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SUSAN SHERIDAN

6 Feminist readings: the case of Christina Stead

With the development of feminist literary criticism over the past decade or so, most women writers recognised as 'major' now have a feminist as well as a mainstream reputation. Christina Stead is an interesting case in point, because the two reputations have emerged almost simultaneously and there is evidence of a struggle going on over the possession of her name. Male critics, in these early stages of Stead criticism, frequently challenge the legitimacy of feminist readings. They object to what they see as feminists 'enlisting her work in support of partisan causes' (Geering, 1978:469; Reid, 1979:112-13) and misreading her texts by an overemphasis on certain features such as her portraits of egotistical males (Clancy, 1981:42) or the 'reductive labelling' of her female characters as feminist heroines (Pybus, 1982:42).

Such objections are easily recognisable as appeals to some basic assumptions of mainstream liberal humanist criticism: that literature has nothing to do with 'partisan causes' but rises above politics and history to explore the universal 'human condition', and that distinctions of gender or other cultural differences made in relation to this 'human condition' are inevitably 'reductive', inevitably made at the expense of the literary text's self-regulating complexity. Feminist criticism challenges both these assumptions by maintaining that such claims to universality are false and that all readings-those of main- stream male critics included-are appropriations of the text and are made from a gender-marked place within a particular cultural con- text (Furman, 1980:52). Feminist criticism of all descriptions insists that the position from which one reads is not neutral, and certainly not neuter. Jonathan Culler describes feminism's 'hypothesis of the woman reader' and its effect as follows: 'What it does above all is to reverse the usual situation in which the perspective of a male critic is

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assumed to be sexually neutral, while a feminist reading is seen as a case of special pleading and an attempt to force the text into a predetermined mold' (Culler, 1983:55).

Yet such objections to feminist criticism of Stead's work can be supported by the novelist's own statements rejecting feminism as a political movement, and in this respect they are not so easily dismissed. It is a stock gesture of such 'malestream' critics to quote Stead's own denials that her fiction had any particular concern with the situation of women or with feminism. In interview after interview she reiterated the opinion that Women's Liberation was not a genuinely political movement against oppression but middle-class fanaticism, 'pure freakery' (Whitehead, 1974:246). Feminist critics are in a less advantageous position to deal with this kind of appeal to the author's authority because, generally speaking, they have developed a critical practice which does indeed refer questions of meaning back to the text's author, a practice which reads the woman writer's texts as expressions of herself, of her female conflicts and visions. This feminist criticism implicitly defines itself as the search for feminist meanings in the texts of women, and in that respect it shares the critical presupposition of its mainstream detractors that meanings reside in texts (put there, as it were, by authors), and that the task of criticism is to decipher those meanings.

This, the dominant mode of feminist criticism so far, has been called 'gynocritics' (Showalter, 1979:25 et passim). It involves the identification of feminist themes in the texts of women writers through attending to their accounts of female experience (usually assumed to be that of the writer herself). In the process, gynocritics has tended to set up a canon of ideologically sound feminist works by a pantheon of exemplary feminist writers. The fact that Stead has refused the mantle of 'feminist writer', and the difficulty of describing her later novels as 'feminist' in any clear sense, are two practical reasons for questioning the critical assumptions and practices of gynocritics. There is also the theoretical reason touched on earlier, the extent to which gynocritics shares these assumptions and practices with the mainstream criticism against which it sets itself politically (Moi, 1985:62-63). On the other hand, feminist criticism of male-authored literary works (what Showalter calls 'feminist critique'), because it cannot expect to find

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authentic female experience represented in them, is less interested in authorial intentions, more likely to 'trust the tale, not the teller' and to attend to the text's inscriptions of ideology rather than reading it as if its language were transparent. The gap between such a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and the celebratory revisions of women's writing characteristic of gynocritics is remarkable. It is also a disturbing gap, if one is

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disinclined, as I am, to believe that only men's texts are saturated in ideology while women's writing offers the woman reader direct access to female experience. Showalter's distinction between gynocritics and feminist critique certainly describes a major divide in feminist literary criticism, but the divide itself must be questioned, not least for its reliance on authorial signatures of gender.

Feminist criticism of all descriptions insists that the gender of the reader matters. The way in which it is held to matter, however, and what it means to 'read as a woman', needs further investigation. As Mary Jacobus puts it:

More recently American criticism has become concerned with the reader as the place where meanings are generated ... and therefore more concerned with the question of the woman reader . . . The woman reader isn't simply produced by having had female experience, she's produced in some sense by the text, whether it's the text she's reading or a text that reads her. (Jacobus, 1986:51-52)

The appeal to the woman reader can be seen as a dual one: on the one hand, to the woman as social subject, whose female identity is thus 'given', and on the other hand to the woman reader as she is constantly inscribed in discursive constructions of femininity. The ground for interpretation is not so much female experience itself but whatever discourses on female experience are available, discourses which may be shaped by different feminist concerns at different times and in different cultural contexts. Such discourses constitute a feminist reader or reading position which sets itself in productive relation to the text. As Culler puts it, in slightly different terms:

The appeal to the experience of the reader provides leverage for displacing or undoing the system of concepts or procedures of male criticism, but 'experience' always has this divided, duplicitous character: it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced- an indispensable point of reference, yet never simply there. (Culler, 1983:63)

Interaction between these two aspects of the reading process, as I hope to show in the following discussion, can produce a high degree of instability. Gynocritical readings of women's novels depend on the

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model of a woman reader's identification with the female pro-tagonist(s), but this model only works successfully when the protagonist can herself be seen as a feminist or proto-feminist, as victim or heroine of the struggle with patriarchal power. In much of Stead's work, however, the sexual politics of the female protagonist are unclear, or even anti-feminist, and the woman reader is left without firm ground to stand on, in an unstable relation to both protagonist and narrator. But if the reader is in an unstable place or

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field which the narrative strategies of the text attempt to organise, reading is also a process or practice, a work of producing meaning; to read is to 'produce the text, play it, open it out, make it go' (Barthes, 1979:80). Operating on a notion of reader-power of this kind, feminist criticism is in a better position to fulfil its potential for 'undoing the system of male criticism' and to develop its own procedures of reading which would apply equally to male- and female- authored texts, appropriating both for feminist purposes.

