are necessarily opposed:

parody introduces . . . a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, once having made its home in the other’s discourse, clashes hostilely with its primordial host and forces him [sic] to serve directly opposing aims. Discourse becomes an arena of battle between two voices. . . . the voices are not only isolated from one another, separated by a distance, but are also hostilely opposed. Thus in parody the deliberate palpability of the other’s discourse must be particularly sharp and clearly marked. (*PDP* 193)

This stress on hostility between the two voices seems at odds with Bakhtin’s own carnival interpretation of parody which emphasises its laughter and ambivalence, as will be shown. However, Morson suggests that the antipathy between the two voices is a necessary criterion of parody: “A parodic utterance is one of open disagreement. The second utterance represents the first in order to discredit it, and so introduces a “semantic direction” which subverts that of the original” (Morson and Emerson 1989,

66). He goes on to argue that the second, authorial voice must clearly represent a “higher semantic authority than the original” (Morson and Emerson 1989, 67).

We have seen already how the text disapproves of Letty’s naivety, her politics, and her conventional aspirations in the face of hypocrisy. The scene in which Letty visits the psychoanalyst will serve as an example of the comedy at work in *Letty Fox* as a result of the double-voiced structure of parody. This scene also functions as a parody of Letty herself, despite the fact that Letty is the narrator. Letty initially hears of the psychoanalyst’s methods through her father:

[The psychoanalyst] attacked his madmen physically, either by violent drugs, or by dropping them on the floor, out of bed, or by imposing upon them slight wounds, which cured them temporarily (of course). Some of the patients screamed with fear when they saw him coming, or knew their day for treatment had arrived. . . . This is what I heard upon inquiry from Solander, and knowing my father’s style of merry hooliganism in discourse, it’s possible he garbled it a bit. (479)

The humour in the first part of this quotation appears to belong to a wiser persona than the gullible Letty (despite the vivaciousness of her voice). Arguably this is authorial discourse,¹³ and is signalled by the aside in the bracket, “of course”, which acts as an address to the reader and emphasises the comedy in the description of the psychoanalyst’s methods. Letty’s voice is then re-established through the use of the first-person. The device of having Letty hear this story from Solander, who, in his “merry hooliganism”, is a character more likely to mock the psychoanalyst, distances Letty from

¹³ Solander’s voice, of course, is apparent here, too.

the knowing laughter of the first section of the quotation. Letty's ingenuousness is reinscribed through her uncertain qualification, "it's possible he garbled it a bit".

The scene proceeds with the depiction of all the clichéd trappings of the psychoanalyst's consulting rooms, including the ubiquitous couch. Letty describes the room to us, but the exaggerated succession of objects in the description is perhaps the author's signal that the reader should note the stereotypical elements of the space. The scene continues with the psychoanalyst's equally hackneyed Freudian diagnosis of "father fixation":

This Solander-fixation was the reason I did not keep men and did not get married. I asked him if . . . the war had anything to do with it. He said I was resisting him, which was a good sign, because it meant I was beginning already to transfer from my father to him. He said he would treat me twice a week, for as long as necessary, at the rate of twenty dollars a visit. (479)

Letty continues her resistance:

I told him that I had not lived with my father most of my life, and he said, "Good grounds for a fixation."

"But," said I, in great confusion, much troubled by the prospect of the forty dollars weekly, "I thought girls who lived with their fathers had father-fixations."

"They do, too," said the great doctor.

"Is there no way out?" I asked.

"Only by analysis," said the eminent prognosticator.

But before I left him, he had poured balm over my painful doubts, with his charming, loving manner, and he wrote down on his calendar the date of my next appointment. (480)

Letty's voice contains the humorous opposition to the psychoanalyst, but this is emphasised or exaggerated by the structural juxtaposition of dialogue between Letty and the doctor. The circular arguments used by the analyst and the large amount of money he asks for his services are of course evident to the reader who is thereby asked to

recognise the doctor's charlatanism. The irony in the descriptive phrases "great doctor" and "eminent prognosticator" may belong to the authorial discourse or to Letty the narrator. Yet, the last paragraph reminds us that Letty, while a participant in the scene, is not the whole source of its satire, as her gullibility is demonstrated once again. So, Letty is naive, while, at the same time, hers is the voice, through the first-person narrative, which enables the parody of the psychoanalyst contained in this scene. Yet, despite the first-person narrative, it appears that behind Letty is the author's discourse which also instigates laughter and parodic play, and which laughs at Letty herself. In other words, the scene serves not only as parody of psychoanalysis and this particular psychoanalyst; it is also a parody of Letty.

The fact that Morson describes the second voice of parody as a "higher semantic authority than the original" (Morson and Emerson 1989, 67) suggests a moral stance in which the first utterance is scorned and denigrated. The novel in some ways does seem to function as a satire of Letty's values and as a criticism of her immorality. Indeed, in her interview with Theo Moody, Stead expresses her disgust at the morals of women such as Letty whom she says she has known in reality:

I have met plenty of Letty Foxes in New York. . . . when I first came to New York 12 years ago after living in London and Paris, I was deeply shocked at the morals of New Yorkers. (Moody N. pag)

Yet, while there may be this moral tone in the authorial utterance, Letty's character and even her promiscuity are celebrated by the text, thus making the novel difficult to interpret merely as moral criticism.

It is important to be clear that *Letty Fox* is not just *satire*, but is *parody* according to Bakhtin's carnival interpretation of the genre. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin distinguishes between the ambivalent laughter embodied in parody and the negative tone of modern satire.¹⁴ For him, Rabelais's parodies of ecclesiastical figures, of official discourses and the like, are infused not only with ridicule but also with redemptive laughter. He argues that modern forms of humour have lost this positive pole to become forms of "reduced laughter": serious, negative and superior. Bakhtin asserts that "the satirist whose laughter is negative places himself [sic] above the object of his mockery" (RHW 12). Satire, for him, is "a laughter that does not laugh" (RHW 45) because it emphasises "'moral' meaning" and, therefore, is "actually not laughter but rhetoric" (RHW 62; 51). For Bakhtin, Rabelais was not a satirist: his humour was not destructive and derisive, and his work was not driven by indignation at the evils of society (RHW 141).

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin also utilises this carnival view of parody, and argues that parody is an:

integral element in Menippean satire and in all carnivalized genres in general. To the pure genres (epic, tragedy) parody is organically alien;¹⁵ to

¹⁴ Bakhtin is not making an absolute distinction between the terms parody and satire in themselves, but between modern forms of humour and carnival laughter: "the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times" (RHW 11). But for the sake of convenience "satire" will be used in this thesis to refer to the negative, mocking form of derision as opposed to "parody's" ambivalence and positive pole of laughter.

¹⁵ See chapter six for a discussion of Bakhtin's concept of tragedy, and chapter seven for his view of the epic.

the carnivalized genres it is, on the contrary, organically inherent. (PDP 127)

He emphasises parody's ambivalence and the fact that it is not "a naked rejection of the parodied object":

Parodying is the creation of a *decrowning double*; it is that same "world turned inside out." For this reason parody is ambivalent. . . . Everything has its parody, that is, its laughing aspect, for everything is reborn and renewed through death. (PDP 127)

Once more he asserts that in "the narrowly formal literary parody of modern times, the connection with a carnival sense of the world is almost entirely broken" (PDP 128).

Despite this historical specificity, Bakhtin goes on to argue that Dostoevsky's novels, while they may contain some sombreness and while the humour is sometimes muffled, are suffused with ambivalent carnival laughter (PDP 165). *Letty Fox*, too, despite its modernity, is a carnivalesque parody.

In her book, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern*, Margaret Rose undertakes a comprehensive survey of the interpretation of parody in Bakhtin's work. She argues that the stylistic and carnivalistic views of parody in Bakhtin's work are not integrated, resulting in an over-emphasis on the negative aspects of modern parody (169). In her own work Rose highlights the existence of the parodied utterance, or text, within the parody itself, a fact which suggests an ambivalent relationship between the two discourses, and one which is not necessarily as *hostile* as Bakhtin suggests in chapter five of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, mentioned above. Yet, her need to stress the ambivalence of the parodying voice in its "nearness and opposition" to the parodied text

(8), and parody's positive comic aspects (that is, the text as not just ridicule or mockery) is not irreconcilable with Bakhtin's carnival interpretation of parody.

As far as *Letty Fox* is concerned, the novel appears to be a parody which is not solely negative, or founded in indignation. The author's discourse and Letty's voice are entirely distinct, and the authorial utterance mocks Letty, but there is arguably no absolute, *hostile* condemnation of Letty's discourse. In fact there is an enthusiasm on the part of the author for that voice. As was stated earlier, Letty's voice runs away with the text and controls the novel's form. There may even be said to be a degree of authorial sympathy for Letty (Geering 1979, 128). In Rose's terms "parodies may be *both* critical of *and* sympathetic to their 'targets'" (47). In other words, the parodied object may not just be criticised but may also be "refunctioned" in a positive sense (Rose 52). If Rose's distinction between satire and parody is employed, *Letty Fox* is not a satire whereby "the author's statements are only directed outwards to the world of the reader" and where the sole purpose is moral comment, but the novel is a parody in its comedy and playfulness (36). Indeed, unlike the object of satire, the target of this novel – Letty – is a significant and constituent part of the parody itself (Rose 51; 81). In allowing her to speak, in giving her subjectivity, the text cannot wholly condemn, or objectivise, Letty.

While it has been argued above that the parody of Letty includes her politics, the laughter of the text avoids a harsh condemnation of her. Barbara Giles's review of *Letty Fox* in *New Masses* criticised the book for presenting "the most unnatural" and the "least

interesting and important" of revolutionaries without the contrast of a sincere or genuine Communist Party member (Giles 24). The demand for the "genuine" hero espoused, in this case, by socialist realist doctrines dismisses the satirical, and regenerative, significance of the laughter in the portrait of Letty. Letty herself might have the best answer to Giles when she censures one of Lucy Headlong's acquaintances; he is "one of those socialists who are extreme puritans, who detest all satire and have nothing of the Molière in them" (338).

For a text to be interpreted as parody its double-voiced nature must be apprehended.

According to Rose the ideal reader of parody:

recognises the parody from the comic discrepancy, or comic incongruity, between T[ext]W[orld]1 and TW2 and enjoys the recognition of the hidden irony of this construction (and the way in which the parody has both borrowed from and renewed the parodied work) as well as any satire against or humour about the parodied text. . . . (42)

Gary Morson argues that:

The audience of a double-voiced word is . . . meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view (or "semantic position") and the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view. (Morson and Emerson 1989, 65)

However, the double-voicedness of *Letty Fox* is not always easy to determine.

Some of the reviewers of *Letty Fox* missed the parodic intention of the novel and criticised the author for her support of Letty's promiscuity. For instance, the report from The Literature Censorship Board of Australia found it difficult to determine the author's intention:

Whether the authoress wishes to expose rampant immorality, or believes that, as an artist, she is bound to objective chronicle, is hard to say. In any case she has been injudicious. (qtd. in C. Williams 1989a, 175)

The *New York Sun* called the book “a quagmire of promiscuity and misinformation about New York” (qtd. in Moody N. pag). It appears that these readers were seeking the unequivocal moral comment of (modern) satire from the novel and, having not found it, attacked the author for her association with Letty’s voice, thus interpreting the text as “single-voiced”¹⁶ (Morson and Emerson 1989, 67).

The response of those wishing to defend *Letty Fox*, including Stead, was to highlight the novel’s parodic structure and draw upon its purported satiric intent in order to answer the charges of immorality. For instance, in a letter to Walter Stone, Stead writes:

Letty Fox is not a heroine of feminine freedom: everyone in the USA understood perfectly that she showed the error of feminine riot! What end was there for her but deterioration, a miserable middle age, desperate abandon, or a total acquiescence with conformity? (*Letters I* 172)

Stead goes on to argue that the book is a satire when she says, “Anyone who understood novels would see that these were satires and moralities” (*Letters I* 172). As we have seen, however, there is an absence of the unequivocal satiric or moral voice which can lead to an oversight of the double-voiced nature of the text.

¹⁶ Just as some critics believe Robbie Grant’s voice to be the “single” voice of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (see chapter two of this thesis).

Susan Sheridan summarises the confused readings of the intention of the novel when she suggests that Stead's style moves from "ironic shading"¹⁷ to "sharp contrasts of satire" to "straight reportage" with the result that "there is no easy access to either judgement or sympathetic identification of the kind one expects as a reader of realist narrative" (1988a, 83-4). This is, as has been suggested, because of the ambivalence of the parodic text which contains both judgement *and* sympathetic identification with the character on the author's part.

It is arguably the carnivalesque ambivalence of parody which leads to a misinterpretation of the novel by some readers. If parody is not as unequivocally scathing as satire, then the two voices in the double-voiced structure may be conflated by an unwary reader, thus camouflaging the parodic play between them. Furthermore, Letty's polyphonic independence causes complications because there is little direct comment from the author and so the second, authorial voice is often difficult to detect. The first-person narrative also means that Letty's narration itself must contain the parody which undermines its teller. Moreover, as we have seen, Stead's dedication to objectivity in the polyphonic portrayal of Letty means that a moral stance against Letty is obscured.

¹⁷ Irony, in some senses may be a more useful term for explicating the hidden nature of the second, authorial discourse in *Letty Fox*. If the parodic utterance is not explicit, it may be possible to talk of an ironic *tone* in the narrative which undermines Letty's voice. In this case the parodying voice is *almost* "identical" to its target" (Morson and Emerson 1989, 71).

Gary Morson argues that when the reader does not know “with which utterance they are expected to agree”, or if they “suspect that the second utterance may be no more authoritative than the first”, then this is “metaparody” (Morson and Emerson 1989, 68). However, *Letty Fox* does not seem to fit these criteria as any confusion in reading the novel stems rather from the hidden nature of the second utterance than from a deliberate obfuscation of, or play on, the text’s parodic intention. Yet, it is somewhat ironic that the carnival sense of play in the text to some extent undermines the novel’s own parodic project by obscuring the mockery at work.

Scandal

While it might appear that the carnivalesque nature of *Letty Fox* undermines its parodic intention, it is possible to argue that the carnival strategies in the text in fact enhance its politics. The emphasis in reading this novel may be shifted away from its parodic treatment of Letty to its parody of American society. Letty’s “gay” voice and her Rabelaisian actions enable this approach. Some of the equivocality experienced when focusing on the depiction of Letty is overcome by a stress on the criticism of her society. After all, as we have seen, the novel does not depict Letty as an isolated individual. Letty is not mocked because she is powerful or particularly wealthy. Nor is she mocked because she suffers from monomania; while she is egotistical, she does not seek to coerce others. Rather Letty is mocked as a representative, as “typical”, of her bourgeois society.

The Literature Censorship Board of Australia banned *Letty Fox* in 1947 blaming the novel's "over-emphasis on sex": "Five hundred pages of closely-packed type are saturated with life seen from the sexual angle" (qtd. in C. Williams 1989a, 175). In answer to American criticisms of the book Stead had already asserted that the novel was "not obscenity" but a "serious, realistic novel" and that it was "meant as a satire on American divorce and sexual customs" (Moody N. pag). There is a great deal of obscenity and vulgarity in the novel, but its purpose is not the sexual titillation of the book's readers. Instead, the "promiscuity" in the novel is representative of a Rabelaisian treatment of American society. As the reviewer from the *San Francisco Chronicle* declared: "It's a worldly, ribald, magnificent tale, this story of Letty Fox" (Voiles 5). Importantly, *Letty Fox* is not just a negative satire of "American divorce and sexual customs" but is also a positive parodic treatment of them.

That the text is carnivalesque is suggested by the novel's references to Rabelais. Letty calls her father, Solander, a "pocket Rabelais" (54), but she is as much one herself¹⁸ and follows in his footsteps as far as his story telling is concerned:

While trying to give me serious instruction and to make me honest, in a broad strain, reminding one of folklore, he invented so much, and so often revealed to me the seamy side of things, though always in a cheerful way, that I was more likely to become a satirist, or comedy playwright, or buffoon, or scandal-columnist than anything else in the world. (168)

¹⁸ It has been demonstrated that while Letty tells the story, another "pocket Rabelais", or source of laughter, is the author herself.

Indeed, at the philosopher's experimental school in England she writes a Rabelaisian play called *Muns and Nuncs* based on a "vision of the medieval church" which includes "indecorous scenes of feasting" and the coupling of the Muns and Nuncs, resulting in offspring (165). Letty comments on the play:

This was not ill-intentioned. It was supposed to be libelous, outrageous, shocking, but not insulting. We all believed this was how things were, more or less, conducted in, say, Chaucerian times, and that this was how, at least in part, the ecclesiastical houses were recruited, with bastards, rips, superfluous heirs, and unmarried women; and that men like Erasmus sprang from such loins. A Rabelaisian time, my masters! But such was the adult world to us – every day of the week. (165-6)

Letty's connection between the play and her contemporary world is, of course, important here. The line, "A Rabelaisian time, my masters!", indicates the carnivalesque nature of Letty's story, and, following from this, its subversive intent directed at her "masters", as we shall see.

It is not surprising that Letty's tale of her life caused such consternation among reviewers because her story is indeed scandalous. Letty describes herself as a treasury of stories of "*obscoena* and fantasy" (438) and she certainly is largely explicit about her relations with her lovers, telling us, for example, of Clays Manning's impotence, and her abortion after having spent the summer with Amos.¹⁹ Bakhtin argues that scandal is an integral part of carnivalesque literature: the scandalous or "inappropriate" word "profanely unmask a

¹⁹ There are several references to marijuana in the novel (eg. 289; 373) which seem not to have aroused any comment from reviewers, but are arguably part of the overall scandal and carnivalesque nature of the text.

holy thing" or "crudely violates etiquette" (PDP 118). Scandal is characteristic of the menippea:

Very characteristic for the menippea are scandal scenes, eccentric behavior, inappropriate speeches and performances, that is, all sorts of violations of the generally accepted and customary course of events and the established norms of behavior and etiquette, including manners of speech. (PDP 117)

Letty's is a ribald tale which disturbs the moral foundations of middle-class society. As has already been noted, it is part of the parodic tone of the text that Letty, middle-class herself, searches for monogamous marriage through the process of promiscuity. Indeed, the scandalous nature of Letty's tale serves to undermine bourgeois propriety.

Letty's family is a marvellous and endless source of scandal, and Letty is by no means its most scandalous member. Uncle Philip causes scandal wherever he goes with his sexual vagrancies. In the scene when Mathilde and the girls are packed and ready to go to the boat, four women arrive at their apartment, each in the belief that they are going with Philip to Europe (101). Philip's last desire, before his suicide, is to love his niece Letty, with all its suggestion of incest (506). Grandmother Morgan is old but has a regular stream of suitors. After her husband Bernard's funeral, the women at the inn are described gathering around Cissie Morgan in a festive way: "They were interested in Grandmother, now a widow; it was almost a fete [sic]" (78). Aunt Phyllis and her friend Pauline sleep with Joseph Montrose and travel across Europe with their cabaret act. Cousin Edwige Lantar, at the early age of twelve, carries about naked photos of herself with a Hollywood career in mind (170). Later she becomes a Hollywood madam and publishes an obscene novel (the novel that *Letty Fox* is not) (483). Cousin Cecily Hogg

kills herself in a suicide pact with her lover, Carl, because their elders tell them they are too young to marry (179). Jacky travels to England during the war to be with her much older lover, Simon Gondych (484). Letty's youngest sister, Andrea, parents the baby of her friend Anita, and there is the suggestion of a homosexual relationship between them (492). And, of course, Solander is living apart from his wife with "*Die Konkubine*", Persia. Referring to her childhood Letty says, "Impossible in a family like ours, full of court scandal, to keep the various sexual knots and hitches from our sight" (54).

Letty Fox contains much of the bawdiness of a Rabelaisian tale. For instance, in Chapter XXVIII Solander introduces Letty to his group of friends who are described as "those drifters of the big city, publishers, readers, and other idle wits who fortunately have time for drinking, eating, witting and whoring" (288).²⁰ In this chapter the appropriately named Gallant Stack boasts about "the size and power of his male parts, with much joviality and good nature" (289). Later the group tell lewd limericks, and Stack tells the joke about the knight whose wish, which is granted, is to be as well endowed as his horse (295-6). According to Bakhtin, similar jokes found in Rabelais's work deal with the "bodily lower stratum" and are founded in debasement, in degrading "all that is exalted" (*RHW* 152). Such jokes are not just negative and abusive, however, because they depict the genitalia and are therefore connected with life and birth (*RHW* 151). In *Gargantua and Pantagruel* this "language of the marketplace" is not an isolated part of the

²⁰ In the author's note to the novel Stead comments that the "jokes and stories in Chapter XXVIII are not original but are taken from conversations heard in midtown Manhattan" which emphasises the fact that these voices have a sociological basis.

novel but is “an organic part of the entire system of images and style” (RHW 153). The same can be said for the lewdness of Letty’s narration which is integral to the overall parody and laughter of the text. This language maintains its positive aspect through this immanent laughter; as Letty remarks ambivalently, “It was supposed to be libelous, outrageous, shocking, but not insulting” (165).

If Letty is the vulgar protagonist of this novel then her side-kick is her sister, Jacky. Letty frequently refers to Jacky’s beliefs and opinions and perceives herself in opposition to Jacky. Jacky is not a grotesque figure like *Don Quixote’s* Sancho Panza, if anything she is the classical and puritan opposite to Letty’s ribaldry. In talking of Jacky this way there is no attempt to install Jacky as a figure supported by the author, (despite an arguable affinity between the voices of Jacky and Teresa of *For Love Alone*), but to see her as a foil to Letty’s character. In their childhood they are a team:

When I was nearly seven, we had a world of our own, joky, mad, bad, selfish, scandalous, indecent, alert. We rifled drawers, read and stole letters, faked telephone calls, spied and informed. We became pious or godless together, full of parental respect or odiously unloving together.
(24)

Later, Jacky is “graver” than Letty and she possesses a “gravity” which sees her study metaphysics and philosophy (24). Unlike Letty, Jacky is romantic and idealistic, but she lacks Letty’s humour and sexuality. Letty dismisses Jacky as being hopelessly out of touch with reality: “society justified me, not Jacky. Jacky no more had the line of the day than a suicide or a saint” (445), but it is clear that Jacky’s alternative perception of the world makes Letty contrast her own. Jacky’s consuming passion for the much older and

brilliant Gondych is a different type of love to those Letty experiences. Letty struggles to understand Jacky's fascination for this older man. She even sleeps with him herself in order to satisfy her own curiosity, and in order to conquer her sister's conquest, but, aside from appreciating his experience in sexual matters, she comes no closer to understanding Jacky's love for Simon. Bakhtin notes that "a typical comic pair" is "based on contrasts: fat and thin, old and young, tall and short. Such contrasting pairs still appear in comic plays and circus shows" (RHW 201). Jacky and Letty function as such a comic pair in their extreme contrast to each other.

Jacky's love for an older man is not just romantic, but is also "grotesque" in the Bakhtinian sense of its rotation of the cycle of life and death.²¹ Grandmother Morgan does this too by acting on her sexual desires in old age. Cissie is the matriarch of the clan, a woman of energy, wealth and power, belying the slang connotations of her name.²² For Letty and Mathilde she is like one of the "members of a joyous, ribald camarilla, hardly women, more like men" (264). Cissie is also a shrewd player of the marriage game. She is not unlike other women in the novel who make use of the law to enforce marriage contracts and alimony payments: "here were brilliant female gamblers unmarrying and remarrying, seizing parts and profits" (262). The laws which entrench monogamy are advantageously utilised by these women and their "dependency" is

²¹ However, Gondych seems a traditional mentor or father figure whose education and experience are romanticised by Jacky.

²² In contrast Bernard Morgan is sickly, lives in the servants' quarters, relies on Cissie as the only income earner, and is laughed at by his children (Chapter IX). He is certainly not what one would expect of a patriarch.

ironised in the text. For instance, at one stage both Percival Hogg and Uncle Philip are in jail (indeed, in the same cell) for the non-payment of alimony (224). Percival's final protest is to leave the United States altogether for Paraguay in order to found his commune for the martyrs of alimony which he calls "Parity" (517). Following Dora's ministrations to Mathilde that she should divorce Solander in order to receive alimony payments young Letty and Jacky run around chanting "*Make him pay or clap him in jail!*" (151). The novel, then, challenges a perception of this society as patriarchal by stressing the (ribald) influence of the women in Letty's family.

Mathilde, however, does not partake in these ribald financial²³ "games" but plays the part of the spurned and tragic wife. Letty outlines Mathilde's desire in her youth to be an actress, a story which emphasises the theme of role-playing as far as Mathilde is concerned. In this way the author highlights the discrepancy between social roles or conventions and real experience. The narrator describes Mathilde's dilemma in this way:

She had acquired all the advertised products, love, a husband, a home, children, but she had not the advertised results – she recognized nothing in the landscape. (80)

Mathilde's inertia is pathetic when compared with the spirited women about her, such as Cissie Morgan, Dora, and of course Letty herself. But Mathilde, as the tragic and

²³ The fact that the women are nonetheless driven by monetary greed limits their potential as subversives, as Stead clearly abhors the reduction of human relationships to monetary terms (see chapter two of this thesis).

abandoned wife, is an object of pity for women such as Dora and Cissie who advise her on how she should escape, or take advantage of, her ignominious position:

It was enough to have lost her husband; it was too much for her to bear these gossips and pocket Machiavellis; but Jacky and I saw it for what it was, a grotesque game, played round her, not for her, with stakes high and low, ageless, immoral, and amusing as a circus. (65)

Mathilde's tragic persona distances her from the "ribald camarilla" of the other women but her dramatic purpose in the novel is to be part of the overall "amusing circus" of American marital predicaments.

As has been noted, Letty's promiscuity, and the promiscuity of others in the novel, undermines society's ideal of monogamy. Percival, Philip and Solander have a long conversation on social morés in the United States during which Solander asks, "Don't tell me, Hogg, that you think we live in a monogamous, one-family society here in the U.S.A?" (54). He goes on to declare "we are all Mormons", and:

don't tell me you think we're going back to the one-woman convent and the emasculated man, or One Million Abelard-and-Heloises,²⁴ after this carnival of jazz. (54)

The year is 1928, so the reference to jazz is historically specific. For Letty and the younger generation their sexual journey takes them through the polarised politics of the 1930s and the "dangerous" "saturnalia" (492) of the war years. Perhaps it is no coincidence that we should find Letty ready to settle down at the advent of the conservative post-war period.

²⁴ This is an example of the refunctioning of the romance genre (represented by the love story of Abelard and Heloise) evident in *Letty Fox*.

It seems that Letty is a protagonist in the manner of carnival rogues such as Gargantua or Pantagruel. Like Robbie Grant of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, she is a Don Juan figure (after Molière's ribald *Dom Juan*, rather than Mozart's romantic *Don Giovanni*) hopelessly and frenetically in pursuit of "love". Letty states:

I listened eagerly to all the tales, trying to pick up the best-worn, most celebrated lines of whoremongers, seducers, Lovelaces, Don Juans, for the words of this song are the same for both sexes, it's a sexless game, indeed.
(402)

Letty is also a fool after Don Quixote, a quester in the pursuit of "romantic" experience. Indeed, she calls herself a "regular Don Quixote, conquering a flower bed" (387). Perhaps she is also a trickster figure²⁵ in the manner of Reynard the Fox, from whom she may very well take her name. Like this figure, Letty is amoral and self-seeking, but is nonetheless a jolly and playful hero. Like the stories of the Fox, too, her tale serves to parody human society.

²⁵ According to Edith Kern the trickster figure often has a "marvellous" childhood; Hermes, for instance, outwitted his older brother Apollo (124). Letty tells us of her own childhood in which she is bright, precocious and a scoundrel – traits which remain representative of her personality in adulthood. Her childhood is described in a comic way. Take this scene where Mathilde (through indirect speech) voices her concern about Letty's education:

Did McLaren even know what words those children used in the street, right outside the house? Letty had brought home two or three of them already.

Not liking to miss the fun, I raced into the room and joyously heaved a slipper over the electric light. I at once gave vent to these juicy words from my listening post.
(22)

See chapter five for a further discussion of the trickster figure in Stead's work.

Letty, in her roguish behaviour and her moral ambivalence, might be thought of as an exemplary picaresque hero(ine). Indeed, *Letty Fox* has been described as a “picaresque” novel (McGrory 24). Bakhtin describes the picaresque novel in this way:

The picaresque novel portrayed life drawn out of its ordinary and (as it were) legitimized rut, it decrowned all hierarchical positions people might hold, and played with these positions; it was filled with sudden shifts, changes and mystifications, it perceived the entire represented world in a zone of familiar contact. (*PDP* 158)

Letty’s narrative is episodic and structured around her sexual adventures. Unlike the philosophical Jacky, Letty exists on the plane of the physical. Just as *Letty Fox* undermines classic structures of the bourgeois *Bildungsroman*, the picaresque elements of the novel serve to counter the traditional genre of romance. Here is a hero(ine) who, unlike her more conservative sister, confounds perceptions of love and monogamy through her adventurous promiscuity.²⁶ Thus, in carnival fashion Letty might be said to challenge the serious and high-minded romanticism of her sister, and the puritan dictates of her society.

Unlike her male mentors mentioned above, Letty is, of course, a female carnivalesque protagonist. One might argue that Letty’s “feminine freedom” (Stead *Letters I* 172), is in

²⁶ Anita Segerberg’s article, “A Fiction of Sisters”, documents similarities in the genesis of the characters Teresa Hawkins, Letty and Jacky in Stead’s manuscripts (1989a, 15). However, there is an important difference between the quests of Teresa and Letty; Letty’s quest is much more comic, or picaresque, which suggests a different function for the two novels. In *Letty Fox* the Odysseus myth is represented in Letty’s play *The Happy Crusader* in which a “Penelope” waits at home for her husband and greets him enthusiastically at his return with eight children produced in his absence (144). In contrast, *For Love Alone* imitates the epic narrative in order to make its hero, Teresa, valorous. In this way *For Love Alone* might be said to invest more in a romantic ideal, but it nonetheless operates to challenge oppressive discourses (see chapter seven).

fact a sign of her subversiveness. She is seeking sovereignty over men and is looking to be a “woman on top” (Davis 124) in her escapades with her various lovers. And like Moll Flanders, Letty might also be said to be “beautiful, irresistible to men, clever, ambitious, determined to use her tears and her beautiful eyes to ‘become a fortune’” (Kern 166). Indeed, Edith Kern argues that female trickster figures seek love and a profitable marriage – conventional aims – but out-wit men in the process (167).

However, the ending of *Letty Fox*, as we have seen, demonstrates that Letty does not “become a fortune”, and nor does she entirely control the men she seeks. While Letty’s story is scandalous, and an affront to bourgeois propriety, it seems she is more conservative and holds more middle-class values than other members of her family. Indeed, Letty is ready to distinguish herself from Edwige when she tells us, after musing upon Edwige’s vices, “It’s necessary to be moral and have principles, even in a really evil setting. It is the only thing to pull one through” (172).²⁷ Her conclusion about the role of the family in the containment of scandal is also apt here:

The family went on in the same old way after this scandal [of Anita’s baby] and I began to see that was what the family and society were for – to scatter during bombshells and calmly cultivate the back yard. (501)

It is with irony that the author presents a character who seeks conservatism in the face of her own, and her family’s, subversion of those values. At the basis of this vision of

²⁷ Geering too contrasts Edwige with Letty in an attempt to make Letty appear harmless; he says: “The critics who complain of the heroine’s immorality apparently fail to see that real evil resides in the inhuman Edwiges, not in the muddled, well-meaning, and rather pathetic Letty Foxes of the modern world” (1979, 126). Edwige is not, of course, “inhuman”, and nor is seeing Letty as a less scandalous figure than Edwige effective unless the parodic treatment of Letty’s relative conservatism is addressed.

society is, of course, hypocrisy – a “double-voiced” structure in that what one says one does, or should do, is distinct from what one does in actuality. Letty’s failure to perceive her hypocrisy in her aim of marriage, her “total acquiescence with conformity” (*Stead Letters I* 172), is part of the parody of her “type”.

Therefore, because Letty is a parodied figure we should be careful about reading her as a valorous or subversive protagonist who attempts to overturn patriarchal morés. Rather, her buffoon quest is part of the overall parody and critique of that society’s values. To treat her as a valorous figure is to treat her more seriously than the laughter inherent in the text demands. Letty might be a “disorderly woman” (Davis 131), but her aims are entirely conventional. As has been suggested already, we must look beyond Letty to locate the site of the critique of social conventions in the novel.

If anything is significant about Letty’s gender it is that her position as a woman makes *the text* more scandalous because it goes beyond the socially acceptable convention of the male rake to overturn or negate the “double standard”, not by asking a male figure to accept the sexual restrictions placed on women in a society which demands they be puritan, but by having a woman don the cloak of sexual promiscuity.²⁸ Letty, in some ways, imitates and exaggerates the process of sexual discovery in the traditional male *Bildungs*. In this way the conservative reader is challenged; if one expects to find in Letty

²⁸ Letty is a female version of that promiscuous rogue Robbie Grant, which supports her rather ironic statement, “it’s a sexless game, indeed” (402). Yet the two novels were not received in the same way; the reviews of *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* did not focus as much on the main protagonist’s promiscuity, and nor was this next book banned in Australia (see C. Williams 1989a, 177).

the traits of a heroine of a nineteenth-century novel who must evade all sexual encounters, then one is gravely mistaken. It is the *novel*, and not Letty, which is ultimately scandalous and picaresque.

Natalie Davis argues that the reversal of social hierarchies symbolised by “women on top” in the festivals and literature of early modern France sometimes enabled social criticism and even change. Like Bakhtin, she suggests that the picaresque novel with its play on sexual roles “offered increased occasions and ways in which topsy-turvy could be used for explicit criticism of the social order” (131). Letty’s personal ending is, as has just been stated, entirely conventional, but her promiscuous adventures challenge the bourgeois conventions of her society. However, in reversed terms, while the precocious female *Bildungs* challenges social prescriptions about female chastity and propriety, *Letty Fox* suggests that this is not an answer in itself for such a precocious voice must also be ridiculed for its naivety, foolishness and egotism. The novel asserts that there is no liberty in the riot of “feminine freedom” if it is ultimately associated with conventionality.

Bakhtin defines Dostoevsky’s texts as “vari-directional”: texts which are marked by “vibrantly intense bonds between utterances” (*PDP* 204). These are not monologic texts in which “all fully signifying authorial interpretations are sooner or later gathered

together in a single speech center and a single consciousness" (PDP 204), but are dialogic texts:

[Dostoevsky] does not fear the most extreme activization of vari-directional accents in double-voiced discourse; on the contrary, such activization is precisely what he needs to achieve his purpose. A plurality of voices, after all, is not meant to be eliminated in his works but in fact is meant to triumph. (PDP 204)

Stead shares this "vari-directional" approach in *Letty Fox* in which the double-voiced structure of parody is present in its first-person narrative. Beneath Letty's independent voice lies the authorial discourse as a source of laughter, as well as the voices of other characters, and a heteroglossia of discourses of the age. While the many-voiced text constructs Letty's subjectivity through heteroglossia, it also serves to undermine the authority of her voice, thus not only asserting the importance of social factors in subject development but also subverting any faith a reader might have in the authority of Letty's narration. Of course, there is nothing remarkable about a complex network of utterances behind the voice of a single speaker, for, as Bakhtin asserts, all utterances are loaded with implied voices, discourses, contexts and meanings. But by constructing the narrative in this way Stead challenges *Bildungsromane* which attest to a singular and authoritative voice.

While *Letty Fox* constructs a dialogic narrative in which Letty is presented in dialogic relation with her society, (rather like the "dialectical" narratives Fraiman perceives in the nineteenth-century heroine's *Bildungs*), Letty cannot be acclaimed as a character for whom we might sympathise because she struggles against social prescriptions. Instead

she is shown to be naive, foolish, and unworthy of heroic stature.²⁹ While Letty's story ends in her social integration, as Moretti suggested of *Wilhelm Meister*, the conclusion is constructed as parodic given what has gone before. Therefore, the novel itself does not acclaim social integration as a goal, but mocks the society from which these conventional aspirations arise.

However, the authorial discourse does not place itself entirely "above" Letty as it would if Letty were the object of satire, but, rather, the authorial discourse is in dialogue with Letty's voice. While Letty is reprehensible the reader is not necessarily led to reprehend her. There is a rhetorical element behind the authorial discourse in its criticism of bourgeois ideals and morality, but this is rhetoric without accompanying moral indignation. Any rhetorical element is at the same time bound up with a positive, rejuvenating and carnivalesque subversion of American society.

Letty's "promiscuity" may be seen as a metaphoric representation of the structure of *Letty Fox* in its polyglot nature and its multi-voicedness. There is a joyous irreverence in the novel's narrative style which is also indicative of Letty's sexual adventurousness. The novel, in its gargantuan immensity and ill-discipline, does not invest in Letty's desire for a monogamous and finalised conclusion, but continues to enact its double-voiced parody of Letty, and so resists the unity of classic literary structures. In

²⁹ Letty must be contrasted with Teresa Hawkins who struggles heroically against her society despite her initial naivety and foolishness (see chapter seven).

conclusion, this text activates heterogeneous voices and discourses extant in bourgeois society to act against this society's own ideals (such as the narrative of the *Bildungsroman* or monogamy) which seek to be closed and homogeneous.

In the next chapter the emphasis on Bakhtin's concept of "scandal" is continued in relation to the "carnival collective" of characters resident in the Hotel Swiss-Touring. *The Little Hotel* is set in the years immediately following World War Two and the "saturnalia" (LF 492) of the war years, seen briefly in *Letty Fox*, is refunctioned in *The Little Hotel's* vision of post-war crisis. Like *Letty Fox*, *The Little Hotel* employs a first-person narrative, and here too the very polyphonic nature of the novel undermines the control by one voice.

Chapter Four

"Doomsday" Laughter and Crisis in *The Little Hotel*

I should not like to hear the swooping down of all the angels. I should go deaf. I'd fall on my face, cover my ears. Doomsday would be funny to see, Robert. I hope I see it. With the wings coming down so thick you could see no sky. (Lilia Trollope, *LH* 164)

Stead's work in general is not renowned for its humour; at best her humour is considered sardonic (eg. S. Kiernan 192). This, it might be suggested, is due to the emphasis by some readers on the negative and satirical aspects of Stead's work rather than on its positive and regenerative humour.¹ Yet there is an ambivalence in Stead's work: the combination of the macabre, the serious, and the political, with carnivalesque "gaiety" or joy. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin argues that the serious side to Dostoevsky's work is as integral as the humour in its carnivalesque intention. This is "serio-comical" literature in which laughter is rejuvenating but also has serious intent; it is "ridicule . . . fused with rejoicing" (*PDP* 127). In order to emphasise the ambivalent use of humour in Stead's work it seems that the comic and regenerative aspects of her laughter must be stressed in order to counter the interpretations of her works as satirical.² It is the intention of this chapter to argue that there is ambivalent laughter in

¹ According to Barrett Reid, Stead herself said of students who took her work too seriously: "They do not seem to understand that I sometimes like to be frivolous. And so does my writing" (B. Reid 21).

² There is no space here to deal with comedy in other novels by Stead, but it is evident again in novels such as *The People With The Dogs*, for instance, where the uncontrollable collection of dogs is a source of fun. In the same novel Dan throws a party for a group of "morons," creating a rather extraordinary scene in which his wife, Big Jenny, is forced to cook for the hordes while the rest of the gathering drink, sing and

The Little Hotel whereby Stead “ridicules” bourgeois and aristocratic capitalism, propriety and politics through carnival and comedy, in which she rejoices. The tenets of aristocratic and bourgeois society are undermined in the structure and content of the novel.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin argues that carnival laughter has its roots in “ancient forms of ritual laughter” which were directed at “something higher”: the sun, the gods, or highest earthly authorities (PDP 126-7). This laughter was a reaction to crises in the lives of these celestial beings, or to crises in the life of the world and of humanity (PDP 127). Carnival laughter is likewise directed toward “something higher” and is connected with transition and crisis:

Carnivalistic laughter . . . is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with *crisis* itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world. (PDP 127)

In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin asserts that medieval laughter “degraded power” through its mockery of authority (RHW 93). He also argues that laughter overcomes fear by disrupting the monologic seriousness of the world, and that it breaks down monologic rhetoric and claims to authority:

Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. (RHW 123)

dance (TPWTD 203). The chaos of the Massine’s summer encampment, pointedly called “Whitehouse,” resembles the family circus of the Pollit household.

Laughter, too, liberates from the “fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power” (RHW 94). Stead’s humour corresponds with Julia Kristeva’s summary of Bakhtin’s concept of laughter: “the ‘inopportune’ expression, with its cynical frankness, its desecration of the sacred, and its attack on etiquette . . . ” (1980, 83).³ It will be made clear that the laughter contained in *The Little Hotel* is fundamentally concerned with a world in change and crisis. This laughter serves to challenge power hierarchies and to debase the serious tones of authority.

The Little Hotel’s narrative structure, like that of *Letty Fox*, undermines bourgeois individualism. It begins as a first-person narrative in the voice of the hotel-keeper, Mme Bonnard. Yet the novel does not sustain this control by the one character as the lives of Lilia Trollope, Robert Wilkins, and Mme Blaise to a lesser extent, become the focus of the text. The narrative lapses into third-person narration and events are depicted where Mme Bonnard is not present (pp. 77-183).⁴ There are other interjections of Mme Bonnard’s first-person narration in this second part of the novel (eg. pp. 100-104), after which the third-person narrative resumes. Mme Bonnard concludes the novel (pp. 183-191), but, by this time, her command is nullified. Unlike *Letty Fox* where the “double-voiced” parodic structure of the text led to a dialogic interaction between Letty’s voice and the authorial discourse, here the characters as a collective usurp the individual

³ In a similar fashion Hélène Cixous advocates the use of laughter as a subversive force “to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (1976, 888). In this way it might be argued that Stead, as a woman writer, is utilising laughter as a means of subversion against patriarchy and other discourses which suppress otherness.

⁴ In a letter to her publisher, Oliver Stallybrass, Stead is aware that the narrative is inconsistent (*Letters I* 488). She says this is because the novel is a condensed version of a larger project which was to be called *The Traveller’s Bed and Breakfast*.

control of Mme Bonnard. In other words, Mme Bonnard's unitary and controlling voice is fractured and broken enabling polyphony to establish itself in place of a definitive narrator.

As an alternative to Mme Bonnard the figure of Lilia Trollope appears to become central to the text. This is a reading the narrative seems to support through its breakdown into the third-person during which Lilia's story – her struggle for love with her partner Robert Wilkins – seems a prime concern. The introduction of different characters continues, with Princess Bili and Miss Chillard for example, but Lilia's story appears to be the focus of the novel. Arguably, the novel ends with Lilia's climactic assertion of freedom from Robert. However, this is an illusory desire for conclusion as Mme Bonnard informs us of Lilia's fate but then goes on to describe two new characters: a Mr Forel and a Mr Hops, quarrelling in the foyer. This reassertion of the varied and endless narratives of hotel guests reinscribes the fact that this novel cannot be finalised and that it cannot be seen as a narrative of one character, but of many. The feminist reader's desire to read the novel as the struggle for independence by an individual hero is somewhat undermined by the recognition of a collectivity of characters. In this way the narrative embraces the immortality of the people, in Bakhtin's carnival terms, whereby the importance of the individual is subsumed by the collective whole (eg. *RHW* 88).

However, Lilia's story can indeed be said to have more significance in the text than that of some of the other characters. Therefore, while there is a collective of characters, they are not all of equal importance to the narrator. It might be argued that this is a result of

the author's struggle to maintain the ideal of collectivity in the face of bourgeois individualism's convention of narrative as the embodiment of one voice and one life. However, this suggestion seems baseless due to the movement in the narrative between characters, and to and from Mme Bonnard, which emphasises the collective basis of narratorial characterisation. The narrative structure underscores the overall subversion of bourgeois individualism in the text which is restated in the ridicule of the bourgeois characters and their conventions.

This is a polyphonic novel in its presentation of the many voices of a variety of characters and in the absence of authorial interference. Yet, it should not be thought that this is an ideal group of people who, on a level plane and as equal subjects, speak and listen to each other in a benevolent fashion. *The Little Hotel* is devoid of a single monologic character who, as the focus of the novel, seeks to impose his or her will by force, but these characters struggle against each other enacting their petty jealousies and revealing their bigotry. They construct each other as "alien" and refuse to come to terms with the others as subjects. In this way Catherine Baguenault's quotation from Nietzsche, "They are alien, . . . so alien that they cannot even speak their difference to each other" (SPM 311), mentioned in chapter one, is apt here. Bakhtin argues that, in order for dialogism to occur, the treatment of the other as absolutely alien must be overcome:

The speaker strives to get a reading on his [sic] own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver; he enters into dialogical relationships with certain aspects of this system. The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener's, apperceptive background. (DI 282)

The other is inevitably alien to some extent as the whole truth cannot be known about her or him. But dialogue can only be possible through something of a shared conception. The absence of “dialogism” amongst the characters, despite the great deal of direct dialogue in the narrative, is perhaps epitomised by Robert’s reading of his newspaper while at the table with Lilia – an indication of his unwillingness to face her and to listen to her appeals for happiness. Yet the novel, in its own dialogic and polyphonic structure, counters the individual alienation of its characters.

The characters of *The Little Hotel* make up what Bakhtin has called a “carnival collective” in relation to his analysis of Dostoevsky’s short story, “The Gamblers” (PDP 171). In that story, in which a group of Russians gather in a German town called “Roulettenburg”, Bakhtin argues that the gamblers’ “behavior and their relationships with one another become unusual, eccentric, and scandalous (they live constantly in an atmosphere of scandal)” (PDP 171). As was stated in the previous chapter, scandal is carnivalesque due to its relativisation of the proper, its violation of “the generally accepted and customary course of events and the established norms of behavior and etiquette” (PDP 117). Amongst the guests at the Hotel Swiss-Touring there is a great deal of scandal. Indeed, an hotel is a perfect setting for a polyphonic and carnivalesque novel because a myriad of characters come together in the one, confined space and at one time, before moving on again. The characters Mme Bonnard assembles before us range from entertainers at the local night clubs, to the hotel workers, to rich elderly ladies, and to tourists and refugees of all nationalities.⁵

⁵ While English is the language of the text, some of the characters use a carnivalesque “hybrid” language. Luisa’s mixture of French, Italian and English and her amusing attempts to converse with Mrs Powell are an example (50).

In keeping with this atmosphere of scandal Mme Bonnard's voice is like that of the gossip, of the hotelier with her ear to the door, and her narrative is correspondingly colloquial and informal (Brydon 1987, 141). Her presentation of characters is structured in a largely illogical way; the personal histories and traits of the characters are told in a dispersed and erratic manner. For instance, at one point she stops talking about the Blaises and then remarks that she wants "to finish about the Mayor of B." but immediately goes on to discuss Mrs Powell (36). Mme Bonnard's voice takes precedence over more formal plot conventions. In general, the narratives concerning the various characters are woven in and out of each other; they are not entities in themselves but form a textured whole. In this way the polyphonic and dialogic nature of the novel counters more unified, cohesive or "classical" texts.

Many of the guests and hotel workers have curious habits, which in the confines of the hotel are intimately known: Mrs Powell snores; Mme Blaise dresses in layers of clothes at all hours so as not to expose herself to disease; the hotel workers sport jealousies and plot against each other; Emma is so poor that she arrives in the country without any underwear; Mme Bonnard's acquaintance who calls in the opening pages of the novel may be caught up in murder; Mrs "Trollope" has an interconnecting door with her "cousin" Mr Wilkins; and so on. Related to this depiction of scandal in the novel is an emphasis on representations of the "lower stratum" (RHW 23), of bawdy, ribald images. For example, Princess Bili's dog, ironically called Angel, urinates on a cushion in a tea-room and "sings" (howls) on command (159). In this communal space the social rules of

etiquette and propriety are rendered arbitrary in the face of the grotesque idiosyncrasies of the guests. What is usually private is made public as the thin walls of the hotel are no barrier to eavesdropping and communal knowledge. The structure of the bourgeois hotel with its *private* rooms is made ridiculous by this “carnival collective” of characters in which there is no individual privacy at all. Thus, etiquette and propriety are relativised and are shown to be “masks” beneath which grotesque and neurotic habits lie.

The scene in which Lilia and Robert invite Princess Bili, the Blaises and the Pallintosts to dinner is a wonderful example of carnival grotesquerie, and the relativisation of propriety in the novel. In his article on Stead’s “Unforgettable Dinner-Parties” Don Anderson accurately interprets them as microcosms of power relationships and as representative of the refusal of *communitas* by the participants (1979, 29). He recognises the satirical treatment of banquets in Stead’s novels, perceiving the grotesquerie contained therein, but interprets them exclusively as severe and “demonic” occasions. For instance, he declares the attempt to cook the chicken in *Cotters’ England* a “ghastly dinner” in which

images of disease and death, cannibalism and cancer, come together to furnish a pattern that underscores the larger narrative of Tom and Nellie Cotter, who “prey” on their fellows. . . . (1979, 42)

Yet, in spite of his discussion of Plato’s *Symposium* in which the rules of the banquet are flouted through laughter (1979, 30-1), Anderson does not acknowledge the humorous and redemptive aspects of Stead’s banquet images. There is, for instance, a perceptible comic treatment of the farcical attempt to cook the chicken in *Cotters’ England*: Uncle

Sime decides to boil the fowl but has the gas so low it never cooks, and, meanwhile, befuddled Ma Cotter has wrapped up and hidden the cutlery and thrown the potatoes on the fire (CE 101). The meal is, of course, representative of the Cotters' futility and desperation, but a recognition of humour in the scene is important for it shifts the emphasis away from tragedy to restore the scene's laughter and accompanying regenerative power.

In *The Little Hotel* Lilia and Robert's dinner party begins badly when Princess Bili overdresses for the occasion, forcing the other women to change clothes. However, each ends in an uncomfortable and improper outfit making her appear ridiculous. The princess has dressed beyond the class of her companions wearing a ball gown, making her somewhat of a relic in the post-war asceticism. She is also the grotesque figure of the old woman dressed as the young in her pink tulle and silk dress:

for a moment she was what she wished to be, young, beautiful and wonderfully dressed. A second look showed her cavernous blue eyes, the heavy flesh-coloured make-up, the thin cords and the other marks of her years.⁶ (110)

In preparation for the dinner Mme Blaise wears an overly elaborate hat while Lilia's make-up is initially exaggerated and gaudy. Lilia removes the make-up and then looks weary. They enter the café together as a rather incongruous group: "Mrs Trollope, in her modest clothes, looked like a good serious little bourgeoisie trotting along behind two pretentious friends" (114). The aristocratic and bourgeois figures are concurrently mocked here; yet there is evident delight in the depiction of the characters also.

⁶ As the old woman seeking to be young through plastic surgery and her involvement with a younger lover, Princess Bili is emblematic of carnival ambivalence in her conflation of age and youth, death and reproduction.

Once in the restaurant Dr Blaise abuses the etiquette of the dinner party by ordering for Robert and Lilia's guests. He orders excessively and orders the most expensive wine and food for himself and Mme Blaise. The Pallintosts, at the other end of the scale, are determined to be frugal in order not to cause their hosts too much expense. Thus the dinner is an uncomfortable one with its struggle of wills, the concern with expense, the doctor's malice, and the extraordinary gluttony and consumption. It is clear the Blaises are motivated by malevolence evident in the following conversation, an aside, which begins with Gliesli's vitriol:

"Let's leech all we can out of the damned ruined robber Empire and lick up the bloodspots. Little salesmen and their half-caste mistresses running here to be safe from doomsday and thinking themselves our equals."

"They are my equals; and doomsday always comes," said the doctor, laughing, with a sidelong glance⁷ at his wife. (134)

The doctor's suggestion of equality means that he effectively debases himself and stresses the fact he is a carnivalesque rogue, while deflating Mme Blaise's superiority and security. Indeed, he is a rather sinister figure who cultivates his wife's drug dependency and eventually, it seems, succeeds in killing her and inheriting her vast property (albeit with Mme Blaise's proviso in her will that he marry the rather grotesque, yet desirable, house servant, Ermyntud). The doctor is an appropriate carnival character because of his ambivalence through his connection with both life and death, healing and suffering:

⁷ It is perhaps significant that Stead should use the phrase "sidelong glance" because of its similarity to Bakhtin's term "sideways glance" which he employs to argue that a subject is always in dialogic relation with others (*PDP* 205). It also reminds us of Stead's assertion that any critique by an author in a many-charactered novel is "sidelong" and "mostly ironic" (1994, 198). Here the doctor's glance is macabre and threatening, but also carnivalesque.

[A physician] participates in death and procreation. He is not concerned with a completed and closed body but with the one that is born, which is in the stage of becoming. The body that interests him is pregnant, delivers, defecates, is sick, dying, and dismembered. (RHW179)

Dr and Mme Blaise's conversation over dinner also disrupts conventions of the bourgeois dinner party. They talk of their hate, instead of love, for each other. "All marriage is hell, don't you think?", asks the doctor in front of all (121). Mme Blaise expresses her infatuation for her son while calling her daughter a "bitch", "clown" and "stupid sow" (121). During the meal Mme Blaise passes around a grotesque collection of photographs, given to her by her husband, of human subjects with vile diseases: "Madame Blaise was now passing round the table pictures of children with blue patches, men with psoriasis, and a late stage of cancer in a woman" (119). Interpreted in a merely negative sense these photos are representative of the "diseased society [Stead] is depicting" (Brydon 1987, 145). In a more carnival fashion, however, this depiction of disease is also a way of undermining the classical and monologic body of that society by rendering it putrid, by depicting its apertures where its corruption can be perceived. Immanent in this method is laughter created through the incongruity of grotesque realism alongside bourgeois propriety.

Dr Blaise orders no less than six bottles of Johannisberger for himself, as well as some brandy and liqueurs, and it is not surprising, then, that, "The company, because of the embarrassment and the unusual amount of alcohol, became slightly fogged" (116). As was indicated in chapter one of this thesis, Bakhtin emphasises the irreverence and joyfulness in such drunken escapades in *Rabelais and His World*, where the serious world

is obscured by merriment (eg. *RHW* 228). In this scene in *The Little Hotel* the drunkenness is not just merry and perhaps adds to the exaggerated malevolence of the Blaises, yet it is an organic part of the feasting imagery.

The banquet scene can be read as a criticism of bourgeois gluttony and consumption. Dr Blaise orders hors d'oeuvres, entrées, mains, cheeses, deserts, all of which the narrator lists in order to emphasise the meal's sumptuousness and excess. Princess Bili's wry comment during all this ordering of food is: "If [the Russians] saw us having a dinner like this, we should at once be stood up against a wall and shot, not even a drumhead court-martial" (118). Yet, arguably the narrator (not Mme Bonnard in this case) seems to take pleasure in the very list of brand names as if that voice were suggesting its own cosmopolitanism and taste. For example, the narrator goes into great detail about the types of food and wine consumed: "caviar Malossol", "Douarnenez sardines", "Rhine salmon", "pâté de foie gras from Perigord", "tournedos Rossini", "Dambacher", "Johannisberger 1945", "fera" ("a fine salmon-coloured lake-fish" (117)), "oyster-plant", and so on (114-129).

Thus the feast is simultaneously nauseating and aesthetically gourmet. But rather than accuse the narrator of participation and relish in bourgeois desire and consumption, which would undermine the scene's critical project, it is more productive to enlist Bakhtin's concept of ambivalence in Rabelais's banquet imagery. Bakhtin celebrates Rabelais's scenes of feasting for their "aspiration to abundance", "universal spirit", "positive hyperbolism", and their "gay and triumphant tone" (*RHW* 278). The natural

world, represented by its products and the human labour which has cultivated them, is swallowed and devoured in a circular process which is regenerative and immortal (RHW 281). Of course Stead's feasting images have nothing of this direct connection to the labouring folk and the triumph of harvest, but there is a discernible residue, or even a renewal, of the gay aspects of the carnival banquet within the historical specificity of her era. In Bakhtin's words, the bourgeois meal is "no longer the 'banquet for all the world' in which all take part, but an intimate feast with hungry beggars at the door" (RHW 302). Yet within this limitation of the bourgeois feast the positive carnival elements of banquet imagery: its exaggeration and gaiety, can be directed towards a satiric intent: the criticism of avidity and corruption (RHW 291). Thus in Stead's images of feasting we have disgust and delight, the macabre and the humorous, drunkenness, merriment and the repulsive. The listing of the various food types demonstrates the narrator's delight in language play and in the evocation of tempting dishes, and this exaggeration is part of the carnival atmosphere of the text, of the author's own rejection of "the ascetic ideal" (RHW 294). This is the same kind of linguistic play which is at work in Marpurgo's address to the Somnambulists' Club in *The Beauties and Furies*, mentioned in chapter one of this thesis.⁸ The satiric or negative intent does not translate into the depiction of banquet imagery itself:

Negation is not transferred to the matter of images: to wine, food, abundance. This matter remains positive. There is no serious, consistent, ascetic tendency. Wherever such a tendency appears . . . the material bodily images inevitably fade and are dryly and parsimoniously presented: the exaggeration becomes abstract. (RHW 291)

⁸ There are other such lists in Stead's narratives, not all of which are gargantuan or abundant descriptions of food. For instance, in *For Love Alone* Aunt Bea details the incredible contents of Malfi's trousseau, including the intricacies of Malfi's new underwear (50). This scene serves as a mockery of Bea's vicarious desire for such goods, and of society's conventions of marriage, but it also acts as a vehicle for Bea's humour of the "lower stratum".

Stead's banquet imagery can hardly be considered parsimonious. She depicts bourgeois characters with gargantuan appetites, and they are criticised for this avidity, while, at the same time, the carnivalesque imagery surrounding them is enjoyed by the narrator and her readers.

All of Stead's novels are overt about the historical and political context of their narratives. *The Little Hotel* is set in Switzerland in the late 1940s after the Second World War, and deals with a variety of characters who come together in that neutral territory as refugees from a world in crisis. Unlike the serious events depicted in *Letty Fox* which were nonetheless subsumed as part of the overall ribald tale of Letty's life, there is more palpable fear on the part of the characters in *The Little Hotel* who are concerned at the uncertainties of the post-war period and the encroaching Cold War. The political allegiances of the war have disintegrated in the struggle to fill the post-war power vacuum. New battle lines have been drawn up between Eastern and Western Europe. The British Empire is dissolving and a "socialist" Labour government is in power in Britain. Yet this post-war world, while frightening, is depicted by Stead as a "world inside-out" (RHW 11) in carnival terms. If the analogy of this period as "carnival time" is continued, then this is a world in which power hierarchies have been overturned, signalling new potentials, and enabling the mockery of the old order.

The group of characters who are the focus of this text are fearful of change – of the new world – because they are remnants of the old one. These bourgeois and upper-class characters represent, in their own ways, facets of the pre-war world through their

wealth, national perspectives and ideologies. The novel ridicules their bourgeois utterances of self-interest evident in their rhetoric of fear. The characters are also rendered impotent and trivial because they function merely as a group of gossip-mongers from whom real power has been removed. They too must suffer from the transience and uprootedness of a world in crisis.

Switzerland, as the setting for this novel, is representative of the wealth and complacency of the pre-war world.⁹ Its neutrality in the war and the resulting absence of destruction mean that in the post-war period the country is something of a haven and a remnant of pre-war Europe. Its political neutrality also means that it is a refuge for those who need to flee their own countries because they have something to hide, as does the Mayor of B. who was evidently a collaborator. It is a place where no questions are asked and where money from all origins, some dubious, is stored and protected. The country is in every sense a sanctuary for those needing to escape the “apocalypse” of the new world. Switzerland is also representative of the whole of Europe in its position as a land bordering many others – at the cross-roads of the continent. With its French, German and Italian speaking communities the rivalries of a larger Europe are played out among the Swiss characters in the novel. As an ideological space Switzerland offers polyglot possibilities, but these are distorted by pettiness, self-interest, and the violent and conflicting discourses of a continent at war with itself.

⁹ Both Brydon and Gribble situate *The Little Hotel* among the novels set in England in their book-length studies on Stead thus somewhat nullifying the significance of Switzerland as a setting (Brydon 1987, 138; Gribble 1994, 102).

Despite its history of neutrality, many of the characters in the novel believe Switzerland will be at the centre of the next war (129; 137). This is partly due to its reputation as a kind of El Dorado “gorged with gold”, with its reserves perceived to be concealed somewhere in the mountains (112). Indeed, Switzerland as the land of plenty is a symbol of bourgeois engorgement. Despite Robert Wilkins’s reading on nuclear fission (45), it is the threat of communism which constitutes the prevailing fear of doomsday. The characters speak with absolute certainty of an imminent war with the Russians, and they are in constant fear of being shot as bourgeois and of losing their property. Mrs Powell declares that the members of the old order must resist this new threat:

Our culture will break down and the Russians come in. Unless what few of the old cultured people are left will get together and bring order into this confusion. . . . We must make a stand. . . . (38)

Mrs Powell is described as a quintessential American by Mme Bonnard who calls her “the most exaggerated American I ever knew” (39). She is fanatically anti-communist, racist and anti-Semitic (38). Of Hitler she says, “Now I cannot approve of the extermination of peoples and yet you might say he was like a surgeon cutting out the disease” (38). Here the narrative makes it clear there is little ideological distinction between the victor and the vanquished. It is as if Mrs Powell speaks the dangerous ideologies of Europe which led to war, and which, in people such as her, live on beyond the awful finality of that catastrophe. In her anti-communism, (she issues anti-communist propaganda to the guests at their dinner tables), she also indicates the rhetoric of the post-war period and the encroaching Cold War. While the text is set in a time of crisis and potential it foresees here the continuation of pre-war ideologies in the

manifestation of the Cold War. Thus the text does not directly position itself as revolutionary because it does not envisage total change – a complete over-turn of the world order – ; rather, the period of crisis in which the novel is situated enables the ridicule and relativisation of this old order, represented by figures such as Mrs Powell.

Mrs Powell levels her attack at Lilia Trollope whom she believes, with little evidence, to be a supporter of the British Labour government which is understood to have an affinity with socialism. However, Lilia, too, is afraid of the Russians and their influence:

We don't have a home any more, do we? In the old days you were at least safe in your own country. Now the Russians and their friends are everywhere. Would you believe it, Mrs Pallintost, there are communists in the British Civil Service. . . . Oh, I could never have believed such a thing of Englishmen. (118)

Like the other British nationals in Switzerland, Lilia, under Robert's tutelage, is in exile from the Labour government particularly due to the government's control and restrictions on their financial capital. By ridiculing the bourgeois characters for their rhetoric of fear based in their self-interest over the threat of communism, Stead's novel covertly sides with communism, although not with the monstrous image of communism painted by her bourgeois characters. That communism should be perceived as monstrous is part of the overall bourgeois discourse of avidity – a discourse which is ridiculed in the novel.

There is a sense throughout the novel that the English have had their day: "Everyone knows the English are a fallen nation" (177). This demise is represented through the pitiful figures of "the Admiral" and Miss Abbey-Chillard. The Admiral is an elderly

aristocratic lady whose manners are out-dated and patronising in the contemporary context; she is literally “deaf” to others and, as her name suggests, brusque in her manner. It is the hotel staff who plot to remove her from the hotel through a series of humiliations; they laugh at her: “she just fitted in with their old-fashioned ideas of the out-of-date English milords” (23). Miss Abbey-Chillard is another of the pathetic English characters who is haughty and dismissive of those who try to assist her. An invalid, she wanders between doctors and hotels in Switzerland (where she had attended school) declaring herself impoverished, yet refusing to return to England where it appears her heart has been broken. This itinerancy, thinks Lilia Trollope, is “one of the miseries of these complicated days, the rich turned tramp and beggar” (82). While Miss Chillard does appear to have a great deal of money stashed in her suitcases her “impoverishment” makes it clear that these denizens of old wealth are outmoded and redundant in this new world. While their frailty and age create some sense of pity for these characters, the text also employs laughter in the depiction of them as befuddled, manipulative, and decrepit. This is not unequivocally scathing satire, but there is a palpable parodic intention in the ridicule of these aristocratic ladies and the system they represent. This, the text suggests, is a system which is now *invalid*.

Mrs Trollope is also an exile in the post-war world. As a person of “Eurasian” heritage who has spent her life on the rubber plantations in the Dutch East Indies and Malaya she finds herself homeless in the post-imperial world. England is not entirely “home” to Lilia either, but she would rather be there than live her life in hotels:

I have never lived long in England and the idea of going there now makes me wretched, and yet I so long to be among my own, among people who

speak English all their lives, even though their England isn't England to me. But it is home. (91)

Yet Robert prevents her from living there with her children in order to maximise his capital gains on the international money market which is better achieved in Switzerland.

Denigrated by the bigoted Mrs Powell, and unloved and constricted by her avaricious partner Robert, Lilia's story can be seen to be about her struggle for self-determination, analogous to the wars of independence in the "East". Yet it is also the story of her education in the gloomier aspects of reality after her enchanted and privileged colonial life: "she was not used to being despised and hated. She had lived in the unreal world of empire outposts for many years and in fashionable places abroad" (142). In the East she had lived the wealthy life of a European but now she is forced to recognise her Javanese heritage because of the racist taunts of others. Lilia is the epitome of ambivalence. She cannot just be perceived as a hero of self-determination because she is indeterminate in her position as part "Eastern" and "Western". "Home" is neither here nor there. Yet, she does choose Europe over the East Indies. While she may be considered a passive victim of the times, she is also an inheritor of colonial privilege and is to some degree active in the choices she makes. The narrative itself fluctuates in its depiction of Lilia as a victim of European bigotry in her position as a representative of a colonised people who seek independence, and as a small-minded bourgeois figure who is party to the structures of European domination.¹⁰

¹⁰ It is true that, as Judith Kegan Gardiner argues, Lilia Trollope arouses a reader's empathy more than some of Stead's other characters. Lilia is "empathetic to others" and "is unique in seizing control of her situation without attempting to control anyone else" (Gardiner 1989b, 69; 71). While Lilia is not monologic, or deaf to others, she is nonetheless depicted as rather petty at times. The carnivalesque nature of her name, "Trollope", also suggests that she is a target of carnival laughter.

Lilia, then, is something of a “double” character. In Bakhtinian terms her hybridity¹¹ represents the competing discourses of imperialism and the “centrifugal” languages of liberation. As Bakhtin states of hybridity in language:

a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages”, two semantic and axiological belief systems. (DI 304)

Similarly, Lilia embodies the monologic tendencies of imperialism as well as the diasporic voices of the new post-imperial world. When Bakhtin states: “We are suffocating in the captivity of narrow and homogeneous interpretations” (1986, 140), it is clear that Lilia challenges monologism in her very “duplicity”. However, she is simultaneously a captive of, and not entirely liberated from, those imperial discourses.

The hotel workers are an integral part of the collective of characters portrayed in the novel; their stories are presented in the text so that these characters are incorporated and not silenced. Yet the lives of these working-class characters are not given the same space in the narrative as figures such as Mrs Trollope or Miss Chillard. Their stories are also largely told in the first part of the novel and so are contained in the voice of Mme Bonnard who is largely concerned with detailing the rivalries and jealousies amongst her workers. Indeed, the rivalries of the European states are played out amongst the Italian, French and German-Swiss employees. This would suggest that they are diminished by their role as workers in the narrative of the bourgeois hotel-keeper but,

¹¹ There is a limited discussion of Bakhtinian theory and post-colonialism here. For a further analysis of Bakhtin and post-colonial theory see chapter one of Ron Blaber’s thesis, *Without Words or Visas*, especially for its connection between Homi Bhabha’s theory of “hybridity” and Bakhtin’s concept of language.

within this containment they nonetheless remain active agents in the text. When the third-person narration takes over these characters are forgotten to some extent, although Clara and Luisa retain some importance. It may be argued, then, that the working-class characters are not subject to the degree of ridicule used against the upper-class and bourgeois figures in this second section of the novel. However, they are nonetheless incorporated in the overall laughter of the text and as such cannot escape being made figures of fun. Therefore these working-class characters are not valorous or serious centres of empathy as they might be in a socialist realist text, but are included in the comic world Stead creates which is holistic and is not, in this sense, divided along class lines. The text in this way resembles Bakhtin's argument about medieval laughter when he writes:

Not only does laughter make no exception for the upper stratum, but indeed it is usually directed toward it. Furthermore, it is directed not at one part only, but at the whole. One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world. . . . (RHW 88)

The Little Hotel mainly directs its laughter at figures of the "upper stratum", but laughter is suffused throughout the novel in its creation of a comic collective of which these working-class characters are a part. It is the whole world, the whole system, which is overturned by laughter.

The frequent instances of spying in the novel underscore a carnivalesque treatment of the intrigue and mistrust among political rivals and of the espionage which will later become a feature of the Cold War. Mme Bonnard's husband, Roger, spies on guests and goes through their belongings using the excuse that he must do repairs in the rooms (eg. 25). The Mayor is always on the lookout for spies and refuses to go to Geneva "because,

he said, you met too many international types there, spies, globetrotters, who might recognize him; and he was here incognito" (15-16).¹² The ending of the novel depicts an exchange between Mr Forel and Mr Hops in which Forel calls Hops, and then the Admiral, "Dirty spies!" (190). Mme Bonnard's response is to call Mr Forel a madman and she tells us that "he was a postman who had had a nervous breakdown and was staying in one of the little rooms at the top for a holiday" (191). As has been mentioned, spying is a trope which recurs in *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* where Robbie Grant's anxiety leads him to believe that Barbara is a spy for the Germans. In these cases the difference between fact and neurosis is unclear, thus relativising normality. On the whole the spying adventures are zany and slap-stick and add to the carnival gaiety of the texts. Yet they are combined with an uncertainty about the political landscape on the part of the characters. It is this uncertainty, this very instability, or crisis, which is made apparent in these carnivalesque escapades.

The Little Hotel is at times a wonderfully funny novel and one of its characters, the eccentric Mayor of B., is an exemplary comic and carnivalesque character. He is the mayor of an undisclosed Belgian city who is staying at the hotel while undergoing shock treatment at one of the local health spas because he is suffering from nerves and encroaching insanity. Examples of his behaviour include a trip to the "WC" sporting only his sunglasses, and a strip-tease on the landing with the infamous entertainer, Lola-la-Môme (47; 21). He buys champagne for the staff and revels into the small hours of the

¹² The Mayor of B. is playing a role, a fact which may be interpreted through Bakhtin's concept of the carnival mask or disguise with its importance on metamorphosis and anonymity in a carnivalesque play on identity (RHW 40).

morning. The porter, Charlie, says of him: "What can I do with a circus number like that? What a card! You could run a whole circus with just one number like that!" (29). Eventually his mania becomes so extreme that one night, (after having been out all afternoon trying to sell tickets for a lottery in which the clothes he is wearing are part of the prize), he bangs at the hotel door wearing just hat and muffler and carrying two shopping bags. Receiving no response he runs into another hotel, where the night-clerk is understandably loathe to receive him, and ends up battling with a strange naked man advancing upon him in the mirror (75). After this incident he is committed to an asylum, but later escapes as his train passes through France.

The Mayor's mania has a serious undertone although the portrait of him is predominantly gay. Stead herself wished to maintain that stress on the depiction of the Mayor as joyful when in her letter to Oliver Stallybrass she rejects making the Mayor's background as a collaborator with the Nazis more overt: "I don't want to add this comment in the novel itself, . . . for the Mayor is so gay" (*Letters I* 489). Yet the carnival portrayal of him does imply he is parodied as a figure of authority. He is obsessed with official documentation and in his paranoia over the presence of "Germans" in the hotel he takes to writing complaints incessantly on hotel towels, labelling them as "Document 157" and so on. "Document 112" is transcribed in full in the novel; it demonstrates the Mayor's delusions and his playfulness with language:

To Madame Bonnard at the Hotel Swiss-Touring. Certificate from the Mayor of B. Madame Bonnard, bonart, bonarr, (that means good fool)¹³, Anyone who wants to visit your hotel can apply to me, Hotel Swiss-Touring. I am the Mayor of B. and I am well satisfied with this hotel. I like all the Germans it contains,

¹³ This appears to be a play on the French billingsgate, *connard*, meaning idiot.

down with the Germans, why do you have Germans in your nothell? Down with the Germans, down with hotelism, Madame Bonarr is a very good German, a b c d e f, ach-german, boo-german, cousin-german, down-with-german, eat-with-german, foey-german, germ-german. Heil, Madame Bonnar! Get out the Germans and I will come and drink champagne with you. (12)

Bakhtin notes that madness, in carnivalesque terms, can be a “gay parody of official reason” so that the Mayor’s stature as an official figure is degraded through his insanity (RHW 39).¹⁴ His position as a collaborator is ridiculed through his accompanying paranoia and neurosis.

Yet, because the portrait of the Mayor is gay, his madness adds to the joyful carnival atmosphere of the text and cannot be delimited as merely negative. When figures of authority are constructed as mad their power and claims to rationality are undermined, but, in the case of the Mayor, his madness also suggests carnivalesque freedom and eccentricity. As the discussion on spying and Mr Forel’s nervous breakdown suggested, the hotel is populated with neurotic characters of all ilks: Lilia is an insomniac; Mme Blaise and Miss Chillard are hypochondriacs; Mme Blaise is also dependent on the drugs her husband gives her. While there is a macabre edge to all this “dis-ease”, there is also a sense of grotesque delight in the text in the antics of the neurotic whose irrationality undermines all seriousness. The eccentric subject is one who is “freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions”:

Eccentricity is a special category of the carnival sense of the world, organically connected with the category of familiar contact; it permits – in concretely sensuous form – the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves. (PDP 123)

¹⁴ There are other instances of gay madness in Stead’s texts. For instance one of Jules Bertillon’s brothers in *House of All Nations* is said to have “lived in Germany, sat in cafes, dribbled strange, delightful, unclimactic, and endless tales to any who would listen to him” (252).

The eccentric disrupts the dominant order by laughing at, or by embodying ridicule against, the monologic seriousness of the dominant order. Bakhtin also argues that madness enables a differing vision of the world:

the theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by "normal", that is by commonplace ideas and judgments. (RHW 39)

The Mayor, then, in his glorious eccentricity, is a figure of carnivalesque freedom.

If these are neurotic times, this instability also promises a revisioning of the *stable* old order. The Mayor's neurosis is certainly an indication of the historical times.¹⁵ His is the gay madness of an irrational age. Therefore, the Mayor himself is not the only target of parody, for the novel's "gay parody of official reason" extends to the socio-political world itself. This world, the text suggests, deserves the label "mad", and so the notion of "official reason" is relativised.

Bakhtin also argues that madness undermines the ideal of the unified self through the instability of the subject:

Dreams, daydreams, insanity destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of a person and his fate: the possibilities of another person and another life are revealed in him [sic], he loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; he ceases to coincide with himself. (PDP 116-7)

In this way the multi-voiced nature of madness corresponds with Bakhtin's concept of polyglossic discourses opposed to monoglossic, unified, and "classical" discourses. The Mayor's madness, then, also serves to underscore the carnivalesque nature of the text in

¹⁵ Karel Karolyi of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, as we have seen, can also be considered to be a mad or eccentric character whose neurosis is indicative of the times.

its polyglot essence and presentation of multiple discourses which undermine the single, unequivocal voice.

This is an “ec-centric” novel. In its carnivalism, in its disjointed and fractured narrative, in its fragmented and neurotic characters, and in its laughter and comedy, *The Little Hotel* challenges texts, or discourses, which are prone to centrism, seriousness and unity. In this way it may be thought of as a post-colonial text to some extent in its very relativisation of the imperialism of the old order, in its challenge to the single voice of the tyrant, and ideologies which disallow alterity. The story functions on the borders of the old world and the next, and in this liminality – a carnivalesque vision of the world turned “inside out” – the text relativises old maps.

It has been argued that the images of disease, engorgement and neurosis in *The Little Hotel* are carnivalesque in their ambivalent seriousness and laughter. Stead seems to share the view of laughter perceived by Bakhtin in Rabelais’s work whereby “the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious stand-point” (RHW 66). Indeed, Stead’s novel is not only satiric, but contains elements of rejuvenating laughter. Stead is not a misanthrope like Dr Blaise, who describes himself as a “satirist of human nature, of which I have the worst opinion” (133). As Diana Brydon argues, Stead also perceives the humour in the events she describes:

Stead sees what [Dr Blaise] sees, but she also sees what he misses – the delight in incongruities, the humour in discrepancies, the occasional genuinely disinterested act. (1987, 144)

Yet, of course, this is laughter accompanied by ridicule; it is humour with serious intent.

The comic and carnival aspects of the text do not trivialise the political events of the era. If anything this laughter undermines the fearful seriousness of the times by perceiving the ludicrous and grotesque nature of the dominant order. In this way the novel utilises this period of crisis in order to relativise normality and to appraise the reversals of power so that the nature of the old order is exposed and ridiculed. The rejoicing laughter of the text enables this ridicule.

In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin argues that, after the Renaissance, laughter was much devalued, and the sphere of subjects which could be treated in a comic manner was narrowed. In the contemporary context laughter is:

not a universal, philosophical form. It can refer only to individual and individually typical phenomena of social life. That which is important and essential cannot be comical. (RHW 67)

However, Stead's use of laughter is not confined to the trite, nor is it limited by definition to "low" genres of writing and thus diminished. Hers is not modern bourgeois laughter reduced to the private sphere and "deprived of historical color" (RHW 101) because, as has been argued, Stead treats politics and humour in the same breath. Laughter and an historical consciousness are equally integral to her work.

The following chapter, which deals with Stead's *House of All Nations*, focuses on another period of crisis: the 1930s, with its air of approaching apocalypse. It is also a time when a

carnavalesque upturn in the world order is envisioned by Stead. *House of All Nations*, like *The Little Hotel*, contains a banquet scene in which bourgeois gluttony is mocked through carnival imagery. More broadly, carnival imagery is used in the narrative to support the novel's critique of capitalism.

Chapter Five

“All That is Solid Melts into Air” Capitalism and the Marketplace in *House of All Nations*

All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men [sic] at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men. (*The Communist Manifesto* 7)

In spite of Bakhtin’s emphasis on the peasant folk and archaic harvest festivals in his theory of carnival, much of his argument is centred on the medieval marketplace as the source of folk humour and billingsgate, and as the arena for carnival itself:

The marketplace of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a world in itself, a world which was one; all “performances” in this area, from loud cursing to the organized show, had something in common and were imbued with the same atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity. (RHW 153)

As such the marketplace is a spatial representation of opposition to the official order and its ideology. The marketplace “enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained ‘with the people’” (RHW 154). In this space “the exalted and the lowly, the sacred and the profane are leveled and all are drawn into the same dance” (RHW 160).

In *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* John Docker states that:

for someone living in a society of official socialism which was determined to eliminate the market from history, Bakhtin interestingly defends the market in early modern Europe, or at least defends the carnivalesque activities that are enjoyed in the marketplace. (175)

Despite Docker's suggestion of Bakhtin's opposition to Stalinist policies, it should not be thought, however, that Bakhtin is a supporter of capitalism because of his emphasis on the marketplace. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* he perceives carnivalesque literature in opposition to capitalism where he suggests Dostoevsky's polyphonic technique is a result of the upheavals of capitalism as applied to Russia in the nineteenth century (PDP 20). As was noted in chapter one, not only does Dostoevsky's work "struggle against a reification . . . of human relations, of all human values under the conditions of capitalism" (PDP 62), but conflicts under capitalism, and colliding ideologies, are also embodied in the structure and content of his novels – resulting in their "multi-voicedness" (PDP 20).

It could be argued that Bakhtin's rhetoric against capitalism in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* is a required obeisance to state Marxism under the Stalinist era in which the first edition of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* was written. It is true that, in general, Bakhtin's work does not rely on explicit Marxist polemic. But, as Simon Dentith argues, Bakhtin's theories share several of Marxism's principal concerns, including a "profound sentiment of anti-capitalism" (14). In a similar way Stead does not use Marxist rhetoric overtly, although it is clear that she is familiar with Marxist theory. Stead's work coincides with Marxism in its indignation at the exploitation and inequities under capitalism, and at the terrible destruction inherent in the system.

The carnival potential of the marketplace can be used against any official ideology, and in the case of *House of All Nations*, Stead uses carnival strategies to mock capitalism. In this novel Stead creates something of the atmosphere of the carnival marketplace on the

stock exchange floor of the Banque Mercure. In this carnival space there is no absolute opposition between the folk and official figures whom they ridicule.¹ Rather *the text* mocks these official figures, or “kings” of “high” finance, by presenting them as rogues and villains. At the same time *House of All Nations* is based on a Marxist perception of capitalism. The principles of Bakhtin’s carnival marketplace and a Marxist interpretation of capitalism in Stead’s novel are not opposed. The carnival elements of the novel celebrate capitalism through a joyous depiction of its absurdities; but nonetheless this laughter is founded in a critical treatment of capitalism as a dominant ideology. The novel is not polemic because of its sense of fun, but nor is it apolitical. Like Dostoevsky’s novels, Stead’s narratives integrally involve, and are situated in, a time of crisis and ideological struggle.

Ambivalence and the Vortex

In his work *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman argues that there is an ambivalence in *The Communist Manifesto* between Marx and Engels’s positive imagery of bourgeois energy, enterprise and drive, and the nihilistic abyss which the capitalist system has unleashed (94). Berman suggests that the ideal of the development of the individual is one of the tenets of bourgeois philosophy, but it is that very desire for self-development which Marx and Engels believe to be thwarted in a system which treats its subjects as commodities, and which directs its energy only to the accumulation of capital

¹ There are, of course, opponents of the bank who are openly critical, such as the employee, Adam Constant. However, Constant, despite his name, is not a central figure in the narrative.

(96). A similar ambivalence to that which Berman finds in *The Communist Manifesto* can be seen here in Stead's novel: while she satirises the capitalist system she is also drawn to its energy and dynamism. While the world in crisis portrayed in the novel is frightening and threatening, it is also exciting and vital. However, the energy in, and the fascination for, the capitalist system which Stead evokes in her narrative cannot be equated entirely with an acclamation of bourgeois traits or ideologies because the novel's ambivalence is also part of the carnival laughter of the text which sets out to subvert that system.

Like the other novels by Stead examined in this thesis, the narrative of *House of All Nations* proceeds at a great pace and is gargantuan in its size and scope. As was mentioned in chapter one, *House of All Nations* is an important model of the polyphonic novel because of the large number of characters involved² and the narrative's reliance on dialogue. Stead's 1939 paper, "Uses of the many-charactered novel", is based upon *House of All Nations* published the year before. Judith Gardiner points out that the amount of direct dialogue in the text gives the impression that the characters "are seen from the outside in their own terms, as though underscoring the novel's historicity and objectivity" (1989b, 60). Stead's polyphonic technique in *House of All Nations* also represents ideological struggles under capitalism. In the novel she has the voices of the communist, Michel Alphendéry, the petit-bourgeois, Aristide Raccamond, and the plutocrat, Jules Bertillon, among many others, interact in order that they voice the various oppositions of their society and the historical times. Their voices map the various tensions and contradictions under capitalism.

² According to Gardiner there are "one hundred and twenty-five characters" in the novel (1989b, 54).

Yet, more than this, the constant talk and the frantic introduction of different characters make the text appear almost neurotic in its density and velocity. Just as Rachel Bowlby perceives the characteristics of modern consumer society in the narratives of novels of the school of naturalism at the turn of the century (14), so too can Stead's structure in this novel be seen to represent the concurrent dynamism and vacuity of modernity and capitalism. Stead's depiction of the dynamism of capitalism is in fact linked to an implicit vacancy. Diana Brydon argues that the narrative is constructed in such a way that "Scene builds on scene, character on character, image on image – all to reveal the emptiness underlying such apparent prodigality" (1987, 59).

One of Stead's original ideas for the title of the novel was "The Revolving Hive"³ (Geering 1990, 404).⁴ Indeed, the narrative seems to spin in its swift cuts between scenes and in its circling back to characters and their schemes. The narrative's movement makes the bank seem as if it were a rounded carapace, like Percy Shelley's "Tower of Famine" seen as a motif for the bank by Michel Alphenéry (*HAN* 23). All this might be seen to represent the "vortex" of modernity. Berman perceives a similar structure in the images of capitalism used by Marx and Engels:

³ The idea of the hive adequately represents the "swarm" of characters "buzzing" with talk.

⁴ There are frequent metaphors or images of spinning in Stead's novels. The merry-go-round or "whirligig" is one such example. References include: "The whirligig of values" (*ALT* 46); "We felt cheerfully that all women lived in a pension of tears in a whirligig of infinite possibilities as to husbands" (*LF* 142); Jonathan Crow repeats the line: "The whirligig of time brings in its revenge!" (*FLA* 169; 340; 432); in *The Man Who Loved Children* Henny is said to be "on the edge of the maelstrom and [is] about to sink down, down, circling" (278); Oliver's senses "reel" in his drunken stupor (*BF* 326); and so on.

the sense of being caught in a vortex where all facts and values are whirled, exploded, decomposed, recombined; a basic uncertainty about what is basic, what is valuable, even what is real. . . . (121)

Stead's partner, Bill Blake, also connects the sensation of "whirling" with the inherent dynamism of capitalism in his Marxist economics textbook, *An American Looks at Karl Marx*: "Where once social changes took decades, they now take months. The old guild-worker cannot compete in this whirl. . . . In other words, society is *dynamic*" (1939, 43).

The narrative of *House of All Nations* is constructed in 104 "scenes" and so resembles a play or screenplay. This impression is underscored by the novel's emphasis on dialogue and the scant descriptions of physical settings.⁵ Indeed, in her interview with John Beston, Stead says that *House of All Nations* "was known in Hollywood and was used for plots" (91). There is a succession of glamorous and beautiful women in this novel; for instance, the prostitute, Mme Verneuil, is introduced in this manner:

Léon came towards them, leading the dark-browed houri by the hand. She was dressed in black, low necked with silver fox furs. An exceedingly smart hat with evening veil set off the black brilliants which were her eyes. Her hair appeared to be done by Antoine: she had platinum and diamond bracelets and silver and ebony bracelets on her arms. (45)

These women are beauties in the style of the classic Hollywood black and white film in that their faces are like masks and their dress, like costume. Stead here seems to be reinforcing the notion of these women as commodities (objects to be gazed upon as the

⁵ Physical descriptions of Paris are rare in the novel. There is one small descriptive piece concerning Paris in Scene 59 when Jean and Michel walk back to Frère's atelier. Paris takes on a translucence similar to Marx's and Baudelaire's nineteenth-century images of modernity as perceived by Berman (eg. 154). *House of All Nations's* passage reads: "It was twilight and they, like the macadam and the buildings, were coated with that faint lucent ghostly gelatine light that makes Paris-real so like Paris-graved and Paris-memoried" (473). This translucence is indicative of capitalism's fluidity and vacuity.

*flâneur*⁶ looks upon the prostitute), and as dream-like objects.⁷ This construction of “Hollywood”⁸ on the page means that Stead evokes the myths and desires of capitalism. But, more than this, the Hollywood style of the novel means that her characters appear to be actors in a weird and wild masquerade. Therefore, Stead emphasises capitalism as performance and stresses its illusory, fabulous nature. Thus the narrative of *House of All Nations* does not reinforce or ideologically support the vacuity of capitalism, but its structure makes the vortex of modernity apparent and so serves to explode and explore the myths of this dominant ideology. Furthermore, the circular motion, or whirl, of the narrative also suggests carnival chaos. The characters become a throng, constantly moving and interacting. This carnival aspect of the novel emphasises a *potential* for political change and allows for the relativisation of all hierarchical classifications.

One of the novel’s major themes is masquerade: both as a representation of the fluid facades with which capitalism constructs itself, and as a representation of playfulness and deceit in a carnivalesque sense. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin defines the carnival mask in this way:

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life. . . . It reveals the essence of the grotesque. (RHW 39-40)

⁶ Unlike the women encountered by the *flâneur*, however, these women are given speaking parts, even if small ones.

⁷ Stead does not *objectify* these women in any derogatory sense but, rather, examines *objectively* the ways in which women are commodified under capitalism through her portrayal of prostitution in the novel. It is beyond the scope of this thesis, however, to deal with the treatment of the female characters in *House of All Nations* in any detail.

⁸ See the following chapter on *I’m Dying Laughing* for another interpretation of Stead and Hollywood.

He goes on to argue that under Romanticism the mask “loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a somber hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it” (RHW 40). Both these elements of masquerade are evident in *House of All Nations*: firstly there is a carnival delight in the depiction of role-playing and facade, but, secondly, there is a perception of vacuity behind the faces of capitalism.

For the reader this combination of carnival grotesque and a Romantic assertion of human alienation under capitalism may be confusing for, as Bakhtin implies in *Rabelais and His World*, the modern reader has lost sight of carnival laughter. But both these strands must be apprehended in a reading of *House of All Nations* in order to clarify what, on the surface, appears to be a contradictory relish and disdain for capitalism in the text.

In her interview with Rodney Wetherell, Stead points out that in writing *House of All Nations* she did not just wish to satirise capitalism. Wetherell begins:

It's a very glittering world you portray in that book, very sophisticated, and corrupt, I suppose.

Well, corrupt is the way you may see it.

Would you say there was a definite political intention behind that book?

None whatever.

Although it's an attack on the existing system, I suppose?

It's not an attack on the system, it's a picture of the system. If a picture is an attack – but it's a picture without venom, without animosity; there's a certain amount of amusement and love in a way, of the system. It's not an attack at all. I'm not a polemic writer. (441)

Stead adds that she wrote *House of All Nations* “Out of the spirit of fun” (Wetherell 441).

In her interview with Ann Whitehead, Stead concedes that she sees *House of All Nations* as a satire of capitalism (238), but her comments in the Wetherell interview emphasise her wish not to be perceived as a polemic writer. This accounts for the lack of direct

narratorial guidance or intervention in *House of All Nations*, and for the way in which the characters are left to speak for themselves – elements which, we have seen, are indicative of the polyphonic narrative.

In a letter to Nettie Palmer, Stead describes Bill Blake's financier friends, upon whom some of the characters of *House of All Nations* are said to be based, as:

cheerful, brutal neo-Darwinians (survival of the slickest), complete Marxians (but on the other side of the fence!) There is no nonsense at all about them and very, very little false sentiment: they are at least interesting and revolting as tigers and vultures are. (*Letters I* 63)

As was noted in the introduction to this thesis, elsewhere Stead defines herself as a naturalist – a student of the human animal whose job it is to examine such “dingoes”, or “tigers and vultures” (Wetherell 441; Giuffré 25). While Stead indicates a wish to portray these financiers objectively, she also suggests that they are nonetheless predatory creatures through her choice of the animals she has chosen to compare them with. Thus there is both “interest and revulsion” in their portraits. Importantly, however, she seeks to be objective in her characterisations, to provide “a picture without venom”.

The apparent enthusiasm in Stead's portrait of capitalism in *House of All Nations* confounds critics because the degree of irony or satire used by the author is difficult to detect. As Bruce Holmes states, “the implied judgement of the capitalist system is countered by a relish for its excitements and joustings” (267). This ambivalence is not the result of an intermittent espousal of the virtues of capitalism in the text, but indicates the carnival aspects of Stead's project. The text certainly acts as a criticism of capitalism, while, at the same time, it incorporates a discernible “amusement and love” in the

portrayal of that system. This sense of amusement underscores the importance of laughter in novel; but it is not just polemical, or satirical, laughter – it is ambivalent carnival laughter.

Stead's epigraph to *House of All Nations* from Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* stresses the novel's enthusiastic depiction of vice, as well as its critical project to reveal that vice:

*On est dédommagé de la perte de son innocence par celle de ses préjugés. Dans la société des méchants, où le vice se montre à masque levé, on apprend à les connaître.*⁹

The exchange of innocence for “the loss of one's prejudices” underscores *House of All Nations's* intent not to shy from the depiction of vice in order to ally itself with knowledge and experience. As has already been mentioned, there is an ambivalence in this imagery of the mask: on the one hand there is an emphasis on playfulness and role-playing, but on the other hand, there is a stress on an awareness of deception and the idea of an underlying truth.

The character Adam Constant's tirade against the bank in the scene “J'Accuse” has been read as a statement of the author's critical intention in writing *House of All Nations* (Geering 1979, 75; Brydon 1987, 58). Indeed, his speech summarises the nexus of carnival, prostitution, market, appetite, disease, monstrosity, power, and war in the novel's imagery. The following is only a small fragment of his speech but is transcribed at length here in order to introduce some of the themes of the novel:

There are no men in this bank . . . only money galls of one color and another shape: only an infection of monsters with purses at their waists

⁹ One is compensated for the loss of one's innocence by the loss of one's prejudices. In the society of the wicked, where vice shows itself from behind its mask, one learns to recognise them.

that we wait upon and serve. . . . My dream is, that one day I will get them all down, I will leave them on record. I want to show the waste, the insane freaks of these money men, the cynicism and egotism of their life, the way they gambol amidst plates of gold loaded with fruits and crystal jars of liqueurs, meats pouring out juices, sauces, rare vegetables, fine fancy breads, and know very well what they are doing, brag, in fact, of being more cunning than the others, the poor. I'll show that they are not brilliant, not romantic, not delightful, not intelligent; that they have no other object but their personal success and safety. Although, of course, there are plenty of living intelligences among them, sidetracked talents, even warm breasts, perspicacious men amongst them, but all, all compliant and prostituted. . . . I'll write down how [the financiers] meditate for hours together on how to excite political passions and make civil war simply to affect the stock exchanges and aid their own speculations in currencies. I'll show them for what they are, bestially selfish, true criminals and gangsters, who admire particularly gangsters in their hearts and comment at length, with love, on the exploits of bandits, armament sellers who sell arms against their own country, great exploiters who kill hundreds of men, women and children under them, apaches of commercial life, profiteers of war, rapine, and fratricidal slaughter. . . . (80-81)

There is an obvious connection between Adam's intention and the areas *House of All Nations* does in fact examine in its portrait of capitalism. For instance, the wealthy capitalists feasting on liqueurs and meats are found at the dinner party at the Hallers (Scene 42). The qualification in Adam's speech which begins "Although, of course, there are plenty of living intelligences among them . . ." is an important one because the novel, while being explicit about the despicable nature of these figures, is also careful not to construct the characters as two-dimensionally evil and to present a variety of characters with their individual motivations and personalities. However, while there are evident similarities, Stead's novel is not as unequivocally scathing as Adam's outline suggests. The narrative does contain a relish for the searing language which rolls off Adam's tongue, but, as has been stated, the narrative voice is not a polemical or

rhetorical one. The novel's sense of fun counters the dull¹⁰ seriousness of Adam's approach; as Gardiner argues, the novel is "a richer experience for the reader than the self-assured satire on capitalist greed that Adam Constant says he wishes to write and that the novel sometimes pretends to be" (1989b, 64).

Mercury

House of All Nations is peopled by a cavalcade of carnivalesque characters who demand to be laughed at. These include the senile and befuddled millionaire, John Tanker; the South American woman-hunter and dandy, Pedro de Silva-Vizcaino; the Aryan looking Jew and Casanova, Davigdor Schicklgrüber; the bumbling lawyer, Maitre Olympe; the large and languid physicist, Charles Lorée; the pompous German Jewish businessmen, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern; and many, many more. The humour at the basis of the names of characters such as Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern suggests a joviality in the text which undermines the seriousness invested by the dominant order in "high" finance.¹¹ This is no serious novel of high finance. This laughter adds to the mockery of the system and underscores the carnivalesque atmosphere of the text.

¹⁰ Some readers may find the length, subject, and repetitiveness of *House of All Nations* rather dull (eg. Chamberlain 255), but, as in the discussion of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* in chapter two of this thesis, it is argued here that one must enter into the *dialogics* of the text, and its carnival aspects, in order to find enjoyment.

¹¹ Other characters have significant names: Carrière for carrion, career, or carrier (of disease and drugs); Raccamond for wreaking havoc; Frère for freedom and brotherhood; and so on. Also note the homonym of Jules (when pronounced in English) and "jewels". Ironically the Jew, Davigdor Schicklgrüber, shares Adolf Hitler's paternal grandmother's surname. He buys some Jewish tailors out of their business and proceeds to manufacture fascist black uniforms on behalf of the Scottish multimillionaire, Lord Zinovraud: a scene which is both comic and frightening as a representation of the politics of the 1930s (HAN 381).

This carnivalesque attitude is found in the depiction of the major characters of the novel as well. Jules Bertillon, who can be considered the principal character of the text in some ways,¹² is a carnivalesque character *par excellence*. He is above all ambivalent. He is monstrous in his cupidity and unconcern for those he makes suffer, yet god-like and angelic. He seems both naive and cunning, callous and benevolent, brilliant and foolish. Jules is portrayed as a trickster character, a Peter Pan figure, a rogue, a gangster, and a gambler. The bank all seems a game and a delightful gamble (gambol) to him:

he was daring because he was ready to fly at a moment's notice and regarded his imposing, wealthy bank as a joke, and . . . he was generous because he was handing out "gambler's gold, fairy money", as he always said. "I give it because I can make it: why should I hoard it? I can always make it". (90)

Jules is ultimately an inconstant figure who cannot be defined through any one term or form, but must be appreciated in his various manifestations. Like the substance Mercury, Jules is a slippery character.

Jules is pre-eminently an actor and a role-player. There is one small scene, for instance, where we do not see him at the bank, but at home, where we receive a brief and easily forgotten glimpse of a man preparing and practising his role:

No one knew exactly how sophisticated Jules was. Nightly to Claire-Josèphe, rarely to William and Alphendéry, Jules went over his game, spoke of them all as his pawns, gave his reasons, hung up the cloak of irresponsibility and intuition which was one of his great masquerades and charms. (536)

¹² Which is not to say that the overall polyphonic structure of the novel is over-ridden.

Jules's ambivalence, his many personalities and roles, all add to the sense of play in the novel and to the importance of the theme of facade.

In her depiction of a millionaire Stead seems to have chosen a subject her friend, Ralph Fox, argued was missing from the nineteenth-century novel and which should be considered by authors in the twentieth century. In *The Novel and the People*¹³ Fox argues that millionaires are indeed villains, but that "It would be very unfair to imagine that the villain is merely negative, that he has no positive features or is a mere symbolic embodiment of evil" (78). He goes on to assert that "your modern capitalists only superficially resemble the Renaissance adventurers" but that the form of heroism represented by Renaissance heroes such as Don Quixote should not be lost to the novel (78). His emphasis on fairness and adventure in the depiction of such figures seems to be founded in his espousal of portraying "man alive" and the "epic nature of man" in literature; that is, his desire to restore to the novel three-dimensional characterisation and the depiction of the hero as an active figure, factors which he perceives to be lacking in the contemporary novel (eg. 83).¹⁴ Stead creates Jules as a modern-day adventurer and as a complex and bemusing hero. She combines a sense of the picaresque with the portrait of Jules as villain. Indeed, if Jules is the devil incarnate of capitalism he is simultaneously a carnivalesque demon. Bakhtin states that in medieval parodies: "the devil is the gay ambivalent figure expressing the unofficial point of view, the material bodily stratum. There is nothing terrifying or alien in him" (RHW 41). Stead, similarly, does not create Jules as entirely monstrous.

¹³ *The Novel and the People* was first published in 1937, a year before *House of All Nations*.

¹⁴ See the chapter on *For Love Alone* for a further discussion of Fox and heroism in Stead's work.

In the novel Jules is directly associated with the god Hermes or Mercury, patron of merchants and travellers. His bank, the Banque Mercure, has Mercury's staff engraved on its bronze doors (15).¹⁵ The adjective "mercurial" is also used to describe Jules frequently (eg. 89). Carrière's lover, Caro de Faniul, calls Jules "Hermes" (164), and it seems that Jules has picked up the nickname "Mercury" (598). This pet name makes his nemesis, Carrière, jealous: "The name stuck to him and Carrière had the displeasure of hearing his rival referred to by the *caressing and satiric* name . . ." (598; emphasis added).

The narrative seems to adopt this ambivalent attitude to Jules, indicated in the name "Mercury": he is treated both fondly and critically.

Jules's association with Hermes is significant for his role as a confidence trickster, or a trickster figure *per se*. As the mythological tale of Hermes's theft of his older brother Apollo's cattle suggests, there is a critical association to be made between commerce (Hermes being the patron of merchants) and piracy, which *House of All Nations* utilises. Jules is in fact described as a thief or a gangster figure. He is said to be "part of Ali Baba's band" of forty thieves (88). Jules himself associates his role of banker with that of thief when he says, ". . . money isn't respectable. Money is a steal" (676). Like the American gangster figures of the 1930s his career is surrounded by notoriety and legend; he is both admired and disdained by the public.

¹⁵ It is perhaps significant that these doors are introduced in the text through the chauffeur who looks at them and then spits – a working-class man's sign of disgust at the edifice of wealth and capital (15).

In her work, *The Absolute Comic*, Edith Kern points out that Hermes's theft of Apollo's cattle is a tale of laughter rather than disapproval (123). In a similar fashion Jules must also be read as a "figure of fun" rather than just as an object of satire. In Kern's terms the trickster figure, in general, is ambivalent in his behaviour because he is both human and animal, creator and destroyer, giver and negator (118).¹⁶ He dupes others and is duped himself; he knows neither good nor evil and possesses no moral or social values (118). Like the trickster, Jules is strangely indifferent to moral values. He builds up his bank for his own pleasure yet is ready to destroy it and flee according to his whim. Jules makes money with ease, yet the narrative also makes it clear that much of his success depends on chance and intuition. This revelation tends to undermine an interpretation of Jules as a genius, but the narrative does not destroy entirely this image of Jules as brilliant because it maintains his shroud of enigma, and so reinforces his ambivalent nature as trickster.

As well as this depiction of Jules as Mercury, the novel also connects him with Cervantes's Don Quixote. For instance, Ralph Stewart describes Jules as "A sort of Quixote with a couple of Sancho Panzas and a donkey and it doesn't work. No Sancho Panza ever yet stopped a Quixote from getting his nose broken by a windmill" (318). In itself this construction of Jules as a Quixotic figure mocks him as a fantastic fool but, as has just been noted, this is not Jules's only side because he is also wonderfully clever.

¹⁶ In her portrait of Jules Stead also seems to have incorporated the other meanings behind the Greek terms for "trickster" and "thief", which, according to Kern, also mean "accomplishment and skill in the arts and in magic" (128). Jules is a competent artist and frequently refers to himself as a "magician".

The references to Quixote, do, however, result in an interpretation of Jules as a picaresque adventurer and as a comic hero.

Jules is also portrayed as a mock-king in a court of farce.¹⁷ Richard Plowman sees Alphendéry as Jules's side-kick when he tells Michel:

you are half an angel and half a devil, half dishonest and half honest. . . .
At first, I thought you were Jules's friend, simply devoted to him; then I
thought you were a vaudevillist, a Rabelaisian sort. . . . (550)

Yet Alphendéry is not as roguish as some of Jules's other cronies. When Jules flees Paris for the Blue Coast Aristide Raccamond and Bomba take up the role of "court" jesters (458). The text delights in the depiction of the sycophantic actions of Jules's underlings. Just as in Bakhtin's idea of the upturn of social hierarchies at carnival time, the text's construction of Jules as a mock-king ridicules his position of power by, in effect, "decrowning" him, and preventing any association of him with real authority. If Jules is a figurehead of capitalism, capitalism is headed by a fool and charlatan.

At the same time there seems to be a certain amount of self-consciousness on Jules's part so that it seems as if he is intentionally mocking the system by playing the role of king. In other words, it could be argued that Jules himself, to some extent, opposes the dominant order through his tricksterish antics. Yet, like Robbie Grant of *A Little Tea, A*

¹⁷ There is also talk of the bank as a circus, as Jules himself says to Raccamond: "I'm the whole show. I'm the Barnum and you're the only freak in the works" (723). This circus imagery stresses the carnivalesque nature of the text, (the circus, after all, is directly related to medieval entertainment in the marketplace (PDP 131)), and highlights its sense of play.

Little Chat, Jules is more a rogue figure than a conscious subversive. However, his “gay antics” (HAN 326) make apparent the tenets of the system through laughter.

The narrative does not portray Jules as an embodiment of “the material bodily stratum” (RHW 41). Rather the narrative goes to great pains to describe him as physically beautiful: golden and angelic. As his association with Mercury indicates, Jules is a model figure of classic antiquity. Here is Bakhtin’s “classical body” with its “impenetrable facade” (RHW 320) which he contrasts with the open, “grotesque body”, as we shall see. Yet there is no support for a corresponding reading of the novel itself as closed, fixed, or classic. Jules’s beauty, while maintained in the novel, receives no ideological favour. While Jules may indeed be beautiful, he is also portrayed as the figurehead of a monstrous system. Jules’s trickster-like ambivalence also destabilises a reading of him as fixed and finite, thus undermining his polished image. There is, too, a sense of fun in the narrative depiction of his beauty, a very delight in the portrayal of his fantastic facade.

Parasites

Unlike the mercurial Jules, there are lesser characters who are denoted by their parasitic and sordid natures. Carrière, for instance, is described as a “worldling” compared with the ephemeral Jules (Scene 74). He is said to be, “irritable and melodramatic, swollen by

vanity and drugs as well as by a very competent knowledge of his own superiority in position and wealth . . . " (595).¹⁸ The sycophant, Bomba, is described in this way:

He used his hands in an outward stirring motion, as if he was fishing round in a cesspool to find some delectable bits of garbage. Both William and Alphendéry found it very hard to take his hand and when he smiled . . . Michel fell back two steps as if from infection. . . . How could Jules, that delicate, fragrant creature, even sit in the same room as Bomba? . . . on Jules's money he had got fatter and more noticeably unpleasant. (467)

These characters are the "low-lives" of the bank. Stead's imagery of the lower bodily stratum emphasises the despicable nature of these men and "degrades" them as figures of power, but this language also adds to the carnivalesque atmosphere of the novel.

Bomba's obesity is representative of his greed and parasitism and it is evident again in the figure of Aristide Raccamond. In discussing whether the bank will employ Aristide, William Bertillon says, "I don't see why we can't have a man who knows the prices at the House of All Nations!"¹⁹ Alphendéry responds with, "If we didn't have any toilets, our clients would leave us, too" (29). Raccamond is said to perform "private" services for his clients; these appear to be anything from procuring drugs to procuring prostitutes. He is described by other characters as a megalomaniac and a neurotic, all of

¹⁸ In the text there is a problematic association of Carrière's vice and his homosexuality. The two can, of course, be considered to be entwined as part of the carnivalesque nature of the text, but this association seems to reinforce prejudices rather than overturn them. Just as women can utilise their carnival *potential*, according to Natalie Zemon Davis, perhaps gays too can use Bakhtin's notion of "gay relativity" as a subversive tool. But Stead does not allow Carrière, or Nellie Cotter for that matter, any subversive potential.

¹⁹ The novel's title bears the name of a Parisian brothel of the time (Geering 1990, 405). Jennifer Gribble writes, "It is a 'house', familial, sexual, mercantile. It mimics and travesties the domestic hearth" (1994, 39). However, the novel's title also serves to mimic and travesty "high" finance in Bakhtinian terms by associating the bank directly with the lower bodily stratum through the prostitute, and by making obvious the nexus of commodification and prostitution under capitalism.

which is rumoured to be the result of syphilis (635; 728).²⁰ These descriptions of Raccamond create him as “grotesque”, mock him as a character, and later prevent the reader from having any sympathy with him in his case against the bank.

Scene 42 of *House of All Nations*, entitled “A Stuffed Carp”, (in which Raccamond and his wife, Marianne, attend a private dinner party given by Aristide’s clients, the Hallers), functions in a similar manner to the banquet in *The Little Hotel* in its Rabelaisian hyperbole and grotesquerie. Yet, here, Stead highlights the contrast between the “grotesque” body and the “classical” body, and, while all the participants in the meal are mocked, Raccamond in particular is the target of the scene’s laughter. This meal emblematises gluttony as part of a nexus of avarice and sexuality. Raccamond’s appetite, for example, is said to attract Mme Haller, “almost sexually” (284). The Comte de Guipatin also talks of Aristide’s greed in this way: “your belly growing bigger and bigger, your appetite getting more monstrous, until you wanted everything in the bank for your own” (715). In this way Raccamond’s desires are “degraded” through the narrator’s use of images of the “lower stratum”.

Before the meal Mme Haller shows Marianne their hoard of fine goods, stored but never used (267). The Hallers keep them as insurance against revolution which they believe to be inevitable, because, like gold, they are solid commodities of apparent intrinsic value. “They will never lose their value, even if gold were to lose its value. With these things the value cannot be lost because the workmanship is there . . .”, says Mme Haller in

²⁰ Carrière is also said to be syphilitic (148). As was stated in chapter one in relation to Hilda Dilley, syphilis can be considered a carnivalesque disease.

“awestruck tones” (271). The narrative intricately lists the Hallers’ various possessions arousing the reader’s desire, so that we are as “breathless” as Marianne (268). Mme Haller unveils precious “jars, vases, plates”, “silky ancient Persian carpets”, “Chinese mandarin robes”, “a gold fruit dish”, and more (268-272). As Bill Blake writes, “The more elegant hoarders put their money into gold and silver objects, fashioned in the arts, and thus cover their avarice with the sauce of taste” (1939, 142). The narrator’s creation of this list of exotic items suggests a participation in the fetishisation of goods, but as in the depiction of the banquet in *The Little Hotel*, this listing of goods can be interpreted as a carnivalesque delight in exaggeration. Also, the display of the Hallers’ hoard is merely a preamble to the meal in which bourgeois gluttony and avarice are parodied. Even within the narrative presentation of the goods themselves there is a certain irony. The Hallers hide their wealth in order not to arouse envy, and so the objects become mere museum relics; such objects of beauty are hidden away in dark gloomy cabinets never to see the light of day. The fact that Mme Haller has two women (one in China and one in Hungary) in her permanent service to embroider linen for her indicates the narrator’s direction that the reader perceive the underlying exploitation and political imperialism behind the possession of these hand-crafted goods:

Here, she had fourteen slips, all hand-embroidered by a Hungarian girl, whom she had found in a village and sent abroad to learn the art. (“Her eyes were now going, poor girl. But she still sends me something year after year.”) (270)

At the dinner, Raccamond, who is in poor health due to obesity, is forced to eat so much food that he nears suffocation. Like the Hallers’ hoard of precious goods, the beautifully presented food and carefully preserved drink is fetishised, but is then consumed in an

orgy of excessive feasting. The meal begins with the rather repulsive combination of chicken livers, eggs, and yellow or green liqueurs (274). Then the “*pièce de résistance*” is the large jellied carp, served with roe and macaroons, which has taken Mme Haller twenty-four hours to prepare (283). This is followed by Australian peaches, cream, chocolates, and, lastly, a “Doyenne de Comice” pear for Aristide in order to aid his “digestion” (287; 298). It is with laughter that the narrator presents this nauseating list of food in order to undermine the greed of those who partake in the meal.

The Hallers have a significant preoccupation with the purity of food; they refuse to eat tinned food, food containing chemicals, and are aghast at the thought of eating *pâté de foies gras* made from the diseased livers of overfed geese. Mme Haller says she gets her sausages from, “the only shop in Paris free from bacteria, poison, and pollution . . . ” (293).²¹ The obsession with purity is indicative of the bourgeois subject’s emphasis on the classical body and its negation of the grotesque body and its bodily products. Bakhtin defines the classical body’s opposition to the grotesque body in this way:

[The classical body] presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts or branches off . . . is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, *the impenetrable facade*. (RHW 320; emphasis added)

Aristide eats and drinks so much that we know that some form of expulsion is urgently necessary, but he continues to eat and drink without the ejection of bodily products until he is literally stuffed. In this wonderful parody the classical bourgeois body in its

²¹ This preoccupation with cleanliness seems ironised by the eating of carp, a fish which roils the water in which it feeds, and through its anagram, crap.

propriety (Aristide must continue to eat in order not to offend his clients) risks death by over-indulgence. Ironically, he does become grotesque, bloated and sickly: "Aristide was spilled in his chair, his mouth half open, his eyes bulging and his pendulous cheeks some pale shade between French blue and mauve" (293). Aristide himself resembles the "stuffed carp" floundering and gasping for air. Therefore, he is ridiculed by the narrator for his self-aggrandisement, or gargantuan greed.

The scene is macabre, grotesque, and almost Gothic with these rather sinister characters feasting in the Hallers' dark and gloomy apartment. This effect is increased by the presence of Anna, the Hallers' uncooperative, taciturn and resentful maid. Anna is not presented as one of the oppressed underclass who might despise this feasting from which she is denied. Rather she is portrayed as a loyal and jealous servant envious of the Raccamonds' intrusion: "She knew, of course, very well, what they came for, the two black pigs: they came to snuffle and grub in her master's dishes" (293). The employment of the grotesque image of the pigs continues the subversion of the propriety of the bourgeois dinner party, but, as in *The Little Hotel* in which the working-class characters ultimately were not the origin of subversion, the perpetrator of this parody is the narrator and not Anna.

The narrative is overt about this scene as a critique of bourgeois consumption. The narrator makes ironic Mr Haller's calls for "moderation" and his discussion of the "Fat People eating": "the ruling classes in Russia had stuffed themselves to bursting on interest", he says (296; 289). Mr Haller's statements and his reading of Lenin relate to his

belief in inevitable communist revolution. Thus his statements may not just be read as ironic but as representations of the political milieu from which he speaks. The novel, set in the early 1930s, has an air of approaching apocalypse. The Hallers are prepared for the revolution, and the novel's emphasis on capitalist and political strife speaks to this age.

The Tower of Famine

Aspects of the architectural layout of the bank stress its carnivalesque nature. Jules's office is above the general throng of the stock exchange floor; from the mezzanine there is a view of the proceedings below. In Scene 13, for instance, Alphendéry looks over the balcony to watch the collection of clients, and their voices even carry to him (107).²² The bank is somewhat of a mock Gothic castle because of its secret stairway, the entrance for which is concealed in Jules's office. This is the staircase by which the overly amorous Pedro de Silva-Vizcaino flees the police who have called for him (91; 684).²³ This secrecy and the structure of the bank represent the vice and privileges of those at the top of the economic hierarchy, but they also allow a sense of fun and of picaresque adventure.

²² The narrative often assumes this "eagle-eye" perspective in which the narrator switches from character to character in a metonymic manner. For example Scene 14, "The Collection", follows Armand Brossier as he collects money from various people in the bank for a wedding present (110). This emphasises the carnivalesque nature of the throng in the bank.

²³ Pedrillo's attacks on women may seem disturbing to some readers, but it could be argued that they are meant to be read in carnival terms as "fantastic" rather than "real" violence just as Aunt Bea's anecdote concerning the attempted rape of the old woman was shown to be carnivalesque in chapter one of this thesis (FLA 28).

Throughout the novel Stead has her characters use carnivalesque metaphors in describing the bank and in describing each other in order to underscore the idea that the bank and financial system are a farce and a masquerade. For instance, Aristide Raccamond comments wryly, using images of rotation, that the bank:

is a merry-go-round. The horses look splendid, their nostrils flash fire, their mouths drip slaver, they rear, their eyes dart passion, their manes float, and they even go round, but all is sculpted wood, and a spinning platform. The bank is a stage. . . . I don't know what gives it momentum. (306)

He also says to Jules, "There is no bank. You just think it's a booth in a bazaar" (723).

Jules himself does not treat the bank as a serious edifice. His brother, William, grumbles,

"This is not a bank, it's a merry-go-round" and Jules responds by saying:

This isn't a bank: there's a sign outside saying BANK and when they see it they come inside and drop their cash on the counter. . . . It's all in the sign. This is a stage I've set and filled with supers for the great act of Jules Bertillon, multimillionaire, and when the climax comes, I ring down the curtain. In the meantime, *they* pay to see the show. (251)

Jules also calls the bank "a confidence trick" (115). There is never any doubt he is playing a role, staging the theatre of "Bank". There is nothing very solid behind the "sign": Stead is explicit about the bank as an elaborate semiotic construction.

Much of *House of All Nations* deals with the hollowness behind the facades of the capitalist system. The bank's decor resembles the theatricality invested in the emerging department stores of the nineteenth century, with their reliance on glass, gloss and glamour in order to attract the consumer to commodities (Walter Benjamin 157). In the case of Banque Mercure the institution offers itself as an edifice of financial security. For

the communist and bank employee, Michel Alphen ery, Banque Mercure's glamorous furnishings offer no comfort to him in his ideological dilemmas:

The more Michel looked at these facades, fine furnishings, crystal panes, brass rods, chased mirrors, carved frames, and soft carpets, the more depressed he became, the more was he convinced that he had to leave the bank and find another job. (530)

Henri L on calls the bank "the finest bank in Paris" and "a hollow jewel" (23).

Alphen ery responds by saying it does indeed represent "hollowness" and proceeds to quote the following passage from Shelley's "The Tower of Famine":

There stands the Tower of Famine. It is built/ Upon some prison-homes,
whose dwellers rave/ For bread, and blood and gold²⁴: Pain, linked to
Guilt,/ Agitates the light flame of their hours,/ Until its vital oil is spent or
spilt./ There stands the pile, a tower amid the towers/ And sacred domes;
each marble-ribbed roof,/ The brazen-gated temples, and the bowers/ Of
solitary wealth- (HAN 23; Shelley 59-60)

For Alphen ery, Shelley's image of the "Tower of Famine" represents the capitalist system with its inequitable distribution of wealth and its injustices.²⁵ This image of capitalism opposes itself to the celebratory abundance of Bakhtin's representation of medieval banquets, and, in the context of the novel, suggests that some starve while figures such as Raccamond stuff themselves.

As was mentioned earlier, Alphen ery is constructed as a less roguish figure than other characters in the novel. Indeed, the reader is made to feel a degree of sympathy for him in his ideological dilemmas, which, like one of Dostoevsky's ideologues, he expresses aloud and in dialogue with others. The morality of his viewpoint is constructed so as to

²⁴ This line appears to be misquoted; the original reads: "For bread, and gold, and blood" (Shelley 60).

²⁵ The poem is said to be based on a prison in Pisa (Shelley 59), thus the poem also represents Michel's feeling of imprisonment in the bank.

be compared favourably with the immorality, or amorality, of others around him. He is also portrayed as an unequivocally intelligent and thoughtful character who is, as a result, a natural foil to the outlandishness of Jules. He and Jules act as a dialogic pair who articulate the struggle between capitalism and communism.

The politics of the 1930s is entrenched in the respective nationalities and religious identities of the various characters. Alphendéry's identity as a Jew, an Alsatian and a communist means that he is despised in many ways by other characters in the text. The effect is to create a degree of sympathy for Alphendéry on the reader's part. For instance, Alphendéry's Alsatian identity means that he is a liminal figure who can be perceived as either German or French depending on the context. The German Jews, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, are keen, for example, to speak with him against the French. The case of Alfred Dreyfus, an army officer and Alsatian Jew who was convicted for giving military information to the Germans, is significant when it comes to defining Alphendéry's place in the society and the bank, and for its lessons about the anti-Semitism of the era.²⁶ Indeed, Alphendéry does mention the Dreyfus case, noting the anti-Semitic rhetoric surrounding that trial (193). Even Léon mentions that he learnt his trade from a "Louis" Dreyfus, from whom he acquired "inside information" on the wheat trade (448). With regularity, Alphendéry himself seems to be accused of Dreyfus-

²⁶ Dreyfus was in fact innocent but was wrongly convicted in 1894 and sent to The Devil's Island, before subsequently being pardoned. The Dreyfus affair may also be a source of some characters' names in *House of All Nations*. Méline, for instance, was a politician and later Prime Minister during the Dreyfus affair. Alfred Dreyfus had a brother called Léon, and a policeman involved in the investigation of Dreyfus was Alphonse Bertillon (Chapman 62; 67). Emile Zola published an article in defence of Alfred Dreyfus in the newspaper *Aurore* on January 12, 1898, called "J'Accuse" (Chapman 179). This is the name of Scene 8 of *House of All Nations* in which Adam Constant describes his aim to write down the sordid truth he perceives behind the banking business.

like crimes; he is often seen as a Judas figure. For example, Raccamond denounces Alphendéry as German: "They employ the basest methods, the kiss of Judas."²⁷ I'm certain that this so-called Alsatian Alphendéry is a secret agent" (731). Richard Plowman is always speaking to Jules about Michel's negative influence in the bank, and Jules himself betrays Michel several times by denying involvement in, or knowledge of, his actions, thus creating Alphendéry as a scapegoat. In troubled times Jules turns on Michel, once his trusted adviser, and uses chilling rhetoric when he says, "Michel's unhealthy. I don't want unhealthy types round me. I want to clean them out. I want barbarians who can just sign their names, that's all" (713).²⁸ All this suggests that Alphendéry can be perceived as the moral centre of the book with whom the reader can sympathise because of his victimisation at the hands of these coercive and prejudiced discourses.

Yet this is not to say that Michel can be seen entirely as the "ethical centre" (Geering 1979, 76) of the novel because the narrator is explicit about the ideological inconsistencies of a banker who is also a communist and who refuses to give up his comfortable lifestyle (even though it is said he has many dependents) in order to join Jean Frère and the cause.²⁹ He is one of the "side-tracked talents" Adam Constant talks of, one who is

²⁷ Ironically, it is Raccamond, who is not Jewish, who becomes the Judas figure.

²⁸ In her review of *House of All Nations* Elaine Feinstein accuses Stead of being politically naive and of succumbing to "the old *canards* about the role of international Jewry" (856). The accusation seems unlikely given the distance of the author from the anti-Semitic speeches of her characters and because of the construction of Alphendéry as a relative centre of empathy for the reader.

²⁹ Stead states that Alphendéry is a representation of her partner, Bill Blake (Whitehead 238). His preface to *An American Looks at Karl Marx* confirms the incongruities of his ideology and his business: "Marxist economic theory, rooted in production relations, was the antipodes of my profession and my interests"

“compliant and prostituted”³⁰ (80). For example, when Michel visits Frère’s country house he despairs at the discomfort of the bed in the attic where he thinks he will sleep and, despite the evident enjoyment of the others in working outside, is sickened by the malignancy and wildness he perceives as he walks through the “garden”. The garden scene can be interpreted as a parable for communist commitment (Forsyth 61). The fecundity of the garden is opposed to the sterile vacuity of the bank, yet Alphendéry is more uncomfortable in the garden than he is in finance.³¹ His Peter-like denial, or Judas-like betrayal, of his communist beliefs in the last scene of the novel also makes the reader question, even if only slightly, his or her faith in Michel as a moral centre (785).

Michel, like Jules, is also an enigmatic character for it is never clear just how much he knows about the bank’s disreputable methods and just how much personal wealth he has. Alphendéry seems to construct a facade about himself and to role-play as well as anyone else. His characterisation is therefore not devoid of carnival elements, as Plowman’s description of Michel as “half an angel and half a devil” suggests (*HAN* 550).

This enigma lessens the closeness of the reader or narrator to Alphendéry. Yet, while the narrator also cannot be associated with Alphendéry directly because there is a distance between them as befits the polyphonic novel in Bakhtin’s view, it is true that

(vi). He adds, “I have found the study of political economy in my evenings a running commentary on the employments of the day” (vi).

³⁰ Alphendéry is described as a prostitute to his own beliefs. He sells himself for his salary and the pleasure of the game, “When would his slavery come to an end? He was bound to the bank by money needs and affection for the Bertillons, as well as inertia” (230). Michel tells Carrière, “I’m a whore, Jacques” (548). Raccamond, too, refers to himself as a prostitute (57). Thus the text suggests that prostitution is inherent in capitalism, a system in which people are treated as commodities and chattels.

³¹ Alphendéry is also disappointed because Frère’s garden is not all that Jean suggested it would be.

Michel's criticisms of the system are meant to be seen as pertinent.³² Indeed, communism, through Alphendéry, is presented as one of the "solid" and secure alternatives to the fluidity and instability of the system represented by Jules. However, it is arguably the character of Jules, and not Alphendéry (whose presence declines as the novel draws to its close), which remains the primary interest of the text.

Crisis

Jules is a figure of the "classic age of competitive capitalism", as Frederic Jameson calls the period of capitalism prior to World War Two (17). Jules is largely a self-made³³ millionaire and so is indicative of this era of *laissez-faire*. His actions embody this notion of economic potential and freedom. Yet this is also a time of tremendous historical crisis.

Jules is a representative of the generation who fought in World War One and who now find themselves in the throes of economic depression in the 1930s. While he may be a man, or "child", of his age, he is in no way appreciative of its political complexities:

A robber by instinct, sharpshooter of commerce by career, nourished by corruption (one of his grandfathers served his time), child of his age, Jules Bertillon was born to profit greatly by it, without understanding it in the least. (86)

³² For example, the narrative supports Michel in its mockery of the Bertillons' perception of the worker's home (617).

³³ There is some suggestion that Jules's wealth is family based, but the Bertillons' background is (intentionally) very sketchy, although there is some mention of it in Scene 38. Importantly there is no suggestion that they have an aristocratic background even though many of their associates are aristocrats.

House of All Nations does not adopt Jules's position of ignorance or unconcern, but makes the socio-historic setting of the 1930s explicit. The novel is set at a time of political turmoil in which the Treaty of Versailles has led to the collapse of the German economy and the rise of Nazism. There is talk of impending war with the Germans, and there is the threat of communist revolution from within France and from the Soviet Union. The Spanish Civil War is also raging.

Alphendéry states that Jules will not let go the "saturnalia" (LF 492) of the war years and the homosocial camaraderie associated with them:

Jules with his imaginative schemes, lavish spending, gay antics, disordered gilded postwar harlequinade, his playing bowls when the Armada is sailing down on him, appeals to these war boys, who have never settled down from flying, thieving, rampaging, giving orders, camping with the boys, raping the girls, spending their leave in cabarets and all the other sublunacies of the day, as it saw the sun fourteen short years ago. These rich young men had a grand spree then and they never want to grow up. Jules understands them. They flock to him. He will not grow up and accept his fate. (326)

Thus Jules epitomises his age in his carnival antics. The aspect of war presented in Alphendéry's speech is not in any way tragic but is carnivalesque, suggesting a picaresque interpretation of war as adventure. Alphendéry's narrative does suggest a moral tone in that Jules's actions are part of a masculine, or childish, heroism which ignores the more horrific aspects of war. The novel itself does share this tone to some extent, and clearly presents a Marxist perception of war and crisis as inherent elements of capitalism.

House of All Nations's theme of engorgement, represented, for instance, in Raccamond's gluttony, is paralleled in a speech by E.M. Forster, paraphrased by Stead in "The Writers Take Sides", written in 1935:

I consider as very possible a new war. It seems to me that if the nations continue to gorge themselves with armaments, they will no more escape elimination finally, than an animal which stuffs endlessly can escape excretion. (Stead 1935, 458)

In this statement capitalism, engorgement, over-indulgence, and excretion are inextricably entwined. The imagery of the lower bodily stratum is used in this instance to make apparent the grotesque nature of capitalism. In the same way the novel is explicit that war is an inherent part of this corrupt and defiling system.

In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels argue that "the bourgeois epoch" invests in crisis and chaos:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. . . . (7)

"Catastrophes are transformed into lucrative opportunities", explains Marshall Berman (95). This reliance on flux is evident, argues Berman, when one considers that the monuments of capitalism are not intended as timeless, but are constructed intentionally to destruct because they then need constantly to be rebuilt in order to create profit (99). Banque Mercure, of course, is constructed with a facade of timelessness, but this conceals its fundamentally transitory and unstable nature.

House of All Nations supports *The Communist Manifesto's* thesis that capitalism relies on crisis for its profits.³⁴ Jules endeavours to “profit greatly” from the upheavals of his era. Both Jules and Léon are described in tremendous detail in the narrative trying to concoct schemes to profit from the Spanish Civil War (eg. Scene 2; Scene 46).³⁵ The narrator remarks, “The world was really crumbling: all speculators hoped to make money out of the death and decrepitude of something or other” (634). Like Robbie Grant’s profiteering during World War Two in *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, Alphendéry states that Jules:

can only make real money in a dissolving world: if they ever get the jigsaw puzzle together even for five minutes, Jules will have to live on his reserves. We’re in the phantom buggy with him. We’re riders of the storm: all of us together with him in this phantom bank, built on misery, shining out of mire. . . . (130)

Jules, in typical carnivalesque terms, describes himself as an eater of carrion: “The world’s always rotting somewhere . . . and I have a nose for decay” (182).

The notion of a crumbling world presented in the text correlates with Alphendéry’s Marxist perception of the forces of change at work and the imminent demise of capitalism. In fascism he sees the last throes of the system, “Now capitalism is only vigorous as it knows freedom. The decay of the host brings the decay of the parasite.

³⁴ The connection of war and profit is one Stead makes again in her essay on the Vietnam War, “What Goal in Mind”. There she writes, “This war is intended to go on till an American landscape, economic and cultural, is installed in South-East Asia among a subjugated people. All the time fresh war business is being procured” (1971b, 126).

³⁵ Léon has also made money during the 1926 general strike in Britain (42), and Jules begins his career in finance by selling American telephone books to the Germans after World War One so that they can contact their German-American relatives for money (344). The ludicrousness of this scheme also seems indicative of carnival laughter in the text.

Far from saving capitalism, fascism exhausts it" (611). This resembles Stead's description of the European political situation in "The Writers Take Sides"; she states:

The war of 1914-1918, that great incentive to mechanical improvement and the instruments of class-struggle, smashed the bourgeois machine; since, the nations have fallen helter-skelter into all the last corruptions of capitalist decay. (1935, 456)

Yet, as Berman's analysis of Marx demonstrates, there is a paradox in perceiving crisis as an inherent part of capitalism and proposing the end of capitalism through crisis (103).

House of All Nations, by not positioning itself as a polemic text, neither advances nor denies the inevitability of communist revolution, but, as was mentioned earlier, nonetheless creates the atmosphere of approaching apocalypse. However, as Alphendéry's carnivalesque description of World War One suggests, the Marxist perception of crisis and capitalism is not the sum total of the text's depiction of historical upheavals.

Jules relies on a "world inside out" (RHW 11) to make his money. More than this, though, he acts in an opposite manner to all other investors. Again Alphendéry says:

With him it is the opposite – the world seems to crown asses when markets are up and when markets are down and everyone is talking about suicide, then Jules feels grand and he chortles at the distress of the others, and thinks it's heaven's cue for him to jump in and take the principal part. (750)

Indeed, Jules in some ways may be seen as a champion of the anti-establishment. He acts against bourgeois ideology which expects solidity and security in its financial dealings. A natural "bear" he speculates against his own clients and against any upwards trend in world markets. Thus he is always opposed to others; always making

money from another's crisis. In this way he acts *contre-partie*.³⁶ His speculation games serve to expose the anxious nature of the world monetary system by revealing its arbitrariness and fluidity which undermine bourgeois notions of solidity and security.

Yet, of course, Jules's carnivalesque actions are not representative of his desire to change or subvert the capitalist system but are merely evidence of his desire to flaunt its tenets. Certainly, Jules is a sanctioned criminal because he is a representative of the wealthy owners of capital who, because of their power, believe themselves to be above the strictures of bourgeois morality and state laws. As Alphendéry comments, "He seems unconscious that there is anyone above him or below him. He does not seem to know there are lawcourts, people who hate, who pursue – disaster, death" (458). Therefore, there is nothing revolutionary or radically asocial about Jules's gangsterism; it merely represents the pinnacle of avarice. This is greed which exceeds the bounds of middle-class propriety. Yet the novel also suggests that this is the illegality and gangsterism upon which much of high finance is run. As was mentioned earlier, Jules's roguish flaunting of the tenets of capitalism make the foundations of the system apparent; they are exposed.

While Jules is a rogue, he is also a gambler. The large, expansive first floor of the bank serves as a carnival space in which a collective of gamblers and speculators – a myriad of

³⁶ Bakhtin (or his translators) use(s) the term *contre-partie* to refer to genres which have "parodic-travesty" doubles (DI 53). In *House of All Nations* the term has a meaning in finance too, as we shall see.

characters indeed – gather to gamble on the stock exchange. As William Bertillon points out to the English broker, Ralph Stewart, Banque Mercure is more a casino than a bank:

You may think this is a bank, Stewart, but it's just a casino . . . And we make casino money. Did you ever hear of a man who won money in the market and took it out, Stewart? No, if the suckers win, they double; if they lose, they put more money in to try to recoup. (237)

Jules is also said to be attracted to the “game” rather than its results: “he cared not so much for money as for moneymaking . . . not so much [for] the making of money as the endless field for speculation and fantasy it yielded him” (597).

In *Reflections*, Walter Benjamin discusses the rise of financial speculation in relation to bourgeois ideology and Haussman's civic reconstruction of Paris:

Paris experiences a flowering of speculation. Playing the stock exchange displaces the game of chance in the forms that had come down from feudal society. . . . Gambling converts time into a narcotic. Lafargue declares gaming an imitation in miniature of the mysteries of economic prosperity. (159)

The Parisians in *House of All Nations* are absorbed in the “game of chance” the stock market offers them. Representatives from Europe, the United States and South America are also drawn to the bank by the promise of riches. The Paris financial scene is said to be “feverish” in comparison with the “solid” banking practices of London's establishments (133). Thus Paris seems an appropriate setting for the game of speculation which relies on abstractness and fluidity.

Bakhtin argues that “Gambling . . . is by nature carnivalistic”, and goes on to explain:

People from various (hierarchical) positions in life, once crowded around the roulette table, are made equal by the rules of the game and in the face of fortune, chance. Their behavior at the roulette table in no way corresponds to the role they play in ordinary life. The atmosphere of

gambling is an atmosphere of sudden and quick changes of fate, of instantaneous rises and falls, that is, of crownings/ decrownings. The *stake* is similar to a *crisis*: a person feels himself [sic]³⁷ *on the threshold*. (PDP 171)

The stock exchange involves the rapid transaction of abstract values without any reliance on the solid objects which may, or may not (in the case of Banque Mercure), be behind the deals. This then is a kind of dream world which, like a lottery, is based on the promise of riches. There is a sense in the novel that money, or rather the desire for money, “dissolves all hereditary ranks, privileges, and sanctities”, as Bill Blake puts it (1939, 142). On the stock exchange chance levels all participants and aristocratic inheritances can be gambled away in moments. Jules, for instance, gambles the entire capital of his bank on financial hunches. This gambling relies on a world in crisis and operates on the principle of crisis (of desire and despair) itself. While Benjamin perceives gaming as part of bourgeois ideology, this carnival perception of high finance undermines any appearance of solidity and security, of wealth accumulated slowly through hard work, and which can be depended upon.³⁸ Thus bourgeois ideology is Janus-faced in its advocacy of hard work and its desire for instantaneous wealth. The second, gaming, principle undermines the first by denying the value of bourgeois principles of work.

³⁷ There are a number of wealthy women in *House of All Nations* who play the stock market.

³⁸ *House of All Nations* has one scene in which it presents a group of artists who waste their time and talent by trying to make a fortune on the stock market. The painter, Kézébec, the sculptor, Garrigues, and the short-story writer, Abernethy Gairdner, are possessed by the hope that they will make a million on the market. Alphendéry despairs at the futility of their enterprise:

Isn't this a terrible business we're in . . . that drags writers away from their books, sends men insane, induces men to waste years of their lives in a stuffy room looking at figures, intent on gorging more and more and more money. . . . (233)

William Bertillon perceives no use or profit in being an artist (241) but the text itself, through the incorporation of this scene, seems to suggest that capitalism is inimical to art and artistry. See the following chapter on *I'm Dying Laughing* for a further discussion of Stead's treatment of art and capitalism.

This celebratory aspect of crisis in the novel might seem to be opposed to a critical Marxist perception of crisis inherent in capitalism. Yet, on this level plane of the marketplace, or gambling hall, crisis is carnivalesque and has the potential to decrown superior figures. Jules's fatal wager with Carrière results in his spectacular loss of the bank and literal obscurity, but the ending of the novel also promises his return to speculation and riches. Arguably Bakhtin's theory of gambling as carnivalesque relies on, and celebrates, capitalist exchange and profit. Yet his theory of decrowning enables a potential upturn of power and wealth which relativises authority's belief in its own fixedness. Just as the carnival depiction of crisis in *The Little Hotel* relativised the old world order, so too, here, is the incumbent hierarchy relativised. Moreover, the crisis inherent in the bourgeois epoch serves to undermine the solidity of its own ideological tenets. Bakhtin's concept of carnival gambling, therefore, is not just a passive reflection of capitalism's innate reliance on crisis, but is an active strategy to undermine that system's fixity.

Fluidity and Solidity

There is constant tension in the novel between those who seek more solid practices in the bank and Jules who is fluid and ephemeral and who relies on chance, intuition, and mystery in his methods. It is, of course, no coincidence that Jules refuses to deal in anything as solid as commodities, but prefers the abstract speculation of shares.

Alphendéry continually advises Jules against fleeing the bank and suggests he build it up into a respectable and legitimate banking operation, (that it accept savings accounts, for instance), if only to protect the welfare of its employees for whom Jules cares little. Both William and Claire-Josèphe have a safety-net of funds as security against Jules's actions. Not even the inner sanctum, including Michel and William, seem to have full knowledge of the bank's assets and financial position. Yet, arguably, the novel supports Jules, and all he represents, in its conclusion which maintains his enigma and notoriety.

When Jules and William do, literally, fly away in the night they leave behind the bank's shell, bare and exposed, but the truth about the bank remains nonetheless enigmatic. A circus of lawyers and judges (a carnivalesque rabble indeed) cannot make head nor tail of the evidence that remains. For instance, it appears the bank had been operating under multiple names: Banque Mercure, Banque Bertillon and Bertillon Frères (760). There are also many and varied rumours about just who its financial backers and general managers were. The public and the legal officials who expected a bank to be solid and reliable in its dealings are shocked at the charlatanism behind the Banque Mercure's operations. Behind the facade is not any clear truth, but a definite lack of substance.

Raccamond is another who is shocked by the bank's operations. He is depicted as a quintessential bourgeois figure in his faith in the Protestant ethic of hard work. This bourgeois ideology leads him to expect solid assets and practices where none exist in the bank. At one point he even demands to *see* the bank's stock of gold in order to persuade

himself of its secure position, indicating his unwillingness to accept the abstract nature of Jules's business.

The decor of Jules's bank is designed to exude an ambience of solidity and security based in *old* wealth rather than in his unreliable, speculative methods.³⁹ Jules stocks his book shelves with classic, leather-bound books of economics, even though he has not read a single volume. His room is furnished with heavy, dark, Dutch furniture again creating an edifice of stability and conservatism, belying his "fly-by-nighter" attitude. Raccamond interprets this physical surface of the bank as a representation "of generations of accumulation and saving and only the just reward of a good hard-working breed" (531). Ironically, it is in this scene that Aristide installs his crony, Posset, in the Brussels office to investigate the accounting books with the suspicion that the bank's operations are not as upstanding as its impressive facade suggests.

In the end, Raccamond learns that the bank "buckets" orders and uses a *contre-partie* system. Marianne Raccamond describes the *contre-partie* accounts in the following way: "In most, in almost all cases, the orders to buy and sell shares were never sent through. They were done *on the books* at prices fixed by the bank for the clients" (646). To Raccamond this is an appalling breach of his clients' confidence, but in the context of the novel the Bertillons have merely taken the abstract nature of the share market system to its extreme by constructing their own exchange procedure without any actual objects of

³⁹ When Jules decides to open an office in London the facade is all-important. He instructs Adam to employ an English public-school man with sea-gray eyes and to put him in a "dark-green office with heavy furniture and a picture of the Bank of England" (128).

exchange and by neglecting the processes of the exterior market. Because of his bourgeois morality Raccamond is offended at the illegal and charlatan actions of the kings of high finance. Yet the narrative does not support Raccamond's bourgeois and moral perception because it indicts him as a participant in the system and derides him as a character. Such is Raccamond's despicable nature that his moral outrage is later replaced by his own greed and desire to secure his position. The narrator remarks, for instance, that his foray into the bank's books which, "had first shocked him, had later enlightened him" (706). By allowing Raccamond to expose the *contre-partie* operations the text suggests that these methods are, after all, the real procedures behind the facade of a "fine" financial institution, but in doing so the novel does not adopt Raccamond's high moral, and hypocritical, tone.

As the sculptor (and gambler), Garrigues, is thrown out of Banque Mercure by Jules, the narrator talks of the bank as a "citadel of *invisible* gold" (240; emphasis added). The abstractness and corruption of the stock exchange and paper money are anterior to the solidity and purity of gold, but the hyper-inflation experienced in the Depression⁴⁰ and the general political and economic insecurity result in a desire for certainty and security. Jules, despite his bet with Carrière that England will remain on the gold standard, is a representative of that abstractness, of the ephemeral nature of early twentieth-century capitalism and of a world in flux.⁴¹

⁴⁰ It seems there can be no absolute security after the "Wall" Street crash of 1929. The edifice of stability has collapsed.

⁴¹ It seems a carnivalesque absurdity that Jules should bet against his own tendency toward abstractness.

The novel is set in 1931⁴² and much of the narrative action turns on the debate over whether or not England will go off the gold standard. England does in fact make the change, which, ironically, brings about Jules's demise and his disappearance. There is general anxiety over the replacement of the solidity of gold and its intrinsic value with money as an arbitrary exchange-value. As Adam Constant suggests, "How can we extract food, drink, and Pullman seats from looking through gilt grilles all day and handing paper money backward and forward. It isn't real . . ." (130). Scene 17 explains the fetishisation of gold. The narrator begins the scene with this summary:

The word "gold" spoken by those who have seen it, had it, lived with it, has undertones of sensual revel and superstitious awe and overtones of command and superhuman strength that excite the greatest hostility and indignation in those who have not got it, have never seen it, or have not lived with its beautiful invisible presence – invisible, because it is always socked away. (135)

And the narrator concludes the scene by commenting:

The foregoing will explain . . . one of the reasons, apart from reasons of speculation, why the question of "going off gold" fretted so many nations, so many individuals, for so many days: why some took it as a world-without-end calamity and some as an unnatural blessing. In the old days those that sought the absolute tried to make gold: our own conception is not very different. (136)

Following the dinner party with the Hallers, Marianne Raccamond continues that scene's theme of purity and disease, but this time in relation to money, which she calls "a very pure thing in its way" (300). Above money she places gold; she describes gold bars as "absolute", the purest representation of value possible. Yet in Jules's world, and despite his own cache of gold, money is not clean. He asks Raccamond, "Did you ever hear of clean money?" (309). Jules operates in, and emblematises, a world in which

⁴² The date is evident in the various letters incorporated in the novel. For example, letters from Mimi Eloth to Dimitri Achitophelous are dated June 1931 (221).

“absoluteness”, purity, and solidity have vanished. That his wealth is “dirty” implies that the novel is using images of defilement to ridicule his power and to suggest the corruption at the core of modern capitalism. But the novel does not accept the alternative offered here by Marianne – the fetishisation of solids – for this nonetheless inscribes objects as commodities. The narrator’s treatment of the Hallers’ hoard already demonstrates a criticism of this bourgeois position.

Jules’s fluid nature can therefore be interpreted in two ways; as ambivalently positive and negative. Firstly, it serves to subvert bourgeois conservatism and desires for solidity, the usurpation of which the text acclaims. His roguish antics also oppose the establishment to a degree, and the gambling and speculation in the bank relativise the fixedness of power. This *laissez-faire* capitalism, therefore, to some extent, enables a certain carnivalesque freedom. Just as a carnivalesque sense of crisis undermined bourgeois tenets, so too here does carnivalesque fluidity subvert bourgeois stasis and fetishisation. Secondly, however, Jules’s ephemeral character embodies the vacuity and fluidity of capitalism in the 1930s, and the text deplors this nihilism and inherent reliance on crisis at the core of the system. Jules, as a figure of power himself, must also be despised for his charlatanism.

Finalé

These two discourses in the text – the Marxist and carnival elements – can lead to some confusion for the reader. For instance, there appears to be a problem in the narrator's depiction of Jules: he is *exposed* as a magician and an illusionist, a rogue of the capitalist world, yet the narration also *maintains* the characterisation of Jules as enigmatic, and the general aura of magnificence surrounding him. The conclusion of the novel has Jules disappear, even, it seems, from his own family. In giving him this ending the narrator perpetuates the myth of his immortality.⁴⁹ The narrative also maintains Jules as the principal character at the expense of other characters and their points of view, such as Raccamond or Alphendéry. This fondness for Jules might lead to a reading of a parallel support for capitalism in the novel, or for the ephemeral nature of capitalism which Jules represents.

The narrative construction of the end of the novel seems to indicate this ideological ambivalence. Jules is portrayed as a trickster figure who outwits everyone and escapes the law and the censure of his society to vanish into notoriety. Yet, in a Marxist manner, the narrator is also careful to point out the effect the closure of the bank has on its employees, dedicating the penultimate scene to this purpose. However, the final scene, "What Avatar?", restores the focus on Jules's mythological status.

⁴⁹ A contrast to the very mortal fate ascribed to Robbie Grant.

The figure of Alphendéry represents the solidity and morality offered by a vision of communism in opposition to the inconstancy of Jules, but, as was mentioned earlier, his is a position not given absolute validity in the narrative. Jules's disappearance is Michel's ideal: the disappearance of the wealthy capitalists and the system in which he finds himself torn between his communist ideology and his desire for pecuniary comfort. Jules's finalé, his ultimate vanishing trick, underscores a Marxist perception of capitalism in which the system is perceived to rely on constant fluidity and crisis. It might also be thought of as symbolic of the end of capitalism (Gardiner 1989b, 62). But, as we have seen, the ending is not a utopian, or communist, vision because it leaves everything, literally, up in the air. Indeed, there is no closure in this text, no absolute victory over dominant ideologies, but the contending discourses (in this case capitalism and communism) continue their dialogue beyond the ending as the world heads toward war, and Jules is rumoured to return. Yet *House of All Nations* implicitly sides with communism in its Marxist perception of society and in its attack on capitalism.

In conclusion, Jules's disappearance indicates that he is both trickster figure and a representative of capitalist nihilism in one. Yet, there is ultimately no support for Jules in his role as a representative of capitalism because the exploitation and corruption of the system is explicit in the text. Jules is a carnival figure, and it is this aspect of him which is celebrated in the novel. By creating Jules as a carnival rogue Stead exposes the tenets of the system as well as employing a "spirit of fun" in the depiction of him. This aspect of laughter and celebration should not be mistaken for a championing of Jules because by making a "high" financier a figure of fun Stead degrades him, brings him down to

earth, and definitively mocks the system he represents. It is not the buoyancy of capitalism which the novel affirms, but a laughter which seeks to mock the tenets of the system without resorting to polemic. This is Marxist discourse, but with a touch of “the Molière” (LF 338).

In *House of All Nations* Stead shows us the capitalist system behind its “impenetrable facade” (RHW 320). Behind the “classical body” of capitalism lies the grotesque: disease, engorgement, gluttony, prostitution, and war. While Banque Mercure shines “out of [the] mire” (130), its luminous facade has its foundations in defilement. In her portrait of capitalism Stead profanes “all that is holy” about capitalism as a dominant ideology, and shows, too, how capitalism relies on the premise, “All that is solid melts into air. . . .”

Following on from Dostoevsky’s novels, *House of All Nations* is integrally involved with capitalism. In some ways, the text may be compared with Alphendéry: like him it struggles to be free of the enticements of capitalism, and like him it is a voice which speaks against that system. Yet the novel seems more active than Alphendéry who suffers from inertia and a feeling of imprisonment. While it embodies the struggling ideological voices under capitalism, and so is “multi-leveled” and “multi-voiced” (PDP 20), the novel actively subverts bourgeois ethics, and capitalism in general, through its Marxist and carnival strategies. By portraying capitalism’s reliance on fluidity and crisis the novel challenges that system’s claim to permanence.

In the next chapter on *I'm Dying Laughing* another pair of discourses – that of tragedy and laughter – is seen to be constituted dialogically. As in the case of a Marxist perception of capitalism and a carnivalesque sense of the marketplace in *House of All Nations*, there is no sense of dialectical resolution in which one reading is favoured above the other, but both exist in tandem. However, the “seriousness” of tragedy is undermined by the laughter in the text which signifies a carnival project. According to Bakhtin this mixing of genres or modes is indicative of “novelism”.

Chapter Six

"Infinite Jest"

A Dialogics of Laughter and Tragedy in *I'm Dying Laughing: The Humourist [sic]*

Very few are the humorists today. It is not a humorous age, though if incongruity is the soul of humour, there should be millions. But we live in an age of fear and fear is not funny. You laugh. In a time like this, you know how to laugh. How admirable! (IDL 243-4)

I'm Dying Laughing is neither a comedy nor a tragedy, yet there are elements of both in the novel. This is not to suggest that the two elements are antithetical, nor that they are synthesised. Rather there is a dialogic relation between laughter and tragedy in the text.

By refusing the dictates and structure of classical tragedy and constructing a dialogic relation between tragedy and laughter, Stead's novel is carnivalesque and dialogic. In other words, the stylistic unity of the classical tragedy is rejected in favour of a dialogic heterogeneity which refuses homogeneity. Through its carnival laughter *I'm Dying Laughing* tempers what Bakhtin perceives to be the "monologic seriousness" of classical tragedy. Yet, just as *I'm Dying Laughing* cannot be perceived as tragedy, nor can it be interpreted as comedy, for the two modes act on a level and equal plane to relativise the nature of each other. In this way the novel can be considered ambivalent. It is through this dialogics of tragedy and laughter that Stead depicts contemporary history.

In Bakhtin's various writings on the novel he opposes carnivalesque literature and "novelness" to "monologic" and "classical" genres. The epic¹ and the tragedy are two

¹ See the chapter on *For Love Alone* for a discussion of Stead and Bakhtin's concept of the classical epic.

genres which Bakhtin contrasts with the novel because of their "seriousness" which resists all laughter. These monologic forms are also "closed", prone to finalisation and have the chronotope² of myth or legend. Aristotle's discussion of tragedy in his *Poetics* may be taken as an example of the classical nature of the form. According to Aristotle, the plot of a tragedy involves a reversal of fortune, generally from prosperity to adversity (37). The plot is also dramatic and full of incident, while the action should be "serious", have "magnitude" and be "complete in itself" (23). Aristotle adds that there should be "nothing irrational" or non-causal in the narrative (53). It is necessary that there be incidents "arousing pity and fear" for the audience (23). Aristotle suggests that the tragic hero should neither be entirely good or evil but a combination of both in order to arouse the pity demanded of the form (43). Yet, despite this suggestion of ambivalence, the tragic hero is usually a man of high rank and is better than the common person (53). His tragic end befalls him because of an error of judgement which is sometimes the result of a transgression of a moral law (43). Yet, the tragic hero, on the whole, "must be good"; he must possess "propriety", be "true to life", and his character must be "consistent" (51).

In contrast, carnivalesque literature incorporates laughter, is multiplicitous, open-ended, and contemporaneous. Menippean satire, for instance, does not involve a distant perspective, or invest in an atmosphere of legend, but is immediate so that action occurs in a "zone of . . . familiar contact" (*PDP* 108). The "hero" of a carnivalesque novel is lowly, and the lofty language of lyric poetry is replaced by an earthy prose. Bakhtin's

² "Chronotope" is a word used by Bakhtin to denote time/space. See his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (*DI* 84-258).

broad argument is that the novel is opposed to all authoritarian and dogmatic discourses and genres which resist heterogeneity.³

Monologic genres, however, may be refunctioned or relativised through laughter. In his essay, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", Bakhtin discusses the "fourth drama", or the "satyr play", which follows the tragic trilogy in Greek drama. This comic play parodies the seriousness of the earlier trilogy but is nonetheless a vital and inherent part of the performance. Bakhtin's view of heteroglossia in language, the various accents on a word, and the multiplicity of discourses in the novel, means that any "serious" genre is likely to be challenged by competing views, voices and tones, as he writes:

Parodic-travestying literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straightforward genre. The high genres are monotonic, while the "fourth drama" and genres akin to it retain the ancient binary tone of the word. (DI 55)

The "fourth drama" mimicked the tragedy and thus relativised its structure, but Bakhtin also points out that the satyr play did not seek to devalue the tragedy entirely: "The direct and serious word was revealed, in all its limitations and insufficiency, only after it had become the laughing image of that word – but it was by no means discredited in the process" (DI 56). Just as Letty Fox was not merely an object of *satire* because the parodic treatment of her was ambivalent, so too is laughter ambivalent here: on the one hand, mocking the form, and on the other, rejuvenating it.

³ This is not to say that a monologic novel is an impossibility as some novels may have a tendency towards dogmatism, as Bakhtin's discussion of Tolstoy's work in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* demonstrates (PDP 71-2).

In summary, on one level Bakhtin's work opposes "closed" monologic genres with "open" dialogic forms. Yet, on another, perhaps more complex level, monologic forms are perceived to be challenged by an inevitable and perhaps inherent multifarious and heteroglossic world of languages and meanings. In this view genres themselves are never entirely "closed" but always act in dialogue with other genres, and with other examples of the same genre. They are constantly renewed and revised:

A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of the genre. Therefore even the archaic elements preserved in a genre are not dead but eternally alive; that is, archaic elements are capable of renewing themselves. A genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past. . . . (PDP 106)

Genres in general, then, like the "novel", may be heterogeneous and multi-voiced.

Following on from the view of tragedy in "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", Bakhtin talks of the *impossibility* of "tragic seriousness" in Greek tragedy in *Rabelais and His World*: "A dogmatic tragedy is as impossible as dogmatic laughter, and the classical tragedies rise above it" (RHW 121). In fact, he argues, Greek tragedies incorporated laughter: "In antique culture tragedy did not exclude the laughing aspect of life and coexisted with it" (RHW 121). In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin also perceives carnival elements in Shakespeare's tragedies:

The analysis we have applied to Rabelais would also help us to discover the essential carnival element in the organization of Shakespeare's drama. This does not merely concern the secondary, clownish motives of his plays. The logic of crownings and uncrownings, in direct or in indirect form, organizes the serious elements also. And first of all this "belief in the possibility of a complete exit from the present order of this life" determines Shakespeare's fearless, sober (yet not cynical) realism and

absence of dogmatism. This pathos of radical changes and renewals is the essence of Shakespeare's world consciousness. It made him see the great epoch-making changes taking place around him and yet recognize their limitations. (RHW 275)

Bakhtin's historical analysis of laughter in *Rabelais and His World* underscores his idea that carnival forms of laughter have diminished in the ages of rationalism since Rabelais's epoch. So too might we presume that Bakhtin would argue that contemporary forms of tragedy have lost their pole of laughter to become mired in seriousness. Yet, if modern tragedy utilises the ambivalent elements of Greek or Shakespearian tragedy it might be possible to perceive an inherited laughter. It is also possible to see, in light of Bakhtin's discussion of Shakespeare, the possibility of a combination of laughter and tragedy in a work of artistic and political integrity. Bakhtin's theory of the novel means that it can also be argued that the novel itself contains a heterogeneity which necessarily relativises the "classical" or "closed" dramatic form of tragedy.

Bakhtin's reference to Shakespeare might suggest that *I'm Dying Laughing* can be conceived as a descendent of Elizabethan and Jacobean "tragicomedy". The tragicomedy's mix of high and low class characters broadly represented its split between the elements of tragedy and comedy in the play. Certainly Emily's mid-West American origins allow her to be a comic figure and oppose her to her wealthy husband and his family. However, *I'm Dying Laughing* does not simply divide its comic and tragic elements, and nor does it invest in the happy or melodramatic ending expected in tragicomedy. In accordance with Aristotle's description of tragedy, the fates of Emily and Stephen do seem tragic because they are indeed catastrophic. They also seem to be,

in general, “good” people who have brought their ends upon themselves because of their personal frailties. Yet, despite these elements, *I’m Dying Laughing* cannot be interpreted simply as tragedy. As in Bakhtin’s perception of Shakespeare’s drama, *I’m Dying Laughing*’s seriousness is also suffused with carnival logic. Just as Franco Moretti, in *Signs Taken For Wonders*, argues that Shakespearian tragedy undermines absolutist power by exposing the fallibility of the sovereign act (1983, 44), so too might it be possible to argue here that the carnival nature of the text (the carnival-tragedy, as it were) serves to de-crown the dominant ideology, as will be made clear.

Like Dostoevsky’s work *I’m Dying Laughing* is “serio-comical” literature which is politically satirical as well as carnivalesque; that is, like Bakhtin’s view of the satyr play’s dialogue with the tragic trilogy, laughter is incorporated in the text without discrediting the seriousness of the novel’s purpose. The novel is critical of capitalism which reduces art to production, reduces humans to commodities, and distorts and denies the possibility of communal and equitable human interaction. Yet the text does this without the complete moral condemnation of the central characters, Emily and Stephen, who are to some extent complicit with this system. They are shown to be driven by their individual desires and greed, but they are also influenced by the external intricacies and pressures of their times. In other words, the characters have agency but are nonetheless contextualised by the great “flood of time” (*IDL* 408). Once again this demonstrates the social, political and historical constitution of subjectivity in Stead’s characters rather than any purely individual or psychological construction. This combination of the historical

and the personal in the novel creates a dialogic relationship between personal and historical “forces . . . at work in a situation” (Eagleton 1976, 47).

Bakhtin writes that in Dostoevsky’s dialogic work:

Each novel presents an opposition, which is never canceled out dialectically, of many consciousnesses, and they do not merge in the unity of an evolving spirit, just as souls and spirits do not merge in the formally polyphonic world of Dante. (PDP 26)

In *I’m Dying Laughing* there is a thematic dialogue between comedy and tragedy, and this opposition is also played out between Emily and Stephen, and is embodied in them.

This is not to say that Emily and Stephen represent comedy and tragedy respectively, but that their conversations and personal dilemmas manifest the novel’s overall thematic opposition. The text does not seek to resolve these contradictions by favouring one above the other, but offers dialogism instead of dialectical resolution.

I’m Dying Laughing is constructed on the basis of a number of dilemmas which the Howards face. Emily struggles between the desire to write “great literature” and the desire to make a great deal of money. She also wishes to write political works but encounters the contradictions of CPUSA⁴ policies on art. She wants to write for the masses but recognises that her popular works have no artistic or political integrity. Stephen confronts the dilemma of being a rich man and a communist. He must battle his family, his conditioning, and his own desire for pecuniary comfort. In the end he must struggle against the guilt of his betrayal of Party members and the betrayal of his own politics. As a pair, Emily and Stephen voice their dilemmas in argument with each other

⁴ Communist Party of the United States of America.

and in doing so demonstrate their differing social backgrounds and their competing desires. These dilemmas are also manifested differently in Hollywood and France as two distinct ideological spaces in which the Howards find themselves. Just as there might be considered to be a dialogic relation between the epigraphs to parts one and two of *I'm Dying Laughing*, so too might there be a dialogic relation in the text between France and Hollywood as ideological spaces, as we shall see.

Stephen and Emily are intended to be seen as representatives of the post-World War Two United States. Emily defines the "American dilemma", as she calls it, as a struggle between humanism or individualism, and the competitiveness of capitalism:

it's that you want to be free and break new ground, speak your mind, fear no man, have the neighbours acknowledge that you're a good man; and at the same time you want to be a success, make money, join the country club, get the votes and kick the other man in the teeth and off the ladder.
(16)

The dilemmas faced by the Howards in the novel are more specific and more varied than this, but are similarly indicative of the ideological incongruities of the United States during this period.

Like other Stead novels examined so far *I'm Dying Laughing* is gargantuan in the scope of its socio-historic setting and detail. The novel begins in 1935 as Emily and Stephen travel to a Europe in which there is an ominous threat of war. The novel skips the World War Two period to resume in 1945 when the Howards are in residence in Hollywood.⁵ Thus

⁵ *I'm Dying Laughing* was published posthumously and was collated from a number of drafts left by Stead to her literary executor Ron Geering who edited them into the current text. This, to some extent, must explain the structure of the novel. (See Geering's Preface to *IDL*.)

the novel positions itself initially in the radical years of the 1930s before moving into the reactionary post-war period when anti-communist sentiment is rife in the United States. This epoch is portrayed as one of “ferment” but the narrative does not adopt an entirely tragic⁶ tone. Once again the times are depicted with fascination and are, above all, shown to be dynamic. The text does not dismiss the immense tragedy of events of the first half of this century but recognises that this is a time of fascinating importance and vital ideological struggle. The narrative’s attitude toward the era is mirrored by Stead in her interview with Ann Whitehead when she says of the 1930s: “the whole of society was in a ferment, nobody really knew which way the society was going. Oh, it was a terrific epoch, very thrilling” (244). She repeats this sentiment even when speaking of the betrayals of the McCarthy era: “Oh, it was a terrific moment, it was worth living through, it was great” (245). *I’m Dying Laughing* resists an entirely tragic approach to the period around World War Two but incorporates laughter, delight, and relish in the depiction of the age.

In her article, “Other Tongues than Ours”, Diana Brydon uses the work of Bakhtin to interpret *I’m Dying Laughing* as a Rabelaisian text. She argues that the novel sustains a Rabelaisian reading and that this prevails over the text’s allusions to Goethe’s *Faust*. The epigraph to part one of the novel is from Rabelais’s *Gargantua*: “I’m thirsty!”, while part two begins with “Renounce, renounce, on every side, I hear” from *Faust*. In the character of Faust, Brydon perceives an individual quest for ascent to a “higher sphere” but, in Brydon’s view, Stead’s novel refunctions *Faust* because it denies this notion of individual

⁶ “Tragic” is used here as an adjective for the genre, “tragedy”.

ascendancy and “affirms an alternative vision of human possibilities based on Rabelaisian commitment to the whole of humanity” (1989, 19).⁷ This chapter supports Brydon’s recognition of the Rabelaisian elements of *I’m Dying Laughing* but leaves aside the question of *Faust* versus Rabelais to emphasise laughter and tragedy in the novel and to further explore a Bakhtinian interpretation of the text.

Susan Sheridan interprets the epigraphs to parts one and two of the novel as indicative of the “fatal mixture of modes in twentieth-century history” (1988a, 128). She defines this combination of modes as “the coexistence of tragedy and farce” (1988a, 128). Sheridan’s perception of history in the novel as farcical, in accordance with Marx’s statement in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that “All the great events and characters in world history occur twice – the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (qtd. in Sheridan 1988a, 128), does seem to suit the novel’s portrayal of the absurdities and incongruities of contemporary history. Her recognition of elements of farce, when farce is defined as a form of performance involving “improbable and ludicrous situations” to induce “belly-laughes” through “broad verbal humour and physical horseplay” (Abrams 26), indicates the Rabelaisian or carnival elements in the novel. Yet, just as *I’m Dying Laughing* is no simple tragedy, it is no simple comedy either, for the text rarely evokes “belly-laughes” from its readers because of its tragic seriousness. However, the nature of laughter in a

⁷ Brydon’s use of Bakhtin is founded in *Rabelais and His World*, but in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* Bakhtin appears to see Faust as a carnivalesque figure. Faust is included in a list of characters, including Gargantua, which follows a description of the carnival hero (PDP 133). Therefore, this chapter resists the temptation to see Faust as a tragic figure.

It has been argued elsewhere in this thesis that Stead’s texts emphasise community over individuality, but see the following chapter on *For Love Alone* for a discussion of individual ascendancy in regard to Teresa Hawkins.

tragic world is explored in the novel – this appears to be a time of “infinite jest” (*Hamlet* V.i.186).

A Tragic Clown

Emily is both a comic and tragic figure. As Brydon notes, she is Yorick and Hamlet in one (1989, 18). Emily declares: “I always felt I was poor Yorick . . . Besides, Hamlet was poor Yorick. Clown at court; what future but a naked skull?” (8). Emily’s conflation of Yorick and Hamlet and her definition of herself as both fool and tragic hero is carnivalesque. The fear of mortality, too, is diminished in this connection with a fool’s death. Death can be tragic yet it can also be “gay” as Bakhtin writes: “where death is, there is also birth, change, renewal”; in Bakhtin’s view the fear of death is overcome by laughter (*RHW* 409). Emily’s words encompass the combination of death and laughter represented in Yorick’s demise and this is indicative of the elements of tragedy and comedy embodied by her. Tragedy and comedy reside ambivalently and distinctly in the one person.

Yet Emily’s references to both Yorick and Hamlet do more than just represent her comic and tragic ambivalence. Yorick’s skull is a symbol of history for Hamlet – a trigger for the memory of life at court thirty years before. As such, Yorick’s skull represents some kind of historical truth from which all masks, indeed all faces, have been stripped bare.

As Walter Benjamin suggests of the allegory of the skull:

the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial language. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head. (qtd. in Moretti 1983, 76)

Similarly, *I'm Dying Laughing* represents its moment of historical truth through Emily and Stephen's dissolution and death, as we shall see. The naked skull becomes equated with the naked truth.

The title of the novel also represents the carnivalesque ambivalence between tragedy and laughter found in Emily. Emily constantly says she is "dying laughing" (eg. 74). She describes this feeling to Suzanne:

I suppose you really could die laughing, Suzanne? It's an awful rolling spasm, you're out of control, but madly happy, inhumanly happy, you feel as if you'll go over the edge of the precipice in another minute, and at the same time, delicious, strange, only you. (305)

Brydon notes that Bakhtin's statement, "Death from laughter is one of the forms of gay death" (*RHW* 408), is pertinent here (1989, 18). Certainly Stead's conflation of laughter, fear and death is carnivalesque.

Emily has fits of laughter and tears. For example, she begins by laughing in the retelling of her speech at a public meeting, but then: "The laughing turned into uncontrollable sobbing" (75). Both extreme laughter and crying are, of course, cathartic⁸, and, physiologically speaking, both phenomena involve convulsion, tears, and a deep vocal crying out. In carnival terms laughter and tears are not necessarily antithetical because they are bound together as part of a rejuvenating cycle of life and death, happiness and

⁸ The idea of catharsis in Aristotle's concept of "pity and terror" in the tragedy can also be applied to the belly-laugh of comedy. However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the notion of catharsis.

sorrow. Yet, laughter is also a carnival strategy which overturns seriousness and sombreness, and makes the world “gay” or joyful.

Emily’s ability to laugh enables her to stave off fear. But the fact that more often than not her laughter *leads to* despair might suggest an overall depiction of Emily as a tragic figure in which her laughter is not rejuvenating at all but is an indication of hysterical desperation. It seems that such are the absurdities or incongruities of Emily’s time that she is drawn first to laugh and then to cry. However, Emily’s laughter is not downplayed in the text as desperation because it is conceived as part of her vital and gargantuan personality, and her personal good humour. Laughter and despair exist in a level, carnivalesque partnership. If Emily is an hysteric, then, it is only an extreme embodiment of the text’s dialogics of tragedy and laughter.

Emily is described in carnivalesque terms; she is a clown figure full of laughter, jokes, song and story. When Stephen first sees her on the boat she is wearing a colourful dress printed with flora, and she attracts attention to herself by singing *La Cucaracha* loudly at the piano (21). Stephen later remarks that he detested the dress but read its “potency” as a sign of her character: “You’re so wonderfully, truly, profoundly potent and you’re nothing like [other women]” (69). She is an extrovert, full of vitality. She repels some people by her loudness, but others, like Stephen, are attracted to her vivacity. Emily is portrayed prancing “into the living-room, all coloured solid flesh, like a circus horse and, on top, her fair hair full of man-made curls, with pink ribbons in them, like a ballerina on a circus horse” (58). It is also said that, “Her face was made for laughter – a pudgy

comic face with deep lines only when she laughed, the deep lines of the comic mask" (68). Emily, then, is a comic figure, and, more specifically, a clown. Like the clowns of circus shows her face can metamorphose from a sad countenance to a happy one. Her extreme changes in mood can therefore be interpreted as part of a parodic performance in which the faces of humankind are imitated and mimicked. Yet Bakhtin also talks of the clown as a subversive figure:

Between the rogue and the fool there emerges, as a unique coupling of the two, the image of the *clown*. He [sic] is a rogue who dons the mask of a fool in order to motivate distortions and shufflings of languages and labels, thus unmasking them by not understanding them. (DI 404-5)

The extent to which Emily can be considered a subversive character is considered below in relation to her comic writings.

On a personal level, critics have interpreted Emily's ribald nature as a sign of her *jouissance*, after Roland Barthes, in which her sexuality and physicality signify her creative energy (Gribble 1994, 116-7). However, it is clear that the novel does not sustain nor herald Emily as a dissident character, nor is her physical pleasure in any literal sense the sum total of her personality. Yet if there is a connection between Bakhtin and *jouissance*, as Julia Kristeva suggests in her vision of the subject "propelled into the whirlwind of his [sic] own fragmentation and renewal" (Kristeva 1980, 171), Emily is just such a dialogic and fragmented subject. Yet, it must be remembered, this fragmentation cannot be conceived outside of socio-historic discourses but must be seen through them. In other words, Emily's laughter is not laughter which leads to "the void" (Kristeva 1980, 182), because it must be seen to be representative not only of herself, but of her times.

Emily is larger than life and a vivacious character but is recognisably monstrous at the same time. The last chapter of *I'm Dying Laughing*, entitled "The Monster", has Emily, as well as her novel *Trial and Execution*, as its subject. Indeed Emily's friend, Violet Trefougar, has said: "Every human being is a sort of monster, if you get to know them" (395). Emily, therefore, seems to evolve as one of Stead's monsters: having given up artistic and political integrity in the pursuit of money, she succumbs to the overwhelming horrors of her time, and her self.

Emily, like those characters discussed in chapter two of this thesis, is verbose and egocentric. She is wilful and domineering, and she speaks loudly, publicly and resolutely about her ideas without considering the responses of others. As the novel proceeds and her unhappiness escalates her rhetoric seems to increase in its extremity. In antipathy to the "potent" dress of vines and flowers Emily wears when she first falls in love with Stephen, she advocates the extermination of various animals and plants through the use of DDT. She also spouts Malthusian notions, whereby disease and war are necessary for population control, to the extent that she even laments the fact that a socialist redistribution of wealth would keep more people alive (146, 147, 172). Diana Brydon points out that this rhetorical violence is in opposition to Emily's more humane communist ideals based in her search for social justice, and suggests her intolerance of "otherness" or difference (1989, 22). In this way Emily resembles Sam Pollit in his rhetoric of humanism with its underlying fascist tones.

Godfrey Bowles's curious "straightening out" of Emily at the Holinsheds' "party" is a parody of psychoanalytic discourse⁹ and of the Party hierarchy and internal Party conflict. Yet it is also, as Sheridan remarks, an insightful rendition of Emily's monologic character (1988a, 127). "God" states, for instance, that Emily is prone to:

verbal incontinence, detailed recitals of insignificant events, a general excitement, incoherencies of speech, unsuitable confidences in public . . . a wish to dominate the scene, a refusal to let anyone intervene, an irresistible urge to talk, shouting and ill-temper, public quarrelling with Stephen, an inability to report faithfully events she witnessed, false and ridiculous ideas. (101)

This egocentrism and verbosity are largely true of Emily. However, Emily cannot be reduced to Bowles's psychological definition of her character. She exceeds this description, and this, accompanied by his appalling cruelty, is the origin of his injustice towards her.

Emily's characterisation may be distinguished from those of Robbie Grant, Nellie Cotter or Sam Pollit. The focus in the portraits of Robbie, Nellie and Sam is their dominance of others. Yet, in *I'm Dying Laughing*, the construction of Emily's volubility mainly serves as an examination of her voluminous energy and drive, her self-destruction, and her self-constructed and historically determined contradictions. That is, unlike the depiction of Sam for instance, the portrait of Emily does not *focus* on her suppression of otherness but on the external and internal contradictions which are manifested in her. Her monologic tendencies, do, however, restrict any resolution of her dilemmas through meaningful dialogue.

⁹ Stead, by parodying the psychoanalytic discourse in this passage, reiterates her emphasis on the socio-historic construction of subjectivity.

Like the monologic characters presented in chapter two, Emily shares a certain carnivalesque ambivalence as a “monster”. The ambivalence in her portrait can be summarised in her attitude towards “her” children in the novel. A great deal of the narrative deals with the Howards’ battles over children. Only Giles is Emily’s natural son, while the others – Olivia, Lennie and Christy – have different parentage. This distance from their “mother” seems to underscore the “unnaturalness” of Emily’s appropriation of these children. Olivia and Christy are both heirs to millions and it is evident that the Howards wish to access this wealth, but their avarice is not necessarily as callous as Godfrey Bowles suggests. Yet it is true that Emily’s desire, appetite and possessiveness lead to the appropriation of these children. In part two Emily sets out to seduce Christy sexually in an oedipal-like struggle to prevent him from leaving her for his girlfriends and to prevent other members of the family from taking him away due to her “mis-management” of his education. The text seems to suggest that under capitalism children are inheritable and purchasable commodities, belying Emily’s cosy picture of the “natural” family from which, she says, communism inherently springs:

Family love is the only true selfless love; it’s natural communism. That is the origin of our feeling for communism: to each according to his needs, from each according to his capacity; and everything is arranged naturally, without codes and without policing. (66)

Yet coupled with Emily’s desire for possession is her enormous capacity to love. This, of course, is somewhat smothering to the objects of her affection, but seems sincere. Emily

is like a Gargamelle who, rather than birthing babies through her ear, procures children. A gigantic mother figure, she is both fearful and abundant.¹⁰

Emily as voluminous, verbose and extraordinary is a gargantuan figure. She is both monstrous and marvellous and has an enormous propensity to love, to hate, to desire and demand. Indeed, even Godfrey Bowles recognises that she has a “gargantuan perception” (102). In a letter to Edith Anderson Stead says of Emily: “Here is a gargantua who marries \$1.000.000 – and decides to go in for Despair, and it is a tragedy, it’s not just talk . . . ” (Rowley 1993a, 363). That such a gargantuan figure should also be a tragic one is one of the primary issues of the novel.

Hollywood

Emily’s contradictions of character are also manifested in her role as a writer and this, in turn, is contextualised through her historical and political milieu. Emily is famous for her comedies set in small-town, mid-West America. While there is little narratorial guidance in the novel because the characters are left to speak for themselves, the text does contain an ambivalent attitude towards Emily as a humorist. On the one hand the text opposes Emily’s humorous works to writing which has artistic or political integrity.

¹⁰ Emily’s abortion, which she feels she must have in order to leave the United States, is indeed tragic. The text does not deny this as a personal tragedy but does not dwell on it either as the narrative moves quickly to Emily’s ridiculous questions concerning what she ought to bring to Europe (187).

In this way her mid-American humour is akin to naivety and infantilism and performs to the “mindless” readership of the “mamma public” (*IDL* 51). This is not a reinforcement of the division between “high” literature and “low” popular culture, but is merely an assertion that Emily’s work is inane and mimetic, and has no subversive carnival potential.

On the other hand, the text clearly demonstrates an admiration for Emily’s personal humour and vivacity. Stead herself says of the real-life model for Emily, Ruth McKenny: “she didn’t really have any integrity except she was a very great person, she was wonderful. It was because of her energy and talent that she got past at all” (Whitehead 246). Indeed, the epigraph to the novel from Walt Whitman not only suggests the tragic aspects of Emily’s nature, but also suggests an underlying strength of self:

The mockeries are not you . . . / The pert apparel, the deform’d attitude,
drunkenness, greed, premature death, all these I part aside . . . / Through
angers, losses, ambition, ignorance, ennui, what you are picks its way.

As far as Emily’s writing is concerned, however, the text does not dispute the fact that her writing is largely banal. Yet it does celebrate her “genius”, as Stephen calls it, – her enormous energy and output. But the inappropriateness of Emily’s humorous writing is clear when she plans a humorous book on that most tragic of phenomena – the Nazi concentration camps – for an American readership: “it ought to be put humanly and with a certain amount of humour. So that people don’t feel the writer is getting at you, that he wants you to suffer and drop maudlin tears” (280). The laughter proposed here is not critical or rejuvenating humour but, in the context of the novel, is plainly

“inappropriate” as its effect is to sanitise and thus minimise the horror of the camps. Therefore, this is not humour which would offend the propriety of its readers in order to mock their conventionality because Emily’s project reinforces a naivety which is itself condemnable. *I’m Dying Laughing* itself cannot be considered banal in the same way for it does not ask its readers to laugh at that which it maintains as serious and important; rather the laughter operates in tandem and not in ideological opposition to its politics.

It has been argued that Emily is a clown figure, and Bakhtin asserts that the clown “has the right to speak in otherwise unacceptable languages and the right to maliciously distort languages that *are* acceptable” (DI 405). However, Emily’s humour, in her writing at least, is mimetic and not subversive. Yet the text itself does not deny the possibility of humour which is subversive. The valorous resistant Vittorio seems to conflate Emily’s personality with her comic writing when he says:

Very few are the humorists today. It is not a humorous age, though if incongruity is the soul of humour, there should be millions. But we live in an age of fear and fear is not funny. You laugh. In a time like this, you know how to laugh. How admirable! (IDL 243-4)

However, part of the tragedy of Emily’s dilemma is that she cannot translate the largesse of her vision into her work. The incongruities of her situation are summarised in the following dialogue with Stephen, which he begins:

“Don’t call it corn. It’s your way of seeing things. Some comedians spend their lives yearning to play Hamlet. They’d make him funny too. They couldn’t help it. You’re a funny Hamlet. Be satisfied. It’s you.”

Emily was insulted. “Then why is so much I think of hangman humour? Why do I hate to write it?”

“You don’t. You have to be solemn in order to laugh at them after. All humorists are gloomy, cruel bastards. But at least they’re not dull. They have both worlds. They see the sinister truth and they can laugh.”

Emily said, “H’m. Laugh, clown, laugh. How is it that the masterpieces of the world are all gloomy – tragedies, no less?”

Stephen was irritated, "Because they all belong to the bad old world, which was black. You're a real American, the new world. . . ." (212)

Stephen allows the possibility of humour which deals with "truth" while Emily is keen to negate the political possibilities of comedy. The text's own references to *Gargantua* would seem to suggest an investment in the idea that not all the masterpieces of the world are tragedies. Indeed, Emily herself calls Rabelais's *Gargantua* a "classic" (302). As well as this, laughter may be thought to undermine the gloomy seriousness of canonical tragedies. In either reading the text sets up a dialogue with Emily's view that laughter and politics cannot reside together. Yet the novel does not necessarily blame Emily for this dilemma but acknowledges the political and historical background to this opposition. Stephen's last, rather dismissive, remark in the dialogue suggests a possible role for American humour in the "new world", but the text makes it clear that America, like Emily, is composed in terms of monologic absolutes which disallow any ideological dialogue or carnival potential.

I'm Dying Laughing, like *Miss Herbert*, deals with the clash between art and commercialism. But unlike Eleanor Herbert, Emily is a successful writer and not a small-time hack; her crisis as an artist is to do with political commitment and financial success. From the beginning of *I'm Dying Laughing* Emily desires to write a novel of "truth" and this she opposes to her humorous novels, short stories, and movie scripts which focus on the middle-America from which she herself originates:

her Toonerville tales, short amusing anecdotes, in simple language, recollections, stories about uncles, parents, cousins, grocers, mailmen, townspeople of the small towns. . . . (43)

Her characters never deviate “from good American family morals, nor from loyalty to the country and flag” (136). Of course these works sell very well and Emily knows how to write to this successful formula. The Howards are described lavishly applying the “honey” for the “mamma public”: “Lincoln said that the bitterest truths could be made palatable with a drop of honey. She and Stephen saw to it there was a pot of honey in each book” (136). But just as Emily is aware that these are the kinds of texts which will sell she also perceives that they have little literary or political merit. Emily says colourfully:

I’m not proud they pay me gold for crap. That *Mr and Mrs* stuff is just custard pie I throw in the face of the mamma public, stupid, cruel and food crazy. I find myself putting in recipes – ugh! – because I know they guzzle it. (51)

Emily detests the fact that her writing conforms to middle-American values:

upstairs Emily flirted with the idea of writing a great novel. She sketched out one idea after another, and in each of them she wanted to tell some truth that would offend some section of the community. (51)

Emily’s distinction between the inane demands of the consumer versus the work of artistic integrity which does not sell is contextualised through the ideological struggle between American capitalism and communism. For instance, Emily must remove all trace of radicalism from her work or it is not published. In one manuscript the Howards see to it that there is: “nothing to harm, nothing about atheists, Russian science, or anything ‘but family hokum, a belly-laugh or two and a shovelful of sentiment’” (137). Later, when she and Stephen are blacklisted, Emily has great difficulties in getting published at all.

The capitalist basis of her readership explains Emily's difficult relationship to the "masses". This is not the folk of the Bakhtinian marketplace who deride hierarchies and authorities, but they are the marketplace themselves – the complicit consumers. Emily must try and reconcile this with her Marxist perception of the proletariat as the source of revolution. Just as Emily "consumes" large amounts of food, the capitalist masses devour "crap" to satisfy themselves.

Emily must also struggle with what seems like contradictory Party policy on art. There is certainly some suggestion that the Party is pleased with the income Emily's conformist money-spinners bring in. The two works of socialist realism she does write, *Johnny Appleseed* and *The Wilkes-Barre Chronicle*, are criticised by Vera Holinshed at a Party function because they did not sell and thus, paradoxically, they did not communicate with the masses (89).

Vera Holinshed tells Emily that New Yorkers have a "nineteenth-century view of writers" but that in Hollywood:

we've got a mass of working writers who are unionised,¹¹ work for big bosses, just like factory workers. The writer working in a cellar on his [sic] own ideas, is almost unknown: it belongs to the handloom epoch. (89)

Vera fails to recognise the irony in her suggestion that writers are factory workers for big bosses; she fails to see the inherent exploitation in such a system in her desire to describe the writer as an artisan, an idea which may be seen to be linked to a romantic notion of

¹¹ Vera Holinshed's reference to a union is probably an allusion to the Screen Writers' Guild formed in 1933 to fight the pay cuts the studios enforced using the Depression as their excuse. The Guild was home to some members of the CPUSA but was largely ineffectual against the might of the studio money-makers. Hazel Rowley suggests that Stead was a member of the SWG in 1943 (1993a, 304-5).

the working class. Vera's intention, of course, is to explode Emily's own romantic notion of the individual writer by replacing it with the idea of art as production. But the paradox of art's relation with capitalism remains problematic and unresolved. The text offers little to suggest it favours a view of the artist as an isolated creator, but it clearly abhors an association of art with capitalist production.

The ideological and artistic contradictions of Emily and Stephen's world are represented in the one place: Hollywood. In one way Hollywood is described as a kind of carnival space in *I'm Dying Laughing*. Stead, in an interview with Robert Drewe, amusingly describes Hollywood as "a funfair run by strange men with slipped discs" (24). In the novel Stephen calls it a "mad . . . carnival" (71). Emily also remarks that the New York Party hierarchy "think the Hollywood boys are a lot of merry andrews, jack-o'-lanterns, harlequins; plain nuts" (124). Yet despite this suggestion of carnival potential, Hollywood is shown to be inimical to art and subversion.

The text parodies the hierarchy of Hollywood's wealthy enclaves beginning with the "poor man's" Guava Glen and culminating in the exclusive Pomegranate Glen (49). Throughout the text Hollywood is also described as the land of "Cockaigne" (eg. *IDL* 60; 128). According to Bakhtin, Rabelais employed the imagery of this mythological utopian land (*RHW* 297). This is a place which can best be described as a "land where piglets run about with apples in their mouths ready for the cooking, roast geese fly with carving knives conveniently at the ready in their backs, and barrels of ale are made without those inconvenient stoppers in their bungholes" (Dentith 76). The references to Hollywood as

the land of Cockaigne in *I'm Dying Laughing* result in ambiguity, for on the one hand Hollywood is inscribed as a kind of carnivalesque dream land, or make-believe world, full of larger-than-life characters. On the other, this description of Hollywood contains an implicit criticism of wealth and hedonism because it is conceived on a hierarchical, rather than level, plane. In this view Hollywood becomes a representative of, and the source of production for, capitalism's dreams and myths. Danton's dream for a land of Cockaigne for the French people after the revolution can be distinguished from this inequitable and hierarchical place (*IDL* 326).¹² So it seems that the carnival possibilities of Hollywood – the acting and the artifice, the costumes and special effects – are not employed in any carnival subversion, to upturn social hierarchies. Rather it appears that there is a reinforcement of capitalist conventions despite the communist radicals' wish in the 1930s that reform might be possible.

Hollywood, that great institution of capitalist America, was home to radicals during the 1930s and early 1940s when the Depression and impending war led to the production of films with social and political content. Ironically, however, writers were attracted by the financial remuneration which the Hollywood film studios offered (*Ceclair* 5). *I'm Dying Laughing's* narrator ironically remarks of Hollywood: "It was fashionable leftist society, people who without giving up their beliefs had made good in a highly competitive and sometimes hidden game" (48). The oxymoron of the "Hollywood left" is one of the

¹² Emily identifies with Danton, and with Cicero, who can both be criticised, as she can, because they "loved luxury" (*IDL* 326). Emily argues rather disingenuously that she cannot live in poverty like the working class because that is precisely the existence from which she is working to relieve them (67). Yet in detailing the lives of Danton and particularly Cicero, the text asks us to consider the value of these subversives despite their purported luxurious tastes. Emily, however, is arguably not in their league.

points of focus in this section of *I'm Dying Laughing*. When Emily and Stephen discuss the possibilities for radicalism in Hollywood Stephen argues that a radical presence in Hollywood allows radical ideas to be passed through the cinema to the audience (66). But Emily responds by asserting that the audience is incapable of recognising radicalism. Whatever the case, the text suggests that the Hollywood system, which diffuses the effect of the work of the individual radical in its production-line processes and the aim for profit, impedes radicalism and artistic creativity.¹³

Stephen and Emily are affected not only by the incongruities of working successfully in Hollywood as leftists, but also by the contradictions and shifts of allegiance in CPUSA policies. In their personal contradictions Stephen and Emily could be seen to be emblematic of the Popular Front time in CPUSA policy. In what seems like an ideological inconsistency, the Howards quote American humanists such as Lincoln, Jefferson and Paine. Stephen is enthralled by the idea of F.D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" which he sees as a "common man's social plan" (35). Emily also recognises the Marxist possibilities for the USA at this time: "Here we have the greatest organization for socialism in the western world. Look at the size of the labour union movement!" (71). Earl Browder's catch-cry of the 1930s and early 1940s, "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism", is indicative of the compromise between distinct ideological

¹³ Of her own short time working in Hollywood as a script writer, (Stead worked for MGM for eight weeks from December 1942 (Rowley 1993a, 304)), Stead states:

Well, it's a dreary sort of office job, frankly. It's not creative. Ah, you get well paid, but there are all sorts of restrictions. . . . Hollywood was full of brilliant people, distinguished people, but the film-makers didn't want that, they wanted some kind of cheesecake. (Whitehead 244)

positions in the face of fascism (Browder 217). However, the Howards, in fact, oppose the Popular Front, perceiving it to be a compromise which ignores the ideological divisions between the USSR and the USA (94). The Howards are, of course, proved correct in hindsight as Browder is reviled for his "revisionism" in the post-war period. But the text proffers no opinion as to the political appropriateness of the Popular Front. What it does offer, however, is an examination of differing ideological consciousnesses without suggesting, it seems, a resolution. Yet there is an implicit laughter at work in the portrayal of ideological contradictions and hypocrisy which underlie the binary (and violent) opposition between twentieth-century capitalism and communism.

Emily, then, is a humorist who fails to combine her comic skill with her political beliefs due, firstly, to her limited personal vision and implementation of comedy, and secondly, because of the monologic historical discourses of her times which confuse and control her, and deny any dialogical solution to her dilemmas.

France

There is some argument for suggesting that in part two of *I'm Dying Laughing* the novel moves more and more towards a climax of tragedy. Correspondingly, Emily's vitality seems to tumble towards despair. Emily gets fatter as the Howards' betrayal of their politics proceeds. Once in France she crawls deeper and deeper into her drug addiction, dietary disorders and isolation as Stephen, in his own desperation, spends more time

from home doing illegal trade in gold, and is frequently away in hospital. Yet, while the Howards reach their tragic ends, the carnivalesque nature of the text is not lost.

In this part of the novel the French revolution comes to the fore as a theme, and both Stephen and Emily see themselves performing the same function (as wealthy Americans in this devastated land) as the French aristocracy at the time of the revolution. Emily constantly fears the “tumbrils” – dung carts used to remove slain bodies. Ironically, the Howards see themselves as the rich likely to be slaughtered in the communist revolution they believe inevitable. In this way the novel draws a connection between the ideology of twentieth-century communism and the pre-Marxist peasant uprisings of the French revolution. Indeed, in one of the first scenes of *I'm Dying Laughing*, Emily sails past the Statue of Liberty on her way to Europe. The statue, as a gift to the United States from France, is a symbol of their shared history of revolution and a reminder of the tenets of the constitution of the United States. The text, then, forces a dissipation of the opposition of American capitalism and communism by acknowledging a broader historical association between revolution and liberty in the United States. In this way, communism is rescued from its demonisation through a wider association with social justice and liberty.

As the image of the tumbrils suggests, the text continues to utilise Rabelaisian carnival images. That aristocratic bodies should be taken away in dung carts, of course, debases the social hierarchy which places the aristocracy above others. It also reduces the “classical” body to death, inscribing it as refuse, and undermining its pretence to

immortality. That Emily should fear the tumbrils is a sign of her perception of her privileged social position, but also indicates her carnivalesque language and her “gargantuan perception”. However, her inability to laugh any longer at death also suggests the demise of her clownish aspects. As her humour disappears, she can no longer be saved.

Emily’s physicality is an important part of her characterisation. It is through her “grotesque” body that Emily plays out her hungers, desires and contradictions. Emily frequently binges and diets, and she relies on coffee and benzedrine to sustain her enormous energy. As has already been noted, Stead begins part one of *I’m Dying Laughing* with an epigraph from Rabelais’s *Gargantua*: “I’m thirsty!”. The line, of course, evokes the ribaldry of Gargantua’s feasting,¹⁴ but also suggests a contemporary meaning of desire and need.

Emily has a gargantuan appetite. Particularly in the early part of the novel her propensity for eating is representative of her vitality and energy. The narrator tells us of her initial visit to Paris in 1935:

She found that she was a gourmet; but she was too greedy, she wanted to try everything and when she looked at the menu in a good place, not merely to know the meaning of the names but to try them all. She was so eager, delightedly gay, spontaneous, so tumultuously full of joy and folly – and with it, sharp, discerning, salty. (34)

¹⁴ Bakhtin argues that Gargantua’s first words, “Drink, drink, drink!”, travesty Christ’s last words on the cross *sitio* (I thirst) and *consummatum est* (it is consummated) as Gargantua goes on to drink enormous amounts of liquor (*RHW* 86).

Emily herself interprets her "greed" or appetite as Rabelaisian; at one stage Suzanne calls Emily greedy but she replies, "So was Rabelais" (228). Later, when describing her history as a fat person, Emily again evokes Rabelais:

These glorious splurges, this mad eating, those glorious feats. . . . A Gargantua that was allowed to eat and spend his life groaning, his belly ached only from emptiness and wind. Rabelais was the only man that understood me. He's dull and reported to be vulgar; but you can't high-hat the classics. . . . (302)

Emily is ready to laugh at her own obesity and plans a novel on the subject: "I have an idea for a new book on Myself [sic], good, fat, funny, sincere, dramatic, tragic, also a picture of the USA as seen transparently through me . . ." (191). Significantly Emily's novel is to be a comedy, but she also perceives tragedy in her physical and metaphysical plight. Her appetite is as much a sign of her vivacity as it is a representation of her desperation, her need to consume, to force pleasure upon herself in order to be replete in the face of her hollowness, sorrow, and desire or hunger.

The representation of Emily's appetite can also be seen as a criticism of her monstrous consumerism. Particularly in part two of the novel Emily's greed becomes privy to the farce of capitalism and war: as France starves she feasts. Her greed rather than her "eager" or "spontaneous" nature is emphasised. The Howards' first social engagement in France is at the home of Mme Valais where they are served an immense gourmet dinner whose ingredients are bought on the black market, making a mockery of the post-war privations. The narrator comments ironically, "The thought of the difficulties made them hungrier" (198). Once again the narrator meticulously lists the food consumed. The dinner begins with asparagus soup, poached salmon with mussels follows, fresh

white rolls, then jellied chicken encased in *pâté de foie gras* served with truffles. The narrator remarks at this point: "The guests who had felt well-fed before, now became hungry again" (198). So the feast continues with roast beef with beans and salad, followed by cheeses, zabaglione and cakes, all washed down with wine, champagne, coffee and liqueurs. Stephen, like Aristide Raccamond of *House of All Nations*, is dyspeptic and feels uncomfortable with all this eating: "Stephen was feeling worse and worse, with a paler and bluer face" (199).

Other dinner parties in this section of the novel show up the Howards for their luxurious tastes which have them at odds with their communist politics and solidarity with the working class. For instance, when they are invited to dinner by fellow writer Henri Villeneuve, they are served a spartan meal which reflects the post-war shortages. But Emily sees this meal as meanness and asks ungratefully, "if that's all they had, why did they ask us? If they want to even accounts with us, they can't do it with vinegar" (313-14). This experience is repeated when the Oateses take them to a popular working-class restaurant and the Howards criticise the rudimentary decor and simple food. In contrast, Emily delights in treating herself to grand and expensive meals, with the attitude, as she says, of "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we live on bread and water" (211).

While these feasts operate as obvious critiques of bourgeois consumption and over-indulgence in the face of poverty and scarcity, the text does not lose sight of Emily's gargantuan or Rabelaisian nature. For example, in the banquet at the Valais house

Stephen refers to Horace's Lucullan banquets detailing a magnificent feast in a Rabelaisian manner. This Rabelaisian element is countered, however, by Emily's remark that Horace and his cronies "ate slaves" which is followed by Mme Valais's statement, made ironic by its positioning, "You're making us all hungry" (199). But the Rabelaisian aspect of Emily's appetite is reinstated in this anecdote from Stephen:

I once cured Emily when she thought she was dying. I read her the specialities of Tours and Blois. She regained her appetite and became well within two hours. She determined she must live to eat those dishes. (199)

Bakhtin notes that in the aftermath of the French revolution Rabelais was seen as a prophet of the uprising because the revolutionaries interpreted the enormous amount of food and drink spent on Gargantua as an allegory for the burden the royalty placed upon the people (RHW 120). Bakhtin does not deny the possibility of this reading but emphasises the positive and regenerative, or parodic rather than satirical, aspects of the laughter and imagery in *Gargantua*. *I'm Dying Laughing* employs the social critique of Emily's monstrous appetite, but at the same time utilises the laughter invested in her gargantuan feasting.

In France, the Howards find themselves in a world in crisis; a world "inside out" (RHW 11) in the aftermath of war. The contradictions of their dilemmas are heightened in the atmosphere of catastrophe and ruin, and because they have no supporting Party structure or employment to sustain them. In this new Europe the tropes of the "New World" and the "Old World" are reversed. Europe is at the other side of apocalypse in its physical and spiritual ruin. Yet, while the Old World has been exhausted, this situation suggests new political possibilities. Indeed there are rumours of revolution in

France and the Howards are hopeful about the spread of communism through Eastern Europe as well. Yet in this turn of events the Americans have become the new imperialists installing their own capitalist infrastructure in the rebuilding of Europe. "Don't you think we too have a lot of that *Übermensch* psychology, we're just Nazis with Roosevelt music?",¹⁵ asks Emily (193). This is the "seedtime" of communist revolution in Europe, but, as has already been mentioned, the Howards find themselves, as wealthy Americans, to be the new aristocrats. They are distant from any desire to participate in a communist revolution they cannot identify with in any personal way. Taken out of their home environment their ideological certainties are confounded in a political and historical territory not (yet) their own. In their confusion, and as Americans, they are unable to partake in the carnival potential of this world in crisis.

Betrayal is the overwhelming theme at this stage of the novel. The Howards perceive their move to France as a betrayal of their politics and of their country as they have fled the HUAC¹⁶ investigations (186). The Howards have already had a troubled relationship with orthodox lines in the CPUSA, but in France they abandon the "train" of their own beliefs entirely. The train is a metaphor Stephen uses to describe the adherence to the communist line which began with Lenin's boarding of the train in Finland, off to ignite the Revolution (184). In France they literally sell out to Stephen's mother, Anna: they agree not to associate with "Reds" in return for keeping the children and receiving

¹⁵ This is perhaps an example by which Stead must be distanced from Nietzsche due to the association between Nazism and his philosophy. See the following chapter for another discussion on Stead and Nietzsche.

¹⁶ House Un-American Activities Committee.

financial support. Stephen and Emily's final, immense betrayal is the supplying of information about their fellow Communist Party members to US embassy officials. Rather than readjust their desires or circumstances in accordance with their beliefs, the Howards give in to the forces they so despise; they compromise their integrity for money.

The Howards' sense of self-betrayal is founded in the rejection of their ideological beliefs, yet the novel also offers a dialogue on truth and history themselves. The Howards have a long discussion with the Oateses and Des Canby on the deviations, or "betrayals" of pure communist ideology found in practice.¹⁷ Their conclusion is that "History doesn't bear scrutiny!" (185). Emily also becomes disorientated about her belief in the good deeds of the French resistants when it is revealed that Suzanne, who has saved many Jewish children and worked in the demolition squad, has had her life paid for in Jewish lives (282). Emily also meets a Jewish student, Breslow, who has survived by betraying all his Jewish friends to the Nazis because his Aryan features disguise his origins (284). Suzanne then lists the ways people, even family members, denounced each other for rewards or in spite (286). The Howards' dilemmas are caught up in a broader historical picture of human betrayal and tragedy. This relativisation of "truth" serves to contest the Howards' beliefs and the discourses of history but does not equate with a relativism of truth *per se*.

¹⁷ In answer to Ken Stewart (1993, 171), the characters' discussion here includes a recognition of Stalin as a "grisly murderer" (184) which suggests Stead may not have been uncritical of Stalin.

The text's questioning of the Howards' actions through the examination of contradiction and the presentation of factual incongruities and inconsistencies does not suggest that the Howards are betraying a cause (that is, communism) to which the novel itself overtly adheres. In other words, the text is not polemic but merely allows for the voices (of characters and of ideologies) to express themselves, to reveal their own contradictions.

Vittorio's quotation from William Blake's *Milton*:

But Palambron called down a Great Solemn Assembly,/ That he who will
not defend Truth, may be compelled to/ Defend a Lie, that he may be
snared and caught and taken. (242)

is of course the same passage from Blake Emily has used much earlier in the novel at a public meeting where she forewarns the audience of the choices they may one day need to make (75). The text, or the narrator, does not punish the Howards for their "betrayal" but Stephen and Emily each "take" themselves and dissolve into their own contradictions;¹⁸ they are not true to themselves. This dialogic view of "Truth" is one which Emily, who relies on absolutes, cannot fathom or reconcile leading to the collapse of voices within her – her madness.

Toward the end of *I'm Dying Laughing* Emily begins what she hopes will be her definitive "great" work, a novel of "truth" about the French revolution. This is to be a work of literature with its foundation in European classical culture (240). Yet Emily intends not to keep exclusively to "literature" but wishes her novel to be popular as well; she says, "It will serialize, sell to Hollywood as a block-buster" (417). It is to be a novel of epic proportions:

¹⁸ As was noted in chapter one, Stead says that she never twists "a character to suit an end, because they come to their ends" (Wetherell 444).

I'm writing a real book, a prose epic, like Tolstoy; and in it, man is the pawn of immense forces . . . Man is carried along on the flood of time, whether he's in a boat or drowning; he is not even in his element like a fish is. It's not only about Marie-Antoinette, that's for the Midwestern mammas; it's about the flood of time and how they were carried along on it. (408)

It is tragedy, yet her view of the Revolution, as Stephen's cousin Dale says, derives "from Dickens" (424). Thus the novel is the appropriate embodiment of all Emily's literary and personal contradictions. This novel, in its combination of "pulp and potboilers" and the "prose epic", suggests a reconciliation of these elements in this French-American novel; one in which tragedy and comedy sit happily together without diminishing the importance of its socio-historic setting. Unfortunately, Emily's book is unfinished and the promise of its combination of Dickensian, tragic, popular, and literary elements is quashed by the misfortune of Emily's personal demise in which her own comic face becomes marred by tragedy (*JDL* 416).

Emily's proposed novel, *Trial and Execution*, is concerned especially with the figure of Marie-Antoinette. Emily includes Marie-Antoinette because of her romantic and populist appeal, but it is clear that Emily also identifies with her. Jennifer Gribble argues that Marie-Antoinette and Emily are both oppressors and victims in one (1994, 114). Indeed, the question of Marie-Antoinette's degree of personal responsibility as a participant in the tyranny of the monarchy is a pertinent one. As a result, the connection between Emily and Marie-Antoinette leads the reader to assess Emily's degree of responsibility, or monstrosity, in the struggle between her personal agency and victimisation at the hand of historical forces.

Emily can only begin this novel, "The Monster", as she calls it, when Stephen is away because his demands that she work for money to support the household cease. There is something both comic and tragic about Emily's descent into the basement for she mimics Vera Holinshed's image of the nineteenth-century writer, holed up in the cellar and writing for hours on end. Like Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein* this novel seems some misbegotten creation – a macabre transmogrification, perhaps, of the child she had to abort when leaving the US for France. Yet the novel is more correctly a representation of Emily's self; she and her novel, "The Monster", become one. Indeed as she gets fatter (so fat that she can only wear dressing gowns) the novel grows and becomes more voluminous. In the end, just as the pages of her novel are spread across the steps on which she sits, Emily's mind becomes dishevelled and dissipates into incoherency.

Stephen and Emily's respective ends can be said to be tragic. In part two Stephen's betrayal of the Party leads to his dissolution. His illegal activities in smuggling gold are parallel to his abandonment of his integrity; it appears that he will do anything for gold, and this is made literal in the text. Significantly Stephen is hospitalised for a colon operation in addition to his problems with ulcers. Unlike Emily whose eating reflects her desperation (she must devour everything), Stephen is dyspeptic and has trouble eating. It is as if he cannot stomach the incongruities of his situation; his ulcers signify that he figuratively eats himself up inside. His difficulty with defecation is indicative of his unacceptance of his grotesque nature, his personal monstrosity.

In the end Stephen appears to kill himself as the enormity of his betrayal of his Party and beliefs becomes unsustainable. While he is making preparations for his departure Stephen tells the following story to his uncle, Maurice:

You know the story Vittorio told us, the time he was in concentration camp. The children were waiting to go to the gas chamber; but something was held up, so the young Nazi soldiers got the order, Play with them, amuse them. And they did, with a good heart, with the best spirit, glad I suppose to be kind for once. They played with them, tossed the ball to them for forty minutes, though everyone was shivering with cold; and then the fault was fixed. They stopped playing and the children went to the gas chamber. (442)

"I prefer not to be out there playing ball", are Stephen's last words in the novel (442). This story is one of absurdity, a "funny" story, but one which is not inappropriate in tone unlike Emily's proposed book on the concentration camps. In this allegory of the concentration camp Stephen is commenting on his political betrayal of his own beliefs. Before his death, Stephen's concluding act of symbolic loyalty is to attend the May Day parade with Christy. Yet his recognition of his own monstrosity brings him to self-immolation.¹⁹

By the end of *I'm Dying Laughing* Emily has been consumed by the tragedy of her situation into madness:

she was no longer the merry oaf she had been, she looked leering and wild, her eyes swam and one half of her face, grey and fallen, seemed many years older than the other . . . her suspicious, greedy eyes watch[ed] them all, calling to attention anyone who did not look at her. (416)

Her monstrous aspects are revealed here, and ironically Emily does not get "past at all" as Stead stated of Ruth McKenny (Whitehead 246). This is most definitely a tragic end

¹⁹ Perhaps another refunctioning of *Frankenstein*.

for the marvellous and vivacious Emily; her madness signifies her degeneration. Yet, as was noted in the chapter on *The Little Hotel*, Bakhtin argues that: "Dreams, daydreams, insanity destroy the *epic and tragic wholeness* of a person and his fate . . ." (PDP 116; emphasis added). In these terms Emily's madness is the ideal fate for the comic because insanity undermines the monologic seriousness of the world; like the clown, the mad person distorts acceptable languages. Yet, Emily is not obviously dissident; her madness is the result of her wish to no longer exist or coincide with her monstrous self. However, its effect is to deny any "wholeness" in her character. Her fate, too, at the end of the novel is left inconclusive and open-ended.

On another level, Emily's madness represents the heteroglossia of discourses and voices with which she has had to struggle and which she can no longer reconcile. Her personal contradictions, and the historical contradictions of her times which she has interpellated, are manifested as incoherency. The text has not constituted Emily's ending in this manner in order to degrade or punish her for her betrayal of communism²⁰ but in order to portray the numerous and disturbing discourses of her era which have led to her confusion and self-destruction.

Emily too, refers to the story of the Nazi soldiers playing with the children when she is found dazed and mad sitting by the Trajan Column in Rome. The Trajan Column, topped as it is by a statue of St. Peter, is another symbol on the theme of betrayal.

²⁰ Again, as was mentioned in chapter one, Stead notes of her "conclusion" to *I'm Dying Laughing*: "I don't want to kill and maim. I never did really; or ever come to a conclusion, because a 'conclusion' is just another scroll in the pattern . . ." (*Letters I* 380).

Ironically Emily is found by the Holinsheds, Hollywood CPUSA members at whose gathering she was "straightened out" for deviating from Party line, and whom she feels she has, in effect, betrayed. When they ask Emily to go and eat a meal with them she replies: "Oh, no, I don't want to play ball with the little children; that's too funny" (447).²¹ She then begins a laughing fit, "She lay on and rolled about the steps, endless laughter", and says:

"Oh, Jim – Jim Holinshed! What a funny thing. It is all so funny! Everything is so funny!" She kept on laughing, until she cried "If Stephen could see me now! But he's in jail. He's in jail for contempt. They took him away from us in the end". (447)

These last words concerning Stephen, Emily's final words in the novel, suggest that she imagines or wishes Stephen has appeared at the HUAC trials and defied the investigators, rather than having fled. Yet Stephen, of course, has punished himself in his self-contempt. Emily's tragic end, her laughter even at this stage, and her carnivalesque madness evoke the dialogics of laughter and tragedy in the text. As Sheridan argues, these closing scenes of the novel "could not exactly be described as a tragedy" because they also enter "the realm of farce" (1988a, 128). In other words, the text does not resolve or conclude the dialogic struggle between comedy and tragedy by privileging one above the other but continues with both in partnership, even here in the novel's "conclusion". While Emily's end is tragic, the text retains its carnival laughter.

The text laughs at *contemporary* history by exposing the irrationality of the dominant "order". Yet, as the dialogue in the text between France and Hollywood demonstrates,

²¹ This is probably the first and only time Emily refuses a meal.

I'm Dying Laughing also utilises history to laugh at this contemporary world. If history is the sum-total of the actions of the powers that be, it is in that sense representative of the dominant ideology. But history is also heterogeneous, it exceeds narrow boundaries and definitions. If scrutinised it displays a multiplicity which cannot be contained in narrow and monologic viewpoints. Therefore, one can attack the dominant ideology by asserting the multiplicity of history; that is, history reveals farce – its own laughing aspect. Indeed, *I'm Dying Laughing* depicts a period in which reason has become farcical.

The argument in this chapter has proceeded on two levels. Firstly, the Rabelaisian allusions and elements in the novel indicate that *I'm Dying Laughing* can be perceived as a descendent of Rabelais's comic works and therefore as carnivalesque literature. Secondly, and more abstractly, *I'm Dying Laughing* embodies Bakhtin's concept of "novelness" through its refunctioning of classical tragedy and in the very heterogeneity of its form with its multiple genres and discourses. The contradictions and oppositions in the various discourses in the novel have also been shown to epitomise the historical period.

It has been demonstrated that Emily as a gargantuan figure is both horrifyingly monstrous and enormously dynamic and vivacious. In this way she represents the narrative's ambivalent treatment of the enormity of her times. She is simultaneously a tragic and comic character; tragedy and laughter are constituted dialogically at a

thematic level in *I'm Dying Laughing* and are embodied in the figure of Emily. Emily has promise as a clown figure but the specific incongruities of her times and her personal avarice prevent her from fulfilling this subversive role. Nonetheless, as a hero who is a woman, and of "lowly" birth, she represents the potential of comic opposition to classical tragic hero. The novel desecrates Emily as tyrant, but accompanying this there is also a lament for her lost potential as a humorist, and, in a more Romantic sense, for the loss of her "genius".

The tragedy in *I'm Dying Laughing* precludes the tone of comic, regenerative laughter or parody which we saw in the more humorous novels, *Letty Fox* and *The Little Hotel*, but there remains a pole of laughter upon which the text relies. Rather than dismissing the possibility of laughter in such tragic times the text maintains laughter on a level and equal plane with tragedy so that laughter is not diminished in Stead's perception of contemporary history. While Emily's identity as a comic ultimately fails, the text itself is successful in observing the incongruities and absurdities of twentieth-century history through the "eyes" of laughter. Thus the text avoids being delimited as cynical and entirely sombre without sacrificing the political (though not polemic) element of its vision. *I'm Dying Laughing* in itself is an answer to Emily's struggle to be a comic writer and to have political and artistic integrity.

Stead has not written a "prose epic, like Tolstoy" but a gargantuan work, and a dialogic novel in the vein of the polyphonic works of Dostoevsky. As Bakhtin argues, such a dialogic novel undermines the "monologic seriousness" of classical forms such as the

epic or tragedy through its laughter and multiplicity. This dialogic form avoids the resolution of the polemical or dialectical novel but inscribes ideological voices in argument and as such records contradictions and inconsistencies. To some, like Emily, this profusion of conflicting voices leads to dissolution, but Emily's madness cannot be interpreted as an allegory for an inherent confusion or relativism in dialogism *per se*. The text depicts heteroglossic voices in conflict but it creates meaning and truth through a structure which cannot be reduced to disassociated voices. The novel is Janus-faced, but the lack of tragic or comic resolution should not be interpreted as failure. Instead, the Janus-face, like the sad and happy countenances of Emily as clown, is representative of a carnival sense of the world in which opposites are combined in ambivalence and in which the world is presented as topsy-turvy.

Rather than successfully struggle against the historical and coercive discourses surrounding her, Emily succumbs to despair. While the story may not have sought a "Faustian" individual ascendancy (Brydon 1989, 19) from Emily, it is clear that as a humorist she was capable of challenging the tragic seriousness of her times. However, in the end she finds herself only in incoherency. By contrast, the next hero, Teresa Hawkins, effectively challenges the oppressive discourses about her and proceeds beyond her own phase of hysteria and madness to seek a dialogic solution to her dilemmas. The next chapter on *For Love Alone* continues the discussion of Bakhtin's theory of monologic genres, begun here, in relation to the epic. The idea of the woman as an anti-monologic hero, only hinted at in this chapter because of Emily's limited subversive potential, is developed more fully in the argument concerning Teresa

Hawkins. Just as the laughter in *I'm Dying Laughing* relativised the closed and serious nature of its tragedy so too in *For Love Alone* do the carnival elements of the novel undermine the epic "wholeness" of the text and its hero.

Chapter Seven

"Her Buffoon Odyssey" The Epic, the Fool and the Hero in *For Love Alone*

Babieca: To love is foolish then?

Rocinante: It is not wise.

Babieca: You grow metaphysical.

Rocinante: From lack of food. (*Don Quixote*¹)

Epic and Novel

For Love Alone refunctions Homer's *Odyssey* to create an epic narrative but one which is simultaneously carnivalesque. Stead evokes the *Odyssey* in her many references to Ulysses and in the novel's prologue, "Sea People", where Australia is rendered as a metaphoric Ithaca:

It is a fruitful island of the sea-world, a great Ithaca, there parched and stony and here trodden by flocks and curly-headed bulls and heavy with thick-set grain. To this race can be put the famous question: "Oh, Australian, have you just come from the harbour? Is your ship in the roadstead? Men of what nation put you down – for I am sure you did not get here on foot?" (2)

Susan Sheridan writes, "the journey shape of *For Love Alone* and its isolated protagonist seeking to be the architect of her own destiny evoke an *epic form*" (1988a, 57). *For Love Alone* does not ridicule or comically deride the epic structure directly; that is, it is not a parody of the epic genre, or of the *Odyssey*. However, beneath this imitation of the epic

¹ The last two lines in this conversation between the horses in *Don Quixote* were the epigraph to the first edition of *For Love Alone* (Geering 1979, 119). This epigraph does not appear in the Angus and Robertson edition used for page references here.

form *For Love Alone* undermines the classic structure of the epic to create a “novelistic” or dialogic text, as well as a “novel” hero.²

In his essay, “Epic and Novel”, Bakhtin contrasts the two genres. For Bakhtin the epic is a closed and finalised genre whose subject is the mythological “absolute past” (DI 13).

He writes:

The world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of “beginnings” and “peak times” in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of “firsts” and “bests”. (DI 13)

The epic hero is indistinguishable from his³ society,⁴ and there is no distinction between internal and external selves as there is in the modern, or “novelistic”, hero. Bakhtin defines the epic hero in the following way:

he is a fully finished and completed being . . . but what is complete is also something hopelessly ready-made; he is all there, from beginning to end he coincides with himself, he is absolutely equal to himself. . . . All his potential, all his possibilities are realized utterly in his external social position, in the whole of his fate and even in his external appearance. . . . He is entirely externalized in the most elementary, almost literal sense: everything in him is exposed and loudly expressed:⁵ his internal world and all his external characteristics, his appearance and his actions all lie on a single plane. His view of himself coincides completely with others’ views of him – the view of his society (his community), the epic singer and the audience also coincide. (DI 34)

² The term “hero” is used to refer to Teresa in order to distinguish her from those fates ascribed to “heroines” in nineteenth-century romantic novels: death or marriage (DuPlessis 3; see chapter three of this thesis for a discussion of heroism in regard to Letty Fox). The term is also used to evoke Bakhtin’s concept of the hero.

³ Gender specific language is used here as the epic hero is traditionally male.

⁴ This may be contrasted with the community of the carnival folk, all of whom are one. The epic hero, rather, is a privileged figure and one who accepts and embodies his society’s dictates.

⁵ In this way the epic hero resembles the monologic character in his absence of dialogism.

On the other hand, the novelistic hero "should not be 'heroic' in either the epic or the tragic sense of the word: he [sic] should combine in himself negative as well as positive features, low as well as lofty, ridiculous as well as serious" (DI 10). Secondly, this hero should not be portrayed, "as an already completed and unchanging person but as one who is evolving and developing, a person who learns from life" (DI 10). The novelistic hero has been "uncrowned" by laughter, that is, he or she has been removed "from the distanced plane" and has been made more immediate (DI 23). This hero is also one who has "ceased to coincide with himself [sic]" as the divisions between internal and external selves, society and the individual, are manifested (DI 35).

According to Bakhtin, the novel, as a form, is menippean and heteroglossic, resisting the closed and canonical nature of "high" genres, such as the classical epic, which represented the interests of the ruling classes of its day. The novel has its historical foundation in "low" literary forms which invest in laughter and the parody of serious official discourses. This carnivalesque and polyglot nature of the novel undermines the epic:

It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close.
(DI 23)

The novel's heteroglossia means that it incorporates various forms and discourses, and in doing so it has no pretensions to incontrovertibility. The novel parodies other novels and other genres, "it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them" (DI 5). Unlike the epic, the novel deals with

contemporary reality and not an absolute past. Thus the novel, in its reliance on the present, is immanently open-ended: "Through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness" (DI 30).

Bakhtin argues that "the novel should become for the contemporary world what the epic was for the ancient world . . ." (DI 10), but Stead's friend and contemporary, and the purported model for Harry Girton in *For Love Alone*, Ralph Fox, has an ostensibly different view of the relationship of the epic to the novel. In his book *The Novel and the People* Fox calls for the incorporation of epic attributes to the novel. In his chapter, "The Novel and Reality", he writes:

The epic was a complete expression of a society in a way in which the novel never has been and never could be. There was a balance between the characters of the epic and the society in which they lived which has since been lost. (35)

His argument is bound up with a view of socialist realism in which characterisation should not ignore contemporary social factors. Fox argues that individualism is excessively pervasive in modern capitalist society and in its literature, a factor Fox sees evinced in characterisation based in psychology which he believes neglects the wider social picture. He goes on to say:

The novel deals with the individual, it is the epic of the struggle of the individual against society, against nature, and it could only develop in a society where the balance between man [sic] and society was lost, where man was at war with his fellows or with nature. (35-6)

Fox seems to manifest a certain nostalgia for this vision of society where there is a "balance between man [sic] and society", but the emphasis of his argument is, as has just been noted, the importance of socio-historic characterisation.

For Fox, the genres of nineteenth-century realism and naturalism relied on such specialisation that characters became dull and lifeless (73). Therefore, as well as an epic style, he wishes to reinstate the idea of the hero. He asserts that, "The modern novelist, abandoning the creation of personality, of a hero, for the minor task of rendering ordinary people in ordinary circumstances, has thereby abandoned both realism and life itself" (74). He concludes his argument by declaring that the new (socialist) realism:

must show man [sic] not merely critical, or man at hopeless war with a society he cannot fit into as an individual, but man in action to change his conditions, to master life, man in harmony with the course of history and able to become the lord of his own destiny. This means that the heroic must come back to the novel, and with the heroic its epic character. (83)

He also writes that, according to Engels:

the one concern with the novelist is, or should be, this question of the individual will in its conflict with other wills on the battleground of life. It is the fate of man [sic] that his desires are never fulfilled, but it is also his glory, for in the effort to obtain their fulfilment he changes, be it ever so little, in ever so limited a degree, life itself. (27)

These statements echo Engels's view of the construction of history in which events emerge from the struggle of individual wills themselves created by "a host of particular conditions of life" (qtd. in Fox 26). The main protagonist, therefore, must be a person of action and one through whom history can be seen to emerge.

While Fox's vision of the epic and the novel might seem largely at odds with Bakhtin's work on the subject, there are commonalities. Fox, for instance, does not refer to the classic epics of antiquity but cites Rabelais and Cervantes as the last great "epic" novelists (57). Thus his view of the epic novel is commensurate with Bakhtin's view of the carnival text. Fox's desire that the characters should "live" as three-dimensional portraits is not far from Bakhtin's notion of the autonomous hero in Dostoevsky's work. His emphasis on the socio-historic basis of characterisation also resembles Bakhtin's stress on the socio-historic construction of subjectivity. Therefore, while the *modern* novel for Fox is devoid of dynamism or inherent "novelness", his idea of the "epic" hero is similar in some respects to Bakhtin's "novelistic" hero.

As far as Stead is concerned, she does not invest in Fox's nostalgia for a society where "man" and society are in balance, as is evidenced by the fact that from the beginning of *For Love Alone* Teresa and her society are at odds, and Teresa's struggle is valorised. Teresa, unlike the heroes proposed by Fox, is not a figure who affects history directly. Yet Teresa is a figure of action⁶ and will who struggles to control her destiny, and battles other wills in the process. As well as this, her characterisation, as in all of Stead's novels, places importance on the portrayal of her socio-historic milieu.

In the figure of Teresa Hawkins Stead creates a novelistic hero after Bakhtin. She is depicted as a subject "evolving and developing, a person who learns from life" (DI 10). She has "negative as well as positive features" (DI 10), is comic and laughable as well as

⁶ There is some tension between activity and passivity in Teresa's approach to Jonathan Crow, as will be demonstrated.

lofty and serious, as we shall see. While she is heroic, hers is not the heroism of the “fully finished and completed” epic hero (DI 34).

Autobiography and the Young Fool

In her interview with Joan Lidoff, Stead professes that Teresa is an autobiographical character: “it was me of course, everybody knows that” (1982, 201). In his essay, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, Bakhtin suggests the impossibility of absolute auto-biography for the self is reliant on the views and impressions of others in order to conceive itself as wholly as possible (1990, 151). Not only this, but the self which is the object of representation can never coincide with the author or speaker because the real self exceeds the limits of, and invested interest in, representation:

the author is a constitutive moment of the artistic whole, and as such he [sic] cannot coincide, within this whole, with the hero, who represents another constitutive moment of that whole. The personal coincidence “in life” of the person *spoken of* and the person *speaking* does not nullify the distinctness of these constituents within the artistic whole. (1990, 151)

This difference is apparent in *For Love Alone* in the distance between the representation of the young, naive Teresa and the view of the older, more knowing authorial discourse. Even when the ironic distance between the two closes in the latter part of the novel the authorial discourse can never be equated simply with Teresa. The subject of an “autobiography”, then, can never “coincide” (DI 35) with its author.

Despite the impossibility of autobiography due to the inherent distance between the author and subject, Bakhtin's theory of polyphony which relies on the independence of the characters from the authorial discourse might be rendered problematic in an autobiographical text:

Self-consciousness, as the artistic dominant in the construction of the hero's image, is by itself sufficient to break down the monologic unity of an artistic world – but only on condition that the hero, as self-consciousness, is really represented and not merely expressed, that is, does not fuse with the author, does not become the mouth-piece for his [sic] voice; only on condition, consequently, that accents of the hero's self-consciousness are really objectified and that the work itself observes a distance between the hero and the author. If the umbilical cord uniting the hero to his creator is not cut, then what we have is not a work of art but a personal document. (PDP 51)

Yet *For Love Alone* is not written as an autobiography; Teresa is referred to in the third-person. On a less superficial level, however, the novel is polyphonic in its use of the perspectives of other characters, and in its palpable distance between the voice of Teresa and the authorial discourse. Like the independent Letty Fox, the young Teresa is allowed a voice, but the authorial discourse is in dialogue with that voice.

Despite being an "autobiography", the narrative is polyphonic. Various letters and other written pieces, such as Jonathan's essays, are "inserted" in the novel, allowing these characters an independent voice. At certain points the narrative also uses the viewpoint of the two principal male characters: Jonathan Crow and James Quick. For example, chapters fifteen, sixteen and seventeen take up Jonathan as their subject. Jonathan's thoughts and impressions of Teresa and Clara Rasche are recorded in these sections; Teresa, for instance, is described through Jonathan's eyes in this way: "She was too plain, dressed too poorly, and looked older than he had thought. But her timidity pleased

him" (181). While the authorial voice undermines Jonathan's discourse, as will be made clear, there is a concerted effort to view events from his perspective. Later chapters will contain both Teresa and Jonathan's views in order to construct a dialogue between them. Chapters thirty and thirty-two present James Quick's view of Teresa and his growing love for her. In this case the narrator does not intervene to undermine Quick's voice but supports him as a man whom Teresa will love. As we have seen in relation to the novels previously discussed in this thesis, polyphony undermines the unified and authoritative voice one might expect of a "single-voiced" text, such as an autobiography. As Sidonie Smith points out in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic "self" is opposed to "the essentialist ideology of individualism that makes the 'self' an atomized privacy, a unified and unique core isolable from society and 'representable' in autobiography" (18). These multiple voices, too, serve to emphasise the dialogic and social construction of the hero's subjectivity.

Especially in the first part of the novel, which deals with her life in Sydney, Teresa is often distanced from the authorial discourse by a degree of direct and indirect irony. To some extent, this young Teresa is depicted as a fool. As we saw in chapter one of this thesis, Teresa's naivety concerning sex and drink is mocked in the scene at Malfi's wedding in which the narrative enlists a knowing carnivalesque gaiety. Teresa's grand statement in the first chapter, "There is simply nothing of which I am not aware" (12), is plainly not the case.⁷ When her brother Lance calls her a "liar" Teresa punches him in

⁷ The novel is, of course, a *Bildungsroman* predicated on the very basis of Teresa's journey towards knowledge. *For Love Alone* is a more conventional *Bildungsroman* than *Letty Fox*; but, nonetheless, its polyphonic nature undermines the unified and individualised voice of the typical *Bildungsroman*. The

indignation and in doing so knocks his boil.⁶ The authorial voice undermines an identification with Teresa's action by stating: "She looked after him contemptuously; he was always a coward. *It did not occur to her that he had not hit her*" (78; emphasis added). In this part of the novel, Teresa's sensual world is arguably a sign of her immaturity and her dreamy distance from reality. This self-absorption and naivety indeed prove dangerous. As Jennifer Strauss argues, Teresa's quest for Jonathan "has been largely the result of her imperfect grasp of reality, her appetite for living mythologically, for being 'noble, loved, glorious'" (85). As Jonathan Crow enters the novel a distinction arises between Teresa's delusional faith in Crow and an authorial subversion of him, as we shall see. Laurie Clancy summarises this tendency when he writes, "there is something almost comically pathetic in the enormity of Teresa's delusions in regard to her lover" (1981, 33).

Bakhtin sees the fool as a subversive figure. The fool misunderstands dominant discourses and in so doing highlights their arbitrariness and undermines their conventions. Bakhtin describes the fool as one who suffers from:

a polemical failure to understand someone else's discourse, someone else's pathos-charged lie that has appropriated the world and aspires to conceptualise it, a polemical failure to understand generally accepted, canonized, inveterately false languages with their lofty labels for things and events: poetic language, scholarly and pedantic language, religious, political, judicial language. . . . (DI 403)

novel is also something of a *Kunstlerroman*, but this is a thread or a mode which is not made apparent in any clear or precise manner, underscoring the multiplicitous and inconclusive nature of the text.

⁶ It seems a rather carnivalesque joke on the author's part that *Lance* should have a boil.

This relativisation of dominant discourses can be perceived in Teresa's miscomprehension of Jonathan's academic language. She fails to recognise the egotistical self-interest, the ideological incongruities and alarming politics at the basis of his discourse. In his meeting with Quick, Jonathan talks plainly to the other man, and so his views are no longer concealed beneath the academic language he uses to establish his authority with Teresa (429). This meeting, therefore, undermines Jonathan's academic discourse by exposing it as artifice. In this way the text mocks, not academic language *per se*, but learning and discourse which conceals a monologic perception by pretending to be founded in dialogue. Jonathan's is a language of authority which has no inherent authority at all.

Thus, the construction of Teresa as a fool has its advantages as a carnivalesque strategy. Yet the presentation of her as a fool also mocks her naivety and serves to distance the authorial discourse from her. In this early part of the novel, then, Teresa is not unconditionally valorised, and the distance between this young protagonist and the authorial discourse is indicative of the dialogic and heterogeneous nature of autobiography.

The Hero and Honour

Yet the authorial discourse does not always appear to distance itself from Teresa. Indeed, in this early section, the narrative seems to shift seamlessly between Teresa's

thoughts and imagined life and its own descriptive passages. In chapter one of this thesis it was suggested that Bakhtin believes lyric poetry to have a tendency towards monologism, while he sees the novel, and prose, as dialogic. Arguably, this first part of *For Love Alone* uses language which is often elevated and lyrical suggesting an epic style in which the authorial discourse, the narrative description, and protagonist's voice are one. In "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" Bakhtin says of the lyrical hero:

The author's victory over the hero is too complete: the hero is totally deprived of strength. . . . Everything interior in the hero is, as it were, turned totally outward, toward the author, and is shaped by the author.
(1990, 167)

For Love Alone, too, seems to treat its subject with "a profound piety" which Bakhtin argues is a trait of the epic (DI 17). He also argues that "the novel should not be 'poetic'" (DI 10). The "poetic" language of this section of the novel might imitate an epic style, but as was just argued, Teresa's foolishness and the gap between the perceptions of the protagonist and the authorial voice make this narrative more dialogic, and less unified, than it at first appears, thus circumventing any interpretation of this text as monologic. However, the lyrical tone of this language does enforce the idea of Teresa as hero.

In the first eight chapters the narrative of the Australian landscape is lyrical and might be thought to mirror Teresa's own sensuality, or the "life of profound pleasure [Teresa] had made for herself" (73).⁹ The narrator, then, might be seen to support Teresa's vision of the world. For instance, the narrative reads:

From every moon-red shadow came the voices of men and women; and in every bush and in the clumps of pine, upon unseen wooden seats and

⁹ It might also be argued that the authorial discourse evokes a nostalgia for a distant Australian landscape; an argument which underscores a distance between the older self and the younger self which is the object of representation.

behind rocks, in the grass and even on open ledges, men and women groaned and gave shuddering cries as if they were being beaten. She passed slowly, timidly, but fascinated by the strange battlefield, the bodies stretched out, contorted, with sounds of the dying under the fierce high moon. (61)

While this passage is constructed on the basis of Teresa's physical separation from this world (as she walks along the coast-line she is a voyeur unable to access the pleasure in action about her), it is nonetheless her vision which describes that action. In this way Teresa's naivety and inexperience are made apparent in the narrative without sacrificing the validity of her perception. In other words, Teresa at this stage may be a young fool, but she is certainly the hero of the novel. While Teresa's perspective changes as she grows toward selfhood, her view is always the relatively truthful one.

Teresa is not subject to the same degree of parody as we saw in the narrator's treatment of Letty in *Letty Fox*. While Teresa misreads situations, the reader does not lose faith in her as hero. Teresa, like Letty's sister, Jacky, is initially "high-minded" and serious, and so she is something of a romantic hero(ine). Her version of "free love" is not one of carnivalesque promiscuity but has an intellectual and metaphysical basis. In this way her "seriousness" underscores her validity as a hero. However, this seriousness is not indicative of a concurrence with social norms, rather, Teresa's high-mindedness is a way of combating social prescriptions.

Unlike the improper Letty, Teresa dons the cloak of "honour" in order to battle her adversaries. In a heated exchange in the opening chapter Andrew Hawkins taunts his daughter by saying childishly, "Ants in her pants and bats in her belfry" (13). Teresa

responds indignantly with, "You offend my honour! I would kill anyone who offends my honour". "A woman's honour means something else from what you imagine", replies Hawkins (13). As was noted above, Teresa also strongly defends her honour against Lance who accuses her of being a liar. Bakhtin writes of such situations, "The truth about a man [sic] in the mouths of others, not directed to him dialogically and therefore a *secondhand* truth, becomes a *lie* degrading and deadening him, if it touches upon his 'holy of holies' . . ." (PDP 59). Her "holy of holies" is her belief in the truth of her perspective of love which is opposed to her father's narcissistic monologue in the opening scene of the novel. Teresa must defend herself in strong terms against coercive discourses which seek to control and define her. Therefore Teresa's "honour" and seriousness are indicative of her heroic resistance to coercive discourses about her.

Joan Lidoff writes that this "controversy about honor, the essential epic virtue, calls into question the very possibility of *classic* heroism for a woman" (1982, 65; emphasis added).

The "possibility of *classic* heroism for a woman" is indeed in question, but Teresa appropriates the epic definition of honour and applies it to her quest for sexuality without allowing the terms to sit incongruously. In so doing, she challenges conventional notions of propriety and the classical epic itself.

As *For Love Alone* proceeds towards its conclusion the ironic distance between the authorial discourse and hero decreases as Teresa grows to maturity and achieves the aims of her heroic quest. Much of the final section dealing with Teresa's relationship with James Quick leaves behind both the metaphoric language of the early Australian

section and the direct talk between Crow and Teresa. The authorial voice seems to speak indirectly for Teresa. This, as Diana Allen points out, has the effect of distancing the reader from Teresa just as she achieves her goals (316), but it also suggests that the narrator feels able to speak for Teresa as if there were a closer relationship between the two. Thus the authorial discourse and hero become one, but this convergence cannot be equated with social integration,¹⁰ and nor is it evidence of the ultimately monologic nature of the text. It merely suggests an acceptance on the author's part of Teresa's conclusion to her struggle against coercive discourses.

In Bakhtin's terms Teresa's foolishness and the ironic distance of the authorial discourse make her a novelistic "hero". Yet he points out that "heroism" itself is not invalidated:

carnivalistic ends debase the hero and bring him down to earth, they make him familiar, bring him close, humanize him; ambivalent carnival laughter burns away all that is stilted and stiff, but in no way destroys the heroic core of the image. (*PDP* 132-3)

For Bakhtin a hero is one who is not "finalisable" and complete in the manner of an epic protagonist. Rather his ideal hero is "unfinalisable" and unable to be contained by social definitions (*PDP* 104; *DI* 37). Part of this struggle is with language and the way it is used by those with monologic tendencies. As he writes:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his [sic] own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. . . . Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily

¹⁰ See the argument concerning Franco Moretti's view of the *Bildungsroman* in chapter three of this thesis.

into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.¹¹ (DI 293-4)

In this way Teresa must struggle against the “word” which is not her own and the coercive other who tries to implement this discourse.

A Hero is One who Struggles Against Coercive Discourses

For Love Alone is constructed on a journey pattern. Teresa must travel through, or past, a myriad of others' perceptions and experiences of love in order to reach her own, and in doing so she attains selfhood. In particular she must struggle with the discourses offered to her by her father, and by Jonathan Crow. Bakhtin writes that, “As a rule, the hero of a novel is always more or less an ideologue” (DI 38). Teresa is indeed an ideologue, one whose views combat the ideologies around her. Certainly, at times she appears so stubborn concerning her beliefs that she seems to deny dialogue. Yet the novel demonstrates how Teresa learns from, borrows and rejects the ideas of others to oppose, finally, the domineering views of Andrew Hawkins and Crow. Ultimately, she achieves a relationship with Quick in which power is equitable, and through which knowledge is gained on a more dialogic basis. Bakhtin writes that the ideologue:

senses above all *someone else's will* predetermining him [sic]. It is within the framework of this alien will that he perceives the world order, nature with its mechanical necessity, the social order. His own thought is developed and structured as *the thought of someone personally insulted by the*

¹¹ This is another example of Bakhtin's emphasis on coercion between discourses which may be contrasted with his more benevolent views of discursive exchange.

world order, personally humiliated by its blind necessity. This imparts a profoundly intimate and passionate character to his ideological discourse, and permits it to become tightly interwoven with his discourse about himself. It seems . . . we are dealing here with a single discourse, and only by arriving at himself will the hero arrive at his world. Discourse about the world, just like discourse about oneself, is profoundly dialogic: the hero casts an energetic reproach at the world order . . . as if he were talking not about the world but with the world. (PDP 236)

Similarly, *For Love Alone* depicts Teresa's dialogue with the world around her and her need to break free from the will of others.

Teresa's journey to England is a physical and metaphysical quest for bodily and intellectual knowledge. It is not, as Ron Geering suggests, an Australian's "sense of isolation from the fountains of European civilization", which drives her to leave (1979, 110). The notion of "cultural cringe" is less important than Teresa's need to break the confinement of the family and the restrictions of the patriarchal "home". As Carole Ferrier remarks, "To leave the country in which one has grown up can also be a decisive rejection of one's family" (51). As *For Love Alone* proceeds the Hawkins family receives much less narrative attention as Teresa attains subjectivity by moving away from them. This is an epic journey *from* patriarchy, not founded in a oneness with patriarchy itself, as is the classical epic.

The history and stories of England do form the basis of Teresa's reading in Australia and so Teresa does, in some ways, travel to the mythological land of the founding fathers. This is a land of legend so that her journey adopts a classical epic quality in this regard. Bakhtin connects patriarchy with the epic when he asserts:

In a patriarchal social structure the ruling class does, in a certain sense, belong to the world of "fathers" and is thus separated from other classes by a distance that is almost epic. (DI 15)

It is ironic, then, that Teresa should leave her patriarchal home only in order to seek her freedom in the land of her ancestors. Yet once Teresa is in England the mythological aspect of the country is forgotten and it is depicted as dreary and mundane. Far from the constrictions of the family home she is free, in her colonial anonymity, to live as she wishes. Quick is aware of the history of the place and acts as a tour guide for Teresa, but their relationship is foregrounded while the historic sites merely serve as a spatial backdrop to their journey together. Quick as an American, and Teresa as an Australian¹², are both citizens of the "new" world and so, are opposed to the incontrovertibility of the legends of the past and the old world.

There is no absolute rejection of Australia as a nation *per se* in the novel. While Teresa's yearning to leave by sea might be interpreted as a wish to escape the figurative penal shores, Australia is at the same time depicted as the land of Cythera in the lyrical first section of the novel. The lovers in the parks and among the rocks, the heat and water, intimate that this could very well be the "Cytherea [sic]" for which Teresa quests (192).¹³ The metaphoric language of this section suggests a nostalgia on the narrator's part for the sun and sensuality of the Sydney landscape. Therefore, it appears to be a simple reading to suggest that the philistinism of Australia must be exchanged for the

¹² This is despite the fact Quick refers to Teresa as "English" (eg. 389; 392).

¹³ Terry Castle interprets Cythera as a carnivalesque island of love on which the participants wore carnival masks and mingled as a carnival collective during which social hierarchies were obscured (109). Love, then, has a subversive potential.

civilisation of Britain because it is the journey itself which is of importance rather than the actual geographical points of arrival or departure.¹⁴ Teresa perceives the examples of sexuality in Australia with ambivalent disdain and desire. For example, the scene in which the Hawkins girls stumble across the boat-hand fondling Gladys's breast is an episode of shock, but Teresa is also envious of Gladys's freedom (21). Teresa must travel to find this freedom and to overcome this disdain for sexuality which, it is implied, is a result of her ignorance.

Stead's prologue to *For Love Alone*, "Sea People", with its rendition of Australia as an opposite space to the Northern Hemisphere suggests that Australia can be seen as a "world inside out" in Bakhtinian terms (RHW 11). However, Teresa cannot utilise this carnival potential as Australia is also defined for her by the monologic and patriarchal discourses of her father and Crow. While the prologue emphasises Australia's physical opposition to the North, it also traces the migration of the British, and so maps Australia as another imperial territory. So, while distant from the founding nation in terms of geography, Australia is also home to this political authority with its imperious discourses. It is in the gap¹⁵ – the journey itself – between the epic or imperial homes of Australia and Britain that Teresa, as hero, must seek out her self.

¹⁴ This is not to say that *For Love Alone* has the "chronotope" of a classical epic, as it is set in the contemporary, socio-historic world.

¹⁵ In the early part of the novel "the Gap" is a favourite suicide point on the Sydney coast-line. In a figurative sense it represents the extremity of the leap Teresa must take in order to find new life through a kind of death, as will be argued.

Andrew Hawkins's narcissism is the first model of love the reader encounters in the text. The novel opens with his monologue on love to which his daughters are forced to listen and in which he demands they admire him incestuously. Indeed, Hawkins is another of Stead's monologic characters whom her texts seek to subvert. Both the authorial discourse and Teresa herself undermine Hawkins's diatribe. While in the first paragraph the narrative describes Hawkins as beautiful with his golden hair and "powerful chest" it goes on to undermine this portrait by describing his body as imperfect: "The man, Andrew Hawkins, though straight and muscular, was covered in flaccid yellow-white flesh and his waist and abdomen were too broad and full" (5). The narrator details Hawkins's monologue on his own beauty to such an extent that when he suggests that Teresa only knows self-love it is an ironic play on his narcissism (9). The narrator also describes Hawkins as the "the family god" who orates while his daughters do household work around him (13). Indeed, his command that Kitty clean his boots is the narrator's way of making the power relations so obvious that it is almost farcical (10). Thus, his position as "the family god" is mocked.

Hawkins's equation that "inward and outward beauty strike one chord" is ridiculed by Teresa as "simple" (9), and the narrator's description of Hawkins as "beautiful" after this discussion therefore takes on a mocking tone (15). When her father describes the beauty of his hands which many women have kissed, Teresa directly, but quietly, mocks him by calling him "Handy Andy" (7). In this way Teresa combats this egotistic image of "love" and begins the quest for her own definition of the word. This ridicule of Hawkins "familiarises" him and disrupts the epic stature he tries to fabricate for himself.

While she subverts her father's power by mocking him, Teresa largely does not adopt the cynical or abusive language of Dostoevsky's underground heroes but uses "heroizing tones" (*PDP* 232) in her talk about honour and truth, in order to contest him. Teresa constructs herself as hero as a way of undermining her father's authority. Moreover, this tone can be interpreted as "holy-foolishness", as Bakhtin calls it, an exaggeration of sobriety in order to wrest the discourse about the self from the dominating other (*PDP* 232).

Yet Teresa's is not an easy or clear victory over her father. There is a period of struggle with his discourse, as Bakhtin notes in the case of Dostoevsky's heroes:

He [sic] has neither freed himself from the power of the other's consciousness nor admitted its power over him, he is for now merely struggling with it, polemicizing with it maliciously, not able to accept it but also not able to reject it. (*PDP* 232)

Her father, for instance, demeans her notion of self by calling her ugly in comparison with his beauty. As an adjunct to this he declares her incapable of finding a husband and so defines her as insubstantial in society, another potential "Miss Hawkins". As a result Teresa sets out to seek all that her father has said she cannot achieve – to find a partner and to be desirable – thus, in some sense, paying homage to his ideals.¹⁶ It seems that the opening diatribe by her father gives Teresa's quest a point from which to cast off, but she does not achieve her goals without disturbing the patriarchal laws in which his demands are founded, as will be demonstrated.

¹⁶ It is ironic, too, that she should perceive Jonathan's inability to love her as a result of extreme purity because her father has described himself in those terms: "I believe I was loved by many women but I was so pure that I had no temptations" (6).

Teresa's longest struggle is with Jonathan Crow. It is an exhausting tussle which consumes much of the narrative in detail and talk. As Laurie Clancy states, once "Crow enters the novel . . . it tends to change; it becomes much more consciously philosophical and loquacious. The conflict between him and Teresa tends to be talked out, rather than acted out" (1981, 38). Indeed, the two characters battle like a pair of Dostoevsky's ideologues. The lyrical narrative of summer in Sydney recedes as Jonathan and Teresa grapple in the cold of a Sydney winter, and then the London cold. Teresa continually fails to break free from Crow; despite some moments which appear to be epiphanies, such as the incident at the saw mill (408), she returns to him. This cyclical element of their relationship and the frigid and bitter atmosphere surrounding it underscore the extremity of the struggle and the victory of Teresa's eventual escape from Crow.

As has already been stated, in part two of the text, "Port of Registry: London", the narrator treats Teresa with less ironic distance as Teresa achieves her quest, having passed through the foolish foibles of immaturity. At the same time Jonathan Crow becomes more and more objectified until he is portrayed as little more than a Gothic villain. In her précis of the novel, Stead writes that Jonathan changes "from a raw ambitious youth to a callous pedant and arriviste" (Stead qtd. in Geering 1990, 423).¹⁷ It

¹⁷ This is Stead's précis of the novel:

A study of the young girl in her isolation, youthful passions, ignorance of life, the ideas she forms about life and her ambition; all this takes its flesh and colour from the magnificent setting, the climate, the rich and unrepressed if crude passions of the people, a southern people. (Australians.) . . . She decides to go abroad to follow a student and it takes her bitter years of struggle to save the money for the fare. In these years the student has changed altogether from a raw ambitious youth to a callous pedant and arriviste. After some distress, during which she attempts to leave a memorial behind her, a writing, she finds another life and new hope. (Stead qtd. in Geering 1990, 423)

is as if Teresa's only way to rid herself of her masochistic obsession with Jonathan is to disarm him by rendering him two-dimensionally evil. While early in the novel Jonathan is described as "*diabolically handsome*", and Erskine warns that Jonathan's face is "no good", it is not until the later chapters that Jonathan definitely becomes the man with the "hammered-out distorted and evil face", as Quick views him (262; 429). When Teresa sees Jonathan in the final scene of the book both he and she are caught in the bluish light of a street lamp, and the narrator exclaims, "The vile-faced man, the bent-backed man, walking crowded with all the apparatus of melodrama was Jonathan Crow!" (501). From his earlier complex portrayal Jonathan is reduced to a figure of melodrama.¹⁸ Yet, in keeping with Stead's dedication to objectivity, this complex portrayal in itself means that he cannot be thought of entirely as a fearful, "inhuman" monster.

Jonathan's is a complex characterisation and he is not, at least initially, the "archetypal man" devoid of individuality as Nick Mansfield describes him (85). Initially the reader is shown Jonathan through Teresa's eyes and he has some attractive traits; this is necessary because the narrative seeks to construct Teresa's faith in him. Early on in the narrative he is described in this way:¹⁹

He had a gentle, plain manner while teaching, a thin face and dark eyes, and seemed to be about twenty-eight. He was poorly dressed, always in black, with white shirts and heavy-soled boots in which, he had told her, pointing to them with a grimace, he walked home several miles every evening, saving the fare. (121)

¹⁸ This should not be thought of as a necessarily negative attribute as there is a certain carnival gaiety in the depiction of Crow as villain.

¹⁹ The very first description of Crow in the novel comes when Teresa bumps into him on her way to Malfi's wedding. The action is described from Kitty's distant perspective and accordingly Crow's aspect is less pleasing than it would be from Teresa's point of view: "A dark axe-faced, starved young man, with spectacles and a black felt hat cocked, was smiling at her . . ." (23).

Thus, it is not entirely the case, as Lorna Sage argues, that, "We're not allowed, even for a moment, to share Teresa's vision of him. Instead he enters the novel to a ribald chorus of insults from his male university contemporaries, who understand him very well" (37).

By the time we hear him speak at the university to his group on "free love" Jonathan has already been established as a figure worthy of sympathy because he has struggled to succeed in academia, arousing the admiration of Teresa who has a similar goal. Teresa's faith in Crow, then, is not yet entirely delusional because it is to some extent supported by the narrative.

It is true, however, that the narrative does undermine Jonathan even in this early stage of the novel. For instance, his inexplicable grasp and then rejection of Clara Rasche is disturbing. Yet, Susan Higgins is correct when she states that, "it is a measure of the conviction with which Stead depicts Teresa's devotion to her ideal of the man that one can forget those encounters with Clare [sic] Rasche . . ." (436). Crow's essay on "free love", which he reads to his group of colleagues, is not challenged by Teresa who is wide-eyed at this introduction to university life and who, like the other women present, is full of admiration for Crow. However, the paper is undermined by the narrative voice which comments: "It was a disordered, impertinent paper; but no one seemed to notice that and to himself it seemed the pure fluid of thought; it was reason arraigning hypocrisy" (181). Terry Sturm, like Jennifer Strauss, argues that the romantic and inarticulate Teresa of the early part of the novel is "vulnerable . . . to the crude intellectual theorizing of Jonathan Crow" (14). Certainly, his ideas on free love are attractive against the narrative background of social restrictions in which a woman is

valueless unless married. In this way, the text validates Teresa's fascination for Jonathan's ideas, while, at the same time, it reveals his theorising as crude. As Diana Brydon points out, Jonathan's idea of "free love" is an ironic misnomer because one-sided and inscribed with self-interest (1987, 81).

In general, the narrative presents Jonathan as a subject while it simultaneously subverts his character. The novel "transcribes" great portions of Jonathan's speeches without any direct intervention so that he is allowed to talk for himself, but his own talk reveals his hypocrisy and sham ideologies. Jonathan's thesis, "Meliorism, or The Best of Possible Worlds", is undermined by its anti-text, Teresa's mystical treatise on passion, the "Seven Houses of Love". Nevertheless the novel juxtaposes the two texts in order to present both characters' world-views (chapter thirty-four).

Especially in the Australian section of the novel, Jonathan's bitterness is explained by his poverty. His poverty means Teresa is sympathetic towards him and it allows the narrator sometimes to explain his behaviour towards her. For example, when Teresa suggests they go for tea and Jonathan refuses, the narrator comments, "She did not know that he had not a penny in his pocket and that, though he believed in the equality of the sexes, he could not tolerate the idea of a woman paying for her food when with him" (207).²⁰ His academic success in the face of his economic background is applauded by Teresa. Yet it becomes apparent that it is Teresa, and not the narrator, who romanticises Jonathan's poverty and so uses it as an excuse for his inexplicable behaviour to the extent

²⁰ This statement is also another example of Crow's ideological hypocrisy.

that it fails to arouse the reader's support. Indeed, the narrative undermines Jonathan as a struggling student by opposing him with the figure of Miss Haviland, who, from a similarly under-privileged background, and though brilliant, is nonetheless prevented from attaining academic scholarships just because she is a woman (eg. 353). Jonathan himself uses his poverty as an excuse to explain his treatment of women arguing that he cannot afford dependents, nor gifts, and cannot marry the wealthy women he desires (eg. 329). Yet the text undermines his position by revealing his actions towards Lucy, of which Teresa remains ignorant, and by creating him as a hypocrite. His ill-treatment of Lucy, and his malicious delight in telling the story of the gang rape of Burton's servant are the narrator's examples of Crow's hypocrisy in championing his class and women, and of his unambiguously repulsive behaviour. Laurie Clancy and Brian Kiernan both argue that it is poverty which has made Jonathan vicious, which seems a rather dubious interpretation in light of what it would mean for the working class (Clancy 1981, 31; Kiernan 76). The text itself, fortunately, does not imply this reading of Jonathan's behaviour. Rather, his social class is over-shadowed by his personal mean-spiritedness. The fact that the young Teresa is not aware of these aspects of Crow's character is a clear example of the distinction between the narrative and its hero.

In London, Jonathan is unequivocally presented as detestable; chapter thirty-five indicates this overtly in its title: "The Signs of the Misogynist". The narrative's identification with Teresa as its hero means that the narrative rejects Jonathan for his renunciation of her. His inability to love *her* is couched in his ultimate inability to love. Jonathan is so enclosed in his monologic and sadistic world, his "self-pickled"

theorising, that he is unable to enter into meaningful dialogue with women. The unopened letters are a cruel example of his rejection of Teresa and his unwillingness to sustain a dialogue with her (324). The result of his egomania is that he must objectify all women in the name of "sociology". Ironically, in *exposing* Jonathan as a misogynist in liberal's clothing, the text simultaneously depicts him as a man in disguise: he becomes a dark man in hat and coat who sports a new moustache and seems dressed like a "second-rate spottable spy" (429).

It can be argued that this objectification of Crow is necessary if Teresa is to achieve independent selfhood. Clark and Holquist paraphrase Bakhtin's notion of the construction of the subject in the following way:

The way in which I create myself is by means of a quest: I go out to the other in order to come back with a self. I "live into" an other's consciousness; I see the world through that other's eyes. But I must never completely meld with that version of things, for the more successfully I do so, the more I will fall prey to the limitations of the other's horizon. . . . Thus, a necessary second step for me is to return to my own horizon, where I can perceive the other not only in the form of what he himself is seeing as he looks out, not only from his eyes, but also from my own eyes. I see him both as subject and as an object. (78)

Teresa, while seeking to borrow from Crow in a dialogic exchange of viewpoints, falls "prey to the limitations" of his horizon. This is mostly because Crow himself gives nothing in return. He cannot see beyond himself to appreciate Teresa in any dialogic way. Therefore, Teresa can break free from him only by rejecting his vision entirely, by spurning him for his callous egotism. The text itself, in its evaluating distance from the direfulness of Teresa's struggle, presents Crow as a subject, although it nonetheless supports Teresa in its rejection of his character by creating him as an egotistical monster.

Clancy notes that Jonathan's discourse resembles that of that other monologic character, Sam Pollit, in its scientific and supposedly rational references which claim inherent authority (1981, 39). Like Sam Pollit, Jonathan's ideas seem mired in the nineteenth-century doctrines of eugenics and social Darwinism, and in the ideas of the "sexologists", "Krafft-Ebing, Freud, [and] Havelock Ellis" (FLA 333).²¹ Teresa must set out to establish a different notion of love – one which is not bound up in nineteenth-century prejudices and hypocrisy, or in the narcissistic preoccupations of her father with his assertion of a god-like "classical" body. Only in her challenge against these oppressive discourses can she find herself.

Like *The Man Who Loved Children*, *For Love Alone* is set against a backdrop of the rise of fascism in Europe. Yet, so absorbed is Teresa in her quest for love that she only takes note of Hitler's rise to power and impending war by cutting out newspaper articles so she can converse on the topic with Crow (295).²² Of course, Teresa is prevented from acting on the public stage due to her social position as a middle-class woman. However, the text itself does not pertain to the "absolute past" of the epic (DI 13), for what little historical detail the novel does give serves to situate the text in contemporary reality. The importance of the historical background is to create an ominous atmosphere in which the rise of fascism is associated with the patriarchal discourses Teresa must

²¹ There is not space here to connect Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis*, Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, or Freud's various works with Crow's theories, but Crow continues the nineteenth-century preoccupation with sex and gender. Along with these "sexologists" he treats women as objects of investigation while evincing the ideological bias of his position as a man.

²² This is perhaps another example of her dangerous naivety.

already combat. The “paternal authority” of fascism, as Jessica Benjamin describes it, is beset with dominant figures and masochistic followers who access power through their leader (6). Therefore, Teresa must move beyond such monologic discourses and their dangerous implications by overcoming her masochistic relationship with Jonathan, and by seeking a new, dialogic, kind of love.

An Heroic Kind of Madness

Teresa’s struggle with Jonathan leads her through a period of self-deprivation as she desperately saves money to reach him in London. This section of her story is ambivalent: on the one hand, her relationship with Crow is based in masochism and dependence; on the other hand, Teresa’s actions indicate her extreme will. It is as if the authorial discourse must re-write Teresa’s despair in hindsight as an heroic representation of will. Yet, in a Bakhtinian sense, the self depends on the other in order to conceive the self, in a process which is dialogic. When coercion is involved, however, this is a negative dependency and one which must be struggled with in order to freely determine the self. Thus, the ambivalence in this section indicates Teresa’s struggle for independent selfhood.

In this part of the novel concerning Teresa's privations, the narrative is most particular in detailing the ways in which she saves and denies herself every luxury.²³ The narrative maps out the paths Teresa must take to save tram fares by walking; she is described patching her dress and carrying a newspaper under her arm to conceal the holes where the material has worn through;²⁴ she is also depicted being obsessed by sweets in shop windows; and so on. This detail is quite different from the indulgent, sensual and lyrical passages in the earlier section of the novel, although it is similarly "feverish". In other words, Teresa's earlier passion and sensuality seem to recede as self-deprivation takes hold, but nonetheless Jonathan is the object of great and passionate devotion. Jennifer Strauss writes that in this part of the novel, "the amplification of detail seems merely manic" (86). Indeed, Teresa, and the narrative itself at this point, do seem to be consumed by a kind of mania. In this mania Teresa resembles a martyr, an hysteric, and even an anorexic.

Teresa constructs herself on the basis of her dependence upon Crow, so that their relationship can be considered to be one between a sadist and masochist. In her study of sado-masochistic relationships in *The Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin argues that the masochist completely surrenders to a master in order to find her "elusive self" by gaining access to someone more powerful, and so, paradoxically, she colludes in a

²³ In a way this is carnivalesque or exaggerated detail in the manner of Stead's banquets, but extreme parsimony here is the intention rather than any show of abundance. (Although *extreme* parsimony in a way must be considered an abundance.)

²⁴ This outfit is a far cry from the green dress she has sewn, described in chapter five as "an old wool dress she had embroidered with all kinds of things, pagodas, butterflies, geraniums" (65). It is also a quite different uniform to the extravagant and lewd costumes she devises in this early section of the novel (95).

relationship which denies her subjectivity (60). Teresa does just this by travelling to selfhood, using Jonathan as a vehicle. She idealises his will to succeed and his freedom to journey. Benjamin asserts that "This is why there are so many stories of woman's love being directed toward a hero such as she herself would be – the wish for discipleship, serving an idol, submission to an ideal" (111). She goes on to say:

The belief that the man will provide access to a world that is otherwise closed to her is one of the great motives of ideal love. It is not difficult for women to give up the narcissism of the absolute self, but to find another path to the world, they often look for men whose will they imagine to be untrammelled. (116)

Once in England this idealisation of Jonathan falls away as his vices come to the fore and his will is not "untrammelled", but compromised.

Benjamin says of the girl seeking subjecthood, "above and beyond the thing that is wanted, the child wants recognition of her will, of her desire, of her act" (101). There is some sense in the novel that Jonathan is *merely* a vehicle in Teresa's journey, that what she wants is "above and beyond" Jonathan himself. The novel intimates that she makes a conscious decision in choosing Crow as the object of her affections when the narrator says, "She cast about for a man to love" (225). With Girton, too, it is suggested that she desires the freedom to pursue, rather than the object of pursuit: "She thirsted after this track-making and wandering of the man in world, not after the man" (492). Benjamin argues that the girl wishes for the closeness of the father and son relationship which can lead her to idolise a man resembling both her father and the independent son she cannot be. Indeed, it has been noted already that there is a similarity in the way Andrew

Hawkins and Crow use monologic discourse as a way of asserting authority. Jonathan, unlike Miss Haviland, is the "son" who is free to journey.

Teresa's trip to Narara, which signals her initial escape from the family home and her restricting job,²⁵ is her first "extreme deed". George Wadling's jump from the classroom window in the chapter entitled "The Deed Was Extreme" is a comic model for Teresa's escape. While the Dickensian nature of Wadling's leap is softened in Teresa's trip, it is nonetheless a foiled attempt at escape which sees her return to her aunt and uncle's house within a day of leaving (166). The action of the old man who exposes his genitalia²⁶ to her is threatening in the silent and empty landscape in which Teresa walks alone (165). She is lost and has no idea of the way to Harper's Ferry. Therefore, in Teresa's next attempt at escape, she chooses a model to follow in Jonathan who maps the way to Europe and the academy for her. To some extent she must ignore his own threatening aspect in order facilitate this journey. This is why she must create him as pure, as an object of devotion. She also creates herself as chaste: "She had come to think of her wild dreams as impure and kept them apart from Jonathan, who was to her holy, pure, admirable, and whom she had begun to love with a mystic love into which no fleshly thought entered" (248).

It may be argued that Teresa chooses to devote herself to Jonathan in order to leave the patriarchal family home. Stead's working title for *For Love Alone*, "The Travelling

²⁵ Teresa is a school teacher and the text clearly outlines the contract in which women teachers are discouraged from marrying.

²⁶ A carnivalesque gesture.

Scholar" (Williamson 14), can be applied to Teresa as well as to Jonathan, indicating a symbiosis between the two. Jonathan justifies her journey in the form of a heterosexual relationship but it is Teresa, and Teresa alone in her unbridled will, who provides the impetus to get herself there.

Just as George Wadling is seen as "mad" by the figures of authority who seek to control him, Teresa constructs herself as an hysteric in order to enable her opposition to the fetters of control. Teresa accepts the label of madness her father has taunted her with (13), but only in order to oppose his discourse by escaping him. Bakhtin argues that "the theme of a person who is *alone* in his knowledge of the truth and who is therefore ridiculed by everyone else as a madman" is typical of the *menippea* (PDP 151). Certainly, Teresa seems to go beyond reason in her infatuation. In the chapter entitled "The Infernal Compact with Herself", the narrator describes Teresa's bargain: "she did not think logically, all other things were secondary to the need to leave the lonely state that galled and humiliated her as woman and free-man" (224). This, then, is another stage of her "holy-foolishness"; another means by which to challenge oppressive discourses.

Teresa's "Seven Houses of Love" resembles very closely Saint Teresa of Avila's "Seven Mansions".²⁷ Teresa of Avila's text outlines the states the soul must pass through in

²⁷ Michael Wilding argues that Stead did not model Teresa on St. Teresa of Avila: "talking at a graduate seminar at Sydney University in 1969, on her first return visit to Australia, Miss Stead adamantly denied any such intentional parallel, and any significance attaching to Teresa's name" (1970, 416). However, this seems improbable given the direct reference to St. Teresa on page 417 of the text, and the connections between the two suggested here. Stead and Blake's suggestion of the "intensity" of St. Teresa in "The Story of Mary MacLane" is another example of Stead's interest in St. Teresa (Stead and Blake 18).

order to obtain union with God. In this "spiritual marriage" the distinction between the Beloved and Lover is lost so that both are one (Vol.II, 192). In Teresa Hawkins's "Seven Houses" the final stage is "The Last Star or Extinction", a state which she describes as "terrible":

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. This is not understanding, not intellectual, but physical, bitter, disgusting, but an affirmation of an unique kind. (421-2)

This disjointed and elliptical style seems close to Teresa of Avila's writing with her self-professed inarticulateness (Vol.II, 189). It seems, at this stage of the novel, that a kind of martyrdom is Teresa Hawkins's goal; as the narrator says: "it was not in the conversion of Jonathan that she believed now, but in her coming martyrdom" (422). Yet, as was mentioned earlier, that this treatise is "not intellectual" is a rejoinder to Crow's cynical intellectualism.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin compares Christian literature with menippean satire; he writes that in both:

enormous organizing significance is allotted [sic] to the *testing of an idea and its carrier*, testing by means of temptations and martyrdom (especially, of course, in the hagiographic genre). As in the menippea, rulers, rich men, thieves, beggars, hetaerae come together here on equal terms on a single, fundamentally dialogized plane. Here, as in the menippea, considerable importance is given to dream visions, insanity, obsessions of all sorts. (PDP 135)

Teresa's belief in truth, honour and love is translated into an obsessive physical struggle within the self in order to demonstrate her great will. So Teresa's martyrdom may not just be thought of as tragic, but as representative of carnivalesque insanity and obsession.

Indeed, the extremity of her actions implies a carnivalesque sense of freedom in its relativisation of normality; as the narrator of *For Love Alone* comments:

Who would believe that she had gone up to someone's door and begged? It was comic. Everything she did was so strange and comic that no one would believe it. She had managed to get out of the goal, she had found out how original real life is. (267)

As well as a martyr, Teresa can be perceived as an hysteric. She has a persistent cough, and her body is the site of the representation of her distress. In her essay, "Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women's Texts", Clair Wills sees the hysteric as a bourgeois daughter who expresses Bakhtinian carnival through her body in order to disrupt the bourgeois family (130). Stallybrass and White also argue that in the hysteric "many of the images and symbols which were once the focus of various pleasures in European carnival have become transformed into the morbid symptoms of private terror" (174). Thus through hysteria the woman expresses elements of the lower stratum from which her social position and historical times have forbidden access. She is horrified by the bodily lower stratum as well as evincing a fascination and desire for that which is denied her. As Wills says, "disgust in its turn bears the imprint of desire" (137). Thus, the hysteric's body represents an ambivalence in its violent reaction against the repressive nature of bourgeois society, and in its severe assumption of that society's dictates.

In her self-starvation Teresa creates a grotesque body for herself. This body is opposed to the flabby and golden beauty of her father's classical, narcissistic body. It is as if she is creating herself as ugly, just as he has called her, in order to defy his discourse of beauty.

Yet, this is not entirely the case, for she is also in some ways creating herself as a classical romantic heroine with a tragic, consumptive aspect. This is the pale, death-like beauty that her colleague Erskine perceives and admires (261). In this way her body is closed, unlike Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque body with its gay, free and open apertures. Teresa's asceticism also mimics her father's demands for abstemiousness. In the obverse of her downing of the champagne at Malfi's wedding, Teresa abstains from any activity her father would disdain.

Teresa rejects the processes of life and renewal represented through her refusal of food. Don Anderson argues that Teresa's effort to starve herself indicates a protest against the family. In refusing the communal meal she chooses "isolation for a limited period in order to seek higher objectives" (1979, 32). He adds that in doing so she refuses to partake in what she sees as social hypocrisy (1979, 32). This is certainly the case, but, more than this, Teresa refuses the family meal in order to ally herself with death and despair. This refusal of the feast suggests a disgust of bodily processes and products.

Teresa's anorexia represents her desire to rid herself of her body. In this way she removes her voluptuousness, and negates her sexuality. Louie Pollit's stigma over the plumpness of her body in puberty is nullified by her successor, the older Teresa. Ironically, Jonathan, to whom she seeks to be desirable, notes that she has become less attractive (296-7). Yet, at the same time, Teresa's starvation is a semiotic representation of her desire or hunger for love and passion. For instance, Teresa is said to interpret her cough as an expression of hunger: "For a long time, she had not noticed the cold weather

nor her cough, which, she said, was not really a cough, but a perpetual hunger which had slipped out of consciousness for several years . . . " (276). Teresa also says to herself about Jonathan, "It isn't that half-starved, half-grown man I want. It's passion, but there's no such thing, that I see. Shall I die hungry?" (226).²⁸ The body, unable to express its desires because of social constrictions, begins to consume itself in its hunger.

Teresa's construction of herself as a consumptive heroine and the "consumption" of her body might be interpreted as an anxiety over the social representation of a woman's body as commodity. It is as if the society which negates women, just as her father has done, causes Teresa to negate herself. But, paradoxically, Teresa's starvation is also an indication of her extreme will-power, her desire to reach the object of her devotion. It is of course one of the paradoxes of this text, and this society, that Teresa constructs herself as a subject by passing through a period of self-abnegation and self-annihilation.²⁹

The constant references to "will" in Teresa's "Seven Houses of Love" and the narrative's emphasis on her willpower, while evoking Ralph Fox's view of the historical struggle of wills via Engels, suggests Nietzsche's figure of the *Übermensch* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

There are direct and indirect references to Nietzsche in the text, including Jonathan's

²⁸ In the early part of the book the narrator describes the fiancés of Teresa's cousins Malfi and Tina as "half-starved" young men. Tom Swann, Tina's partner, is described in this way: "there, shifting his feet, near a privet hedge was a starved little man with stiff black hair" (18). The reader understands from this that Teresa is more discerning and willing to wait to find an experienced man, one who is more self-evidently passionate.

²⁹ If the process were more comic or benevolent *For Love Alone* might suggest a carnival relationship between death and love. Love, with its basis in renewal and reproduction, might be seen to embody death through the desire to negate the self in order to reach the other. Yet it is true that in order to birth the self Teresa must pass through this period in which she approaches death.

statement, "I'm beyond good and evil" (376).³⁰ Hazel Rowley points out that the very designation of this statement to Jonathan, who is far from heroic, and Teresa's social position as a woman means that Stead "sees the limitations of the Nietzschean vision in its application to women" (1988b, 35). This is supported by Teresa's response to Crow when he asks, "What about Nietzsche?", when criticising her for having sacrificed her time on the boat for the dipsomaniac. She replies: "It was well for Nietzsche – he had aunts to support him, later he was a university teacher, he did not really have to work" (359). Therefore, Nietzschean ideas are not adopted uncritically in the text, but Teresa's individual struggle to rise above her society nonetheless indicates a Nietzschean influence. It might be argued, then, that *For Love Alone* refunctions Nietzschean philosophy by having a woman hero use his notion of heroism to challenge the patriarchal and monologic bases of power.

The text suggests that Teresa moves beyond the various social conventions of love and marriage to a point where others rarely venture. This might appear to be an elitist position, yet Teresa's creation of herself as subject is founded in a dialogue with society. Furthermore, her quest is not in isolation, she must have partners – Crow, Quick, and Girton – with whom she must talk and physically express her metaphysical journey. In this way the text constructs the individual by a journey through social ideologies and experiences. Therefore, she is not *above* society, but in the Bakhtinian sense of subject development, is created *through* society. However, Bakhtin's concept of this heroic

³⁰ Teresa quotes from parts of *Zarathustra* to Crow's university friends (203). Indirect references include the narrator's comment, using Nietzschean imagery: "She saw how little they knew and thought it would be easy for her to get up among the heads of the living world; eagle's feathers sprouted" (204).

struggle with society and its coercive discourses is not entirely incompatible with Fox's or Nietzsche's ideas of the individual will. As we saw in *I'm Dying Laughing*, Bakhtin's emphasis on community, on polyphonic voices, does not exclude the possibility of individual action, but the individual is conceived amongst socio-historic discourses.

The extremities to which Teresa goes in her quest to reach Jonathan are almost self-parodic, to the extent that they might undermine her dignity as a hero. The detail of the narrative suggests this in the depiction of her pathetic and almost comic act of begging while looking for accommodation, and in the scene in which she plans to sleep in the vacant lot beside her factory in order to save herself the walk home, but uses all her energy in the attempt to do so (267; 280). Yet, Teresa in a way *mimics* Jonathan's claims to poverty and parodies his will to succeed. This undermines Jonathan's need to excuse his actions through his poverty, and minimises the degree of his struggle. However, despite this implicit mockery of Crow, the parodic element of this part of the text once again emphasises the ironic gap between the authorial discourse and the central protagonist. The authorial discourse once more laughs at the absurdities of the young Teresa's actions, but nonetheless maintains her as hero.

Bakhtin connects love with the genre he calls the "*adventurous-heroic*" and with which he connects Nietzsche (1990, 155). In this genre the individual seeks love from others in order to confirm its own worth, to define the self:

The thirst to be loved; the consciousness of oneself, the seeing of oneself, and the forming of oneself in the possible loving consciousness of another; the striving to turn the longed-for love of another into a force that impels and organizes my life in many of its constituents: all this, too, constitutes growth in the atmosphere of another's loving consciousness. (1990, 157)

Love, then, is a process of subject development through which the subject relies on an other³¹ – a dependency which might be perceived as a negative one. Yet, it is possible to see in this statement on love by Bakhtin, scant though it is, a dialogic potential in love, depending on its relation to monologic tendencies or forms which might limit that potential.

Teresa, of course, moves beyond this stage of self-abnegation. While the “Seven Houses” is a dialogue with Crow’s thesis, *For Love Alone* takes Teresa beyond martyrdom to find “another life and new hope” (Stead qtd. in Geering 1990, 423) in her relationship with James Quick. In this way Teresa struggles beyond the tragic ending of death written for the archetypal romantic heroine. Rather than have her subjectivity consumed in a union with a more powerful other, she finds a more dialogic type of love in which the power relations are more evenly balanced. Quick’s appreciation of Teresa’s “Seven Houses” indicates his willingness to acknowledge her viewpoint and self-worth – a recognition of her subjectivity. This is a benevolent, rather than coercive, love -- and one which the text and hero seem to acclaim in unison.

³¹ This is a view of love arguably borrowed and developed by Kristeva in her work, *In the Beginning was Love*, in which she argues that desire is “the ultimate sign of subjectivity” (1987a, 62). See also her *Tales of Love*.

A Dialogic Kind of Love

Quick is a carnivalesque “man of the world”; a real Don Juan without the cynicism of Jonathan Crow, or the self-interest and manipulative nature of Robbie Grant. He imparts street talk, jokes and travel tales: “He was now in full feather, interspersing debate with limericks, heavenly love with obscenity” (449). Quick’s plain speaking is therefore opposed to Crow’s academic jargon which conceals his vile nature. Quick is a man of vast knowledge, ideas and theories, some of which is learned by experience and the rest through his avid reading. His form of knowledge is opposed to Crow’s crude and immature theorising, giving Quick more validity as a man who will bring Teresa to awareness. Quick’s lewd jokes are at first a mystery to Teresa (368), but he soon brings her to sexual experience and opens a world for her in which she achieves self-knowledge. Through him she reconciles the desires of her “lower bodily stratum” with the avidity of her mind.

In Quick Teresa finds a man who is both pure and impure in a benevolent fashion. He is thus opposed to the pretence of purity offered by her father in the opening scene of the novel, and the vileness of Crow. The impure, or carnivalesque, side of Quick means that Teresa cannot perceive him as a chaste object of reverence, as she had done with Crow. Quick also challenges Teresa’s pedantic ideas of truth and honour by being unconcerned at lying in his business deals (362), and by persuading her to have a physical relationship outside legal marriage, but not outside love.

Quick is depicted as a very amiable character. He is a great talker, much in the same vein as Stead's monologic characters, but, unlike them, his talk is an indication of his intelligence and vivacity without the darker side of discourse as coercion. The narrative displays his sympathy with the working class and women in order to emphasise his difference from Jonathan (eg. 441). His rotund, generous figure is also a contrast to the mean-spirited and "half-starved" Crow, and to Teresa at the height of her suffering. His constant walking around London, while a sign of his loneliness, is also an indication of his thirst for knowledge and his energy. This penchant for walking links Quick and Teresa in their wanderlust, willpower, and passion.

Some critics have criticised the novel for presenting Quick as a *deus ex machina*. For instance, Brian Kiernan argues that he appears "in the nick of time to provide love *and* money, almost the millionaire seeking the sweet unspoilt heroine of women's magazine fiction" (77). This has the effect of giving Teresa's story somewhat of an epic structure by giving their love a mythological stature. Teresa herself sees their meeting as some kind of nameless fate: "If this is not fate, it is what is called fate" (458). Yet this line in itself suggests that the plot is continuing its claims to verisimilitude by asking the reader to accept Quick's arrival as a fortunate but not impossible coincidence. However, the conclusion to the novel involves this ambivalence between the finality and attainment of the goals of an epic quest and a certain inconclusiveness and open-endedness.

Quick's convenient appearance in the plot, and the fact that it seems his exposure of Jonathan is necessary before Teresa will give up her perception of Crow,³² have the effect of impeding a reading of Teresa as an autonomous hero. Quick's ability to persuade her of his point of view concerning Jonathan might be seen as another case of her willingness to fall prey to a man's discourse. However, the very contrast between Crow and Quick, and the construction of Quick as a sincere and benevolent character, mean that the reader is asked to cast aside these doubts. As Susan Higgins argues, "Teresa's rejection of Crow is at the same time a rejection of Crow's construction of reality, and [Quick's] is not a substitute knowledge" (440).

It is also not clear whether or not Teresa's relationship with Quick is an unequivocal success and an idyllic partnership. Quick's discussion with Girton over whether Teresa should travel to Oxford with Harry is perceived by Teresa as a "trade" discussion in which the men bargain over her as object (480). There is also some sense that Teresa is sometimes distant from Quick and performing the romantic role he desires her to play:

She resigned herself now to playing a part with him, because she loved him, and in order to give him happiness. She felt the fatigue of life, believing like so many young women that she had found out the truth, which was that man and woman cannot be true companions for each other. (460)

This hardly seems the ideal "spiritual marriage" suggested in the "Seven Houses of Love" based on Teresa of Avila's vision of union with God. But this is just as well because, as Joan Lidoff suggests, it is a relationship based in "love not as self-sacrifice or surrender into merged identity but as self-affirmation" (1982, 100). The wavering in

³² The falsity of Teresa's earlier perceptions of Jonathan is indicated by her ignorance of his colour-blindness, a fact which the clever and perceptive "Quick" has detected (502).

their relationship undermines an impression of epic closure and creates a perception of continual development.

A reader might also question the extent to which Teresa subverts the term "marriage". The parody of Malfi's wedding at the beginning of the novel and Teresa's symbolic stamping of the bride's bouquet underfoot suggest that Teresa's fate is not to be thought of in terms of conventional marriage. It is indeed the case, as Lidoff points out, that while the novel begins with a wedding the plot does not conclude with one (1982, 66). However, Teresa's relationship with Quick seems to be defined in terms of marriage. Diana Allen notes that Teresa's ideas contain, "a connection between a dream of perfect union and the social institution of marriage" (303). Teresa appears to despair at the fact that Quick will not or cannot offer to marry her. Later, their decision to live together is described in terms of marriage: "All her study of love fitted her for marriage", notes the narrator (458). Teresa's foray into promiscuity with Harry Girton also seems to be reviled by her as she makes a conscious decision to stay with Quick. While Teresa and Quick's relationship does break socially acceptable boundaries because it exists outside of legal marriage, it is not a comprehensive rewriting of the heterosexual relationship. However, in this very ambivalence over the term marriage (and for that matter, the word "love"),³³ the text makes it clear that Teresa has found her own definition.

³³ Teresa writes to Jonathan about the ambiguity of the term love: "The words, joy, love, excitement, are bald and general. That is why love stories I suppose sound so dull, for the heroine or hero cannot feel just love, it must be one of a hundred kinds of love he feels" (253). Teresa must find her own definition(s) among the social meanings offered her.

In some ways Quick and Teresa's relationship reverses the power structures in her relationship with Crow. His tears and constant devotion suggest that Teresa is now the object of love and the one who has the power to refuse or encourage the devotee. In this position Teresa feels herself free to explore the world of men; it is said that she wanted to "get to understand and love men, from whom she had been wrongly, feloniously separated for so long" (458). It is ironic that Teresa reverses Jonathan's position as "sociologist" by taking up the role of the masculine subject in her study of men as objects:

She was like a scientist who has had many failures and who, once he succeeds, thinks that all his previous researches were not wasted. . . . 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. (464; emphasis added)

This would suggest that theirs is not a dialogic love at all, that it exists not on a single plane, but as a reversed hierarchy. Yet this assumption of power by Teresa is not equated with a subjugation of Quick. Rather, her acclamation of power underscores her attainment of self and the rejection of the masochistic relationship with Crow. This assertiveness brings Teresa onto a level plane with her new partner.

Teresa's freedom to pursue her desire for Harry Girton is part of the culmination of her quest for love and knowledge. The affair, which takes place in the university town, Oxford, is a stage in her journey to wisdom.³⁴ Like Teresa of Avila's progressive stages for the soul, Teresa's tryst with Girton is simply another episode through which she must pass. It is true, however, that the episode with Girton has the effect of curtailing a

³⁴ The text maintains its view that there is more to be learnt by experience than through the theorising of academics such as Crow.

“happily-ever-after” reading based on Quick and Teresa’s relationship and so weakens the romantic or epic closure of their love.³⁵

Much is made in the novel of Girton’s physical resemblance to Teresa, so much so that the hotel-keeper in Oxford believes them to be brother and sister (487). In a parallel move Quick is said to resemble Harry’s partner, Manette (482). Bakhtin’s interpretation of doubles in Dostoevsky’s work is that they represent the dialogised self:

This destruction of the wholeness and finalized quality of a man is facilitated by the appearance, in the *menippeia*, of a dialogic relationship to one’s own self (fraught with the possibility of split personality). (PDP 117)

Dostoevsky’s doubles are therefore personifications of the dialogue within the self. There is not the same sense in *For Love Alone* of Harry as a manifestation of Teresa’s personality, but he is offered as a male version of herself. He is the political, active and heroic man whom she would seek to be if it were not for the social constraints placed on her because she is a woman. Girton is, of course, Ralph Fox’s ideal of the hero. Just as her father’s model of narcissism is repugnant, this attempt at a narcissistic relationship cannot be Teresa’s final goal. She must return to love the other in Quick. But the episode does imply a communion with the self; a moment of self-discovery.

The reinstatement in the narrative of passionate or metaphoric language in the episode with Girton intimates a connection with Teresa’s sensual world in the early section of the novel. For example, the narrative reads:

³⁵ In a letter to Bill Hunter an older Stead seems to regret the immorality of this episode: “The Harry Girton episode (which never took place) I only put in so that people would not say, ‘So she got married and lived happily ever after’. But it was a sad error of taste and sense . . .” (*Letters II* 357).

She now knew a bounding ecstatic gaiety she had not felt since her early girlhood, in the stern pride of sixteen. The golden young man³⁶ called up in her mind, when she was thinking of him, an endless succession of light images, golden days, golden globes within which she lived in the murk of London. (468)

Later, Teresa, for the moment alone because Harry has gone out, is described in this way: "She was in a strange state of ecstasy, she seemed to float upright, like a pillar of smoke, or flesh perhaps, some little way above the pavement" (489). As in the early part of the novel, this language, while a representation of bodily pleasure, is strangely divorced from any participation in the physical act of communion. The narrative calls it "ecstatic", "chaste" or "absolute" love (490). While the affair with Girton is seen as part of a progression to self for Teresa, it is also, in a sense, a regression in its connection with Teresa's mythological world and in its imagery of ecstasy, chastity and the burning flesh resonant of the martyr or saint. Therefore, the relationship cannot be wholly satisfying, and because Girton is about to leave to fight in the Spanish Civil War Teresa is no longer willing to devote herself to an absent other because she is now capable of her own "track-making" in the world (492).

Kate Lilley argues that it is problematic that Teresa relies on male companions in order to construct herself (1991, 175). Indeed, she never at any time seeks a life by herself or claims with pleasure the position of the next "Miss Hawkins". Her quest has been for knowledge through the vehicle of heterosexuality, and for a knowledge of heterosexuality itself. Stead seems to evince these views as her own in her interviews, and this colours her perception of feminism which she equates with separatism. For

³⁶ Harry, here, resembles Andrew Hawkins.

instance, in her interview with Ann Whitehead she says, "I object to any movement taking any direction which separates them from the men who are their natural friends and companions" (Whitehead 247). This dialogue with men is problematic if the reader asks Teresa to be an autonomous hero. However, the text itself clearly asserts that while Teresa has found heterosexual love, she has, more than this, attained a heroic independence and selfhood.

The open-endedness of the novel's "conclusion" does not allow the reader the finite conclusiveness of the epic. This inconclusiveness is suggested in the cyclical metaphor contained in the last line, spoken by Teresa: "It's dreadful to think that it will go on being repeated forever, he – and me! What's there to stop it?" (502). Lidoff suggests that the text asks us to read the ending as both cyclical and progressive when she says, "Progress is rather spiralled moving forward even as it repeats old patterns, in a continuing dialectic of struggle" (1982, 101). The inconclusiveness of Teresa's fate, which ends neither in death or conventional marriage, is emblematic of Teresa's journey to self-discovery. As Nick Mansfield asserts, "Her journey knows no destination because any neat resolution would belie the narrative's understanding of selfhood in terms of change and experiment rather than meaning and truth" (78). In this way, Teresa is Bakhtin's ideal of the novelistic hero: the endlessly becoming subject.

Yet it is also true that, despite the ambiguities contained in Teresa's relationship with Quick, we are meant to read the ending as a victorious conclusion to her quest. Teresa has succeeded in fulfilling her desires, and has accumulated a great deal of knowledge

such that she understands more than the static, but “learned”, Crow. She has struck out from family and home and has found love in an unconventional way. She has lived as a woman of action enacting the deeds evinced in her ideas, and she has had integrity, been strong-willed and assertive. In this way she is portrayed as a kind of epic hero.

Like the epic journey of that pre-eminent fool in love, Don Quixote, Teresa’s is a “buffoon Odyssey” (348): a quest founded in folly. Her foolishness brings her down to earth in the Bakhtinian sense and makes her a novelistic hero. Yet, at the same time, *For Love Alone* imitates the epic structure and constructs Teresa as a valorous hero. Indeed, she succeeds in her quest for love and knowledge. Yet, *For Love Alone* in its very multiplicity of voices and modes does not adopt the finalised, distant and closed structure of the classical epic. Nor is Teresa an epic hero because she is a subject in the process of formation. While Teresa does not utilise the carnival potential of Australia suggested in the spatial metaphors in the novel’s prologue, she does combat the monologic and patriarchal voices around her and so challenges the “epic” nature of these discourses. Thus, *For Love Alone* refunctions the epic, investing its main protagonist with heroism, and imitating the epic’s journey pattern, while undermining the very discourses at the foundation of that classical genre.

It might be argued that Teresa is a carnival woman in her ability to overturn social conventions. Diana Brydon sees Teresa’s love as:

subversive, even revolutionary, because egalitarian and unlimited. It is genuinely free, not the travesty of freedom labelled "free love" that Jonathan tries to palm off on her as a new excuse for the old exploitation. (1987, 81)

Teresa's heroic assertion of love undermines social prescriptions of passivity for women and so challenges society's notions of propriety.³⁷ Teresa, then, challenges Aristotle's dictates in his *Poetics* that a woman should "aim at . . . propriety": "There is a type of manly valour; but for a woman to be valiant in this sense, or terrible, would be inappropriate" (51). In her very quest for love Teresa is improper. When Teresa has declared her love to Jonathan the narrator describes her in this way:

she went about with all the feelings of a young anarchist preparing to overthrow authority in secret, for strangely enough she now hated the accepted world, and triumphed over it too. She had undone it all. (226)

Thus, through her love, which she finds on her own terms in the end, Teresa assumes a subversive (not submissive) position. However, the potential of Australia as Cythera – an island of carnivalesque love – is sacrificed in her need to escape the patriarchal home.

Teresa embraces the position of the *hetaera*: "I should like to be one of the *hetaerae*, thought she, that's different from a harlot, it's a mistress harlot; govern my own household, do as I liked, have no one say no to me" (93-4). She is one of the "virtuous *hetaera*" Bakhtin speaks of as typical of the misalliances of the *menippea* (PDP 118).

Bakhtin also writes, "A carnival sense of the world also ma[kes] it possible to 'deck out philosophy in the motley dress of a *hetaera*'" (PDP 134). Teresa finds "free" love in spite

³⁷ Stead says the novel got its name from a publisher who based it on a calypso going around New York at the time: "Twas for love, love alone, King Edward left his throne" (Lidoff 1982, 196). The power of love to subvert political and historic institutions in the story of Edward and Mrs Simpson is mirrored in Teresa's rejection of patriarchal propriety.

of the coercive discourses surrounding her. In doing so, she does not sacrifice all her erotic potential or her heterosexual desires in her quest for freedom, independence, and selfhood. In fact, unlike those nineteenth-century romances in which the heroine is ascribed death or marriage at the conclusion of her *Bildungs*, Teresa combines the genre of the quest with love without diminishing the importance of either, and, in doing so, maintains her position as hero.

It is perhaps, ultimately, impossible to decide whether or not Teresa is a subversive figure. In her dependency on men and assertion of self, in her "marriage" which is and is not marriage, in her "honour" and quest for "free love", in her high-minded seriousness and her carnivalesque madness and foolishness, in her journey which is both physical and metaphysical, she is perhaps more ambivalent than anything else. Yet in this very ambivalence, in the eternal becoming of Teresa as subject, she counters the closed, fixed and finalised nature of the epic hero, and of social prescriptions. The text itself, in its multi-voicedness, its ironic gap between the hero and the authorial discourse, and in its very mixture of genres, epitomises Bakhtin's theory of "novelism". Its heterogeneity challenges monologia and the authoritarian word.

Conclusion

A “Magnificent Riot” Stead’s Dialogic Texts

After the preceding discussion on Christina Stead’s carnivalesque and dialogic texts the question may well be asked, is her work in any significant sense a “riot”? Certainly it seems that the extent of the subversiveness of these novels may be questioned. Some readers may seek a projected definitive future beyond the endings of Stead’s novels in which the plurality of voices offered in her narratives is over-ridden by a clear, polemic voice that suggests a concise political vision. Indeed, the absence of rhetoric in her novels has been shown to cause confusion in the work of some critics, and many readers may find the lack of firm political positioning ideologically problematic. For instance, it has been demonstrated that the absence of an overt political voice in *House of All Nations* leads to a possible reading of the narrative’s support of the plutocrat, Jules Bertillon – the very figure the text must undermine in order to oppose itself to capitalism. Thus carnival ambivalence in the depiction of Jules may be thought to hinder, rather than help, a mockery of the system.² To a Marxist reader this might be seen as this novel’s reticence towards direct hostility.

Despite evidence of a Marxist perception of history and society, Stead’s novels cannot be seen as “revolutionary” in the sense that they call directly for the overthrow of the

¹ Title taken from M. Barnard Eldershaw’s statement on Stead’s early novels: “Their very variety forces them to a sort of sameness; they are continually effacing themselves in their magnificent riot . . .” (166).

² The same can be said of the treatment of Letty Fox, whereby the carnivalesque enthusiasm in the depiction of that character may be said to disarm the novel’s satiric intent.

dominant order. If they act politically, it is arguably in an indirect manner. In general, the absence of rhetoric in Stead's work may lead the reader to question whether "sidelong" (Stead 1994, 198) criticism or indirect polemic, and ambivalence (including ambivalent heroes), should be privileged over overt political positioning and unequivocal rhetoric.

As far as Stead's female protagonists are concerned, it has been argued that Emily Howard and Letty Fox are ultimately mocked for their political hypocrisy and bourgeois ideals despite the suggestion of their carnivalesque potential as "women on top" and as humorists. Their carnival natures support the carnivalesque narratives of the texts but, as individuals, these characters are not representative of the political action in which the text invests. In other words, the political voice of the text distances itself from these figures. Like Emily Howard, Lilia Trollope, too, was seen to be ambivalent in her role as both victim and oppressor, such that she could not be seen as entirely heroic, or viewed as the text's centre of empathy. In *For Love Alone*, there is a more problematic association between the authorial discourse and the central protagonist. That novel ultimately supports Teresa as hero but her carnival potential is limited somewhat by the (ambivalently) conventional conclusion to her journey in which she finds heterosexual romance and hence, arguably, does not radically challenge those discourses she has sought to combat. Thus, for a feminist reader (or any reader) seeking unequivocal heroes, Stead's female protagonists are not without their limitations.

The same can be said for Stead's working-class characters. While Adam Constant is a figure who directly attacks capitalism and its edifice, the bank, he is not made central in *House of All Nations*. Similarly, the Hallers' maid, Anna, and the hotel workers in *The Little Hotel* (despite their ridicule of "the Admiral"), are not constructed as the absolute source of parody in these novels. Jonathan Crow also, in the end, is not created as valorous merely because of his working-class roots. Thus these texts do not uncritically support the working-class characters or construct them entirely as the "carnival folk" who might ridicule officialdom and challenge the dominant order.

Therefore, we cannot look to Stead's protagonists for the definitive source of subversion in these novels. If subversion is to lie anywhere it must be perceived in the texts themselves. Just as Stead says "the reader must draw his [sic] own conclusions" (1994, 198) from the many-charactered novel, perhaps it is ultimately the reader's responsibility to decide upon the extent of subversiveness in Stead's novels. Yet, it has been argued here that the carnivalesque and dialogic elements of these texts cannot be denied and must be considered as anti-authoritarian strategies.

This thesis has argued, primarily, that Stead's novels can be defined as carnivalesque literature. They contain elements of popular-festive forms and strategies as analysed by Bakhtin in the work of Rabelais. Following on from Rabelais, they also embody the elements of Dostoevsky's serio-comical novels and employ polyphony in their narratives. On a more abstract level, these texts fulfil Bakhtin's concept of the heterogeneous novel in their mix of voices, genres, and discourses. They are, more than

this, dialogic texts in which authoritarian discourses and viewpoints are denied in favour of collective truth and the presentation of equal subjects. It is in this very *dialogism* that the ultimate value of Stead's texts can be perceived.

In general there is an indirect political voice in each of Stead's novels which challenges hierarchies, authoritarian discourses or dominant ideologies. Stead's texts have been shown to employ various carnival strategies of subversion. These are: inversion, parody, relativisation, and laughter in general. For example, Jules Bertillon was shown to be a mock-king thus "decrowning" his position as a figure of authority. Robbie Grant was seen to be a rogue who, through his self-interested language, made apparent the merchant's discourse of greed. The scene of Malfi's wedding in *For Love Alone* was interpreted as a carnivalesque parody of a serious social occasion, which also had the effect of mocking the naive Teresa. Letty Fox's bourgeois ideals were mocked by her "own" narrative of picaresque promiscuity; and so on. Stead's use of these methods has been shown to result in the mockery of capitalism, bourgeois conventions, political hypocrisy, and monologic personalities. More broadly, dogmatic and authoritarian discourses, such as patriarchy, fascism and totalitarianism, were seen to be challenged through her carnival and dialogic strategies.

It has been argued that any political intention in carnival is also accompanied by a joyful laughter, play and delight. In this way, Stead's work opposes "one-sided rhetorical seriousness" (*PDP* 107). The authorial or narratorial discourse laughs at characters and their languages, yet delights in its own laughter, its own play, which these characters

and ideologies have made possible. This laughter is in no way antithetical to the political intention of these texts; on the contrary, this laughter underscores the political voice. In other words, Stead's laughter serves the same political intention, but is also positive and "gay". This laughter does not merely mock the objects of derision using a negative, satirical tone, but also relishes their vices and absurdities. Stead's texts, then, have been shown not to be merely serious, but to be carnivalesque. Her novels are not entirely sardonic, or critical, but also encompass parody, irony and comedy.

This thesis has also traced a number of elements which are continued throughout Stead's work. The banquet, for instance, plays a large part in many of Stead's novels. These meals have been interpreted following Bakhtin's analysis of banquet imagery in *Rabelais and His World*. Stead's descriptions of banquets delight in carnivalesque exaggeration and word-play. These scenes also serve to criticise the avaricious and over-indulgent figures of power. In Stead's case it is not monks who are derided for their greed and hypocrisy as it is in the case of Rabelais; rather, pertinent to her era, she mocks bourgeois taste and etiquette, and figures of capitalist wealth. At the dinner table, the bodies of the avaricious are made grotesque in their very over-indulgence and malice, and so these figures are degraded. This is done, however, with a certain Rabelaisian, or Gargantuan, gaiety.

Madness has also been shown to be an important motif in Stead's novels. As we saw in the case of Robbie Grant, to create a figure of authority as mad is to degrade that character and to undermine his or her claim to rationality and power. Yet, madness

itself can be a carnival strategy for it enables the relativisation of normality and results in an eccentric freedom. So Stead's mad protagonists, such as the Mayor of B., and even Teresa Hawkins, have been shown to evince a carnivalesque viewpoint. Their madness adds to the laughter and gaiety of these texts. Indeed, this is not just tragic babble, (although there are elements of tragedy in these novels), because the characters' madness literally embodies carnival strategy.

Stead's mad characters, such as Emily Howard or Karel Karolyi, represent the multi-voicedness of their era. Therefore, they cannot be perceived as fragmented subjects in any "non-referential" sense, for their madness is grounded in their socio-historic milieu. Yet, it is as if the colliding discourses of the times are so frenetic and disturbing that control cannot be sustained resulting in inevitable break-down and incoherency. However, Stead's novels do not assert such a nihilistic approach themselves for this representation of madness is a positive strategy. If madness is indicative of the times, then the era is rendered neurotic and uncertain. In this way Stead makes apparent, and undermines, the tenets of the "old" or dominant order, and questions the very "rationality" of her epoch. As Oliver Fenton says in his stupor, "There are countries where this is state policy. This is but cuckoo lore" (*BF* 338). The elements of fantasy and madness in Stead's work must therefore be considered significant for their carnivalesque subversion of dominant "reality" and "rationality".

These subjects who do not "coincide" with themselves are exemplary carnivalesque figures in their relativisation of epic or tragic "wholeness" (*PDP* 116-7), or their

subversion of the dominant order's ideal of the atomised and coherent individual. Bakhtin, of course, favours *equivocality* over unequivocality. The ambivalent carnivalesque hero is gay and opposed to all seriousness. In Bakhtin's theory ideal characters are "unfinalisable", interactive with others, and incoherent: they cannot be reduced to singular, monologic and unequivocal definitions. We should not expect, then, to find "one-sided" unequivocal heroes in Stead's work, but to find characters who embody a gay multiplicity of voices.

This thesis has argued that the multi-voiced and heteroglossic nature of Stead's novels is eminently suited to the historical period in which she writes and in which her novels are set. The tumultuous first half of the twentieth century is represented in the ideologies of each character, and through the overt socio-historic positioning of each text. This is a world in conflict, of opposing voices, and ideological struggle. Stead's portrayal of the era is ambivalent: on the one hand she depicts the times as terrifying and frightening, but, on the other hand, she also delights in the depiction of the dynamism of this world and the very variety of life it offers. This is a world which is both exciting in its plurality, and frightening in its violent coerciveness.

We have seen how the apocalyptic essence of the era also suggests potential, transformation and metamorphosis in the carnival sense. Yet Stead's novels do not go or see beyond this liminal stage to suggest a future in a polemic fashion. They do, however, invest in the ideal of potential, in the carnival possibilities of a world in strife. In this way Stead depicts a world which is endlessly *becoming* and "unfinalisable". This

topsy-turvy world spins wildly out of control; it is fearful, tragic, terrifying, but it also has the potential to be liberating. By laughing at this chaotic world, Stead negates fear and mocks the era's terrible seriousness.

The "multi-leveledness" and "multi-voicedness" (PDP 20) of Stead's novels must be seen as a direct result of her work's dialogue with capitalism. These texts are founded in capitalism in the sense that it is the pervasive socio-historic ideology from which they must speak. Thus the dynamism of Stead's novels must, in part, be seen as integrally related to the "whirl" and inherent impermanence of capitalism. However, these novels activate and represent the heterogeneous voices which speak against capitalism through characters who are communists, and those who are oppressed and bewildered by that system. More than this, Stead's texts mock and ridicule the bourgeois epoch and figures of capitalist wealth. Through their very heterogeneity they challenge capitalism's paradoxical (because capitalism is shown to rely on crisis and fluidity) claim to permanence.

If one had to suggest a model for Stead's narratives a "whirling" structure might be the most appropriate. This is not to suggest that these narratives are circular: they do not begin at one point and return logically to that initial location. Technically speaking, it has been demonstrated that non-linear movement and repetitiveness in the novels is the result of carnivalesque literature's reliance on contemporaneity, polyphony's counterposing of voices, and the recording of minutiae in order to establish a character's subjectivity. Furthermore, a motif of "spinning" is a suitable representation of the

dynamism and pace of Stead's novels despite their anti-linear movement. A "whirling" model for Stead's narratives would also embody carnival's reliance on cycles, ambivalence and a world which is topsy-turvy.

Stead also shares Bakhtin's theory of language in its dialogic exchange between speaker, listener and subject in which all three interact, bouncing off each other in "interactive circles" (Stam 120), in a way which disturbs the triangular pattern of language found in Aristotle's work, or the direct exchange between addresser and addressee in Saussure's linguistics. Thus a whirling motif might represent the complicated exchange or matrix of meanings, tones, and ideologies behind every utterance. In general, Stead's narratives might be said to be "centrifugal" in structure through their opposition to centripetal languages and linear time and movement. They resist all centrism.

Therefore, Stead's novels are endlessly becoming, just as dialogue is perpetual, and the contemporary world cannot be made distant but is always familiar and immediate. In this way, Stead's texts have been shown to be inconclusive. The absence of authorial interference or narratorial guidance means that a definitive interpretation of her novels is elusive. While the texts must be conclusive to some extent because of the immanent finality of the novel form, they are nevertheless open-ended. There is no moral voice which concludes these texts and seeks to punish characters through death or tragic catastrophe. Her novels give the impression that the dialogue enacted in the text will continue on beyond the ending because the interaction of discourses is ceaseless.

In her use of polyphony Stead shares Bakhtin's ideal of the objective portrayal of characters in her depiction of each character as a "three-dimensional" subject, and in the way these characters are left to speak for themselves. Therefore, the narratives involve little direct interjection from either the narrator's discourse or an authorial discourse. However, a hidden voice is sometimes discernible in these novels in which the authorial discourse is implicitly judgemental and invests in an ironic or parodic tone in order to deride some characters. Thus, these novels are often "double-voiced" texts evincing a "hidden polemic". This dialogue between an authorial discourse and a novel's characters is one of the important concepts in Bakhtin's work because of its recognition of the author's presence, albeit a hidden and sometimes indirect influence. In this way, the possibility of absolute objectivity in which the author is entirely absent is somewhat illusory, yet polyphony's goal of objectivity cannot be dismissed and must be considered significant for its ethical implementation of subjectivity. Bakhtin's theories demonstrate the saturation of the subject by ideology and discourse, and so Stead's work must be appreciated for its attempt at escaping the limited horizon of the author's own viewpoint by envisioning the subjectivities of others.

Despite an absence of polemic and the lack of valorisation of working-class characters, Marxism perhaps best represents Stead's vision of social collectivity when Marxism is envisioned as a dialogue between equal subjects who are liberated from oppressive hierarchies and from a system which creates its "subjects" as commodities. This, *I'm Dying Laughing* suggests, is possible in practice only when the Communist Party³ is freed

³ In this case the CPUSA is the target of laughter.

from its own authoritarian suppression of otherness, and from its deafness to the political inconsistencies apparent in its history. Indeed, we have seen that Stead is not frightened to laugh at Communist Party politics, and to invite the Party to laugh at itself. Yet, just as Bakhtin's theories must be seen to have an affinity with Marxism in their opposition to the reification of humans under capitalism and in their socio-historic emphasis, so too must Stead's work be seen to share a Marxist perspective in its vision of capitalism as oppressive.

Moreover, Stead's reliance on the socio-historic construction of subjectivity challenges the twentieth century's emphasis on individualism so denigrated by Ralph Fox in his analysis of the contemporary novel. We have seen how Stead constructs each of her protagonists through the heteroglossic discourses of his or her world. Thus the individual as an isolated entity is illusory. Yet, this approach does not deny individual agency or action. According to Bakhtin, and as we have seen in the character of Teresa Hawkins, a hero is one who struggles against the coercive discourses about (and surrounding) her (or him). In Bakhtin's theory of polyphony this includes the independent character, or hero, who is free to act and speak outside the dictates of authorial discourse. This form of "individualism" is not elitist in any hierarchical sense, nor is it ahistorical, but the "struggle" is nonetheless heroic. Stead does not depict prominent figures who change history directly, but these "obscure" protagonists must be perceived amongst their historic discourses.

Marxism is not the only model which might encompass Stead's ideal of equal subjects on a non-hierarchical plane. Her vision of the United States with its ribald and diverse voices, and its history of liberation, must be seen, potentially at least, as a space in which a level multiplicity of voices might be attainable. Yet, Stead combats this vision of America with her portrayal of monetary greed and self-interest in her American characters. This is a country of monstrous avarice, in which even love is reduced to a series of financial transactions. Despite its guise of plurality and democracy, Stead shows the United States, too, to be pervaded by coercive and monologic discourses.

Feminism might also be seen as a political ideology which might encompass Stead's work. Feminism, when it recovers the silenced female voice from patriarchal and centripetal discourses, creates and declares a subjectivity for women, thus undermining this hierarchy by *speaking* – by asserting a centrifugal voice. Yet, Stead's relationship with feminism has been seen to be problematic: firstly, as was mentioned earlier, because of the equivocality of her female protagonists who are often undermined by the narrative; and, furthermore, by the focus on male subjects in some of her novels (such as *House of All Nations*), at the expense of female characters who, while often given something of a voice in keeping with polyphony, are relatively silenced. It seems that Stead is concerned with both male and female voices, and, in texts like *The Man Who Loved Children*, is interested in the dialogue between them. Yet, it is also clear in these novels that Stead perceives the limited social and historical roles for women and so challenges these social prescriptions. Therefore, it might be suggested, as the discussion on Teresa Hawkins demonstrated, that Stead's dialogic and carnivalesque novels laugh

at and subvert patriarchy when it is depicted as a dogmatic and tyrannical discourse. The dialogue between Bakhtinian theory, feminism and Stead was outside the scope of this thesis, but is one which, perhaps, should be explored further.

Stead's use (and Bakhtin's theory) of multiple views and equal subjects cannot be denounced simply as a nihilistic pluralism. Her world is not devoid of truth or of material reality – this is not a world reduced to an anarchic cacophony of voices, to relativism *in toto*.⁴ Indeed, the negation of centrism in centrifugality cannot be equated with absolute absence. Truth is to be found through multiple perceptions; a multiplicity which challenges the limited or “one-eyed” vision of the single and monologic viewpoint. Many voices, then, are needed to construct the true history of Stead's era presented in her novels.

Heteroglossia, when depicted passively, merely restates an extant diversity of voices and discourses. Carnival, too, when it ridicules those people or languages which are already subordinated, cannot be subversive. Therefore, carnival and heteroglossia can only be liberating if and when they are actively used against higher languages and authorities. Stead's novels upturn hierarchies, decrown, degrade, bring things down to a level plane, and so undermine “higher”, or superior, powers.

Stead creates dialogic texts in a time which she has shown to be pervaded by monologic ideologies and the conflicts between them. Hers is not a world of benevolent discursive

⁴ While *relativisation* is a carnival strategy it cannot be reduced to relativism *in toto*.

exchange, but her characters are ideologues who struggle with each other, and some seek to suppress the voices of others. Stead counters the dangers of this monologic approach by the very creation of her dialogic texts in which the monologic characters are undermined and monologic ideologies are relativised. Thus her novels do more than just mirror or “reflect” the heteroglossia of her era: they challenge and enact a dialogue with those discourses.

Ultimately, in a paradox which is evident in both the work of Stead and Bakhtin, it seems that the ideal of level and benevolent discursive exchange is an impossibility because it is always and everywhere affected by discourses which seek to assert themselves in a hierarchical manner. Yet, when the world is seen to be permeated by dogmatic discourses “deaf” to others, the assertion of dialogic structures, of multi-voicedness, becomes a way of subverting, undermining, and relativising such “high” languages by exposing their monologic natures, too, as *impossible* because inevitably heterogeneous. In this way Stead shows how “all languages” are “masks” (Bakhtin *DI* 273), and, in doing so, she challenges tyrannical ideologies. This, then, is the ultimate value of Stead’s dialogic approach.

We have seen how Stead’s novels are in many ways “monstrous”. They are “grotesque” in their excrescences, repetitiveness, and formlessness. In this way they are opposed to the “classical bodies” of more polished novels. Their refunctioning of classical literary forms such as the epic, or tragedy, challenges generic conventions. In their grotesquerie they are also ambivalent: they repulse, but they also entice through their laughter,

irregularity, multiplicity, and carnival gaiety. In conclusion, these are gargantuan texts: enormous, consuming, hideous, as well as carnivalesque and ribald, set in a time when reality took on monstrous dimensions.

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