I want now to look at some gynocritical appropriations of Stead's best-known novel, The Man Who Loved Children, and to estimate their strengths and limitations. Even within the dominant liberal- humanist critical discourse, a certain feminist reading position is possible and has proved productive, as exemplified by Dorothy Green's essay 'Storm in a Teacup' (1974). Her sharp analysis of the patriarchal nature of family dynamics implicitly answers the sentimentalities about 'the family' propounded by Randall Jarrell in his influential introductory essay to the novel. While her reading constituted a powerful counter-diagnosis of major thematic issues, how- ever, it perpetuated at the same time the notion that the daughter in this family, Louisa, must escape from it because she is potentially an artist, a destiny which cannot, in this reading, be connected with her cultural fate as a woman. Green's approach could be described as one which brings to bear a woman's point of view, but within the boundaries of liberal humanist ideology. To schematise: it locates women's (and children's) oppression within the family but assumes that beyond this private sphere of life a woman (a woman artist, for instance) can enter the public sphere on the same terms as a man. It is a position similar to that of Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex (1972), with its central opposition between the immanence of women's condition within the domestic world, and the potential transcendence in the world of work and politics available to the 'independent woman'. In this oppositional scheme there is only one model of subjectivity, that of a 'universal' individualism, covertly identified with masculinity.

Out of the Women's Liberation movement which took up and extended de Beauvoir's analysis of women's oppression, radical feminism has emerged as the dominant tendency, at least in North America. In literary studies, as in other areas of knowledge, radical feminism has

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challenged the universalist claims of liberal humanism. It has gone on to maintain that women have not in fact been absent from cultural production but have been, in Dorothy Smith's phrase, 'eclipsed' from 'men's culture' (Smith, 1978). The study of this eclipsed female culture-gynocritics-has been a major theme of radical feminism. But in the process of recovering women's writing,

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gynocritics, practically speaking, inverts the categories of 'men's culture' and applies them to women, without interrogating the categories themselves. For instance, gynocritics has produced feminist versions of the dominant literary-critical categories of 'tradition and the individual talent' and of literature as expressive form. Influential books by Patricia Spacks (1976), Ellen Moers (1977), Elaine Showalter (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), have set in place the major themes of gynocritics: a matrilineal history of women's writing, enabling myths of female creativity and community, and an analysis of women's texts as expressive of the female experience, in particular the specificities of feminine psychology.

Joan Lidoff's study of Christina Stead takes up these latter themes. Her analysis of The Man Who Loved Children is entitled 'Domestic Gothic: the Imagery of Anger' (1979), and it inevitably focuses attention on Henny, the mother, as victim; she is seen as a representative figure of the 'constricted subculture' of women denied legitimate outlets for aggression and fantasy. Louisa, the daughter, is seen as the agent of the female anger expressed in that Gothic sensibility, a sensibility which is also, Lidoff argues, shared by Stead's narrative voice. But a major problem with the theory of expressive form she is operating with is that in eliding the two characters into a single figure representing 'female experience', she manages to avoid examining the violent-indeed fatal-conflict be- tween them. And in identifying this composite figure ultimately with the unifying narrative sensibility, everything is referred back to the 'authority' of Stead herself.

This kind of feminist criticism repeats the gestures of mainstream liberal humanist criticism in two ways. First, meaning is referred back to the author, whose creativity is seen as its single origin and whose text transmits this meaning to the waiting reader who, be- cause she too is a woman, recognises it as authentic. Second, to operate on this theory of meaning is to divert attention from the critic's own activity as reader- in this instance, from her own choice of the feminist questions she brings to bear on the text. In a repetition of the universalising gesture of the dominant critical dis- course, 'female experience' is generalised out of what in fact is a cluster of particular radical feminist themes, namely a female sub- culture (defined by domesticity and marked by the suppression of anger and fantasy) and a feminine psychology

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conceptualised in behaviourist terms, and which generalises about 'female experience' without recognising differences of class, race and sexuality.

My own analysis of The Man Who Loved Children is in part caught up in the same universalising tendency (Sheridan, 1985). In talking about the 'patriarchal family drama' in terms of incest (or

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what Elizabeth Ward (1984) has more accurately designated 'father-daughter rape') and in giving this theme a psychoanalytic reading derived from Juliet Mitchell's earlier hypothesis of a 'feminine Oedipus complex' (Mitchell, 1975), this essay buys into the continuing debate in feminist theory about whether Freudian psychoanalysis can claim to explain the universal entry into human culture of gendered subjects. It is, though, a debate about the applicability of a theoretical construct to explain the oppression of women, rather than a claim about the capacity of literature to represent female experience, and in this respect it appropriates Stead's text as a contribution to feminist theory. It is undeniable that the best-known of Stead's novels, the autobiographically based The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone, stand up remarkably well to gynocritical readings. Their concern with the transition from childhood to adult femininity, and with the dynamics of heterosexual relations, can be read as a powerfully critical representation of female experience. The linguistic excesses that mark Stead's style can be explained, as Joan Lidoff explains them, as a Gothic mode compatible with a 'feminine aesthetic', the theory of which is another major concern of gynocritics. The structural anomalies characteristic of Stead's narratives can in each case be subordinated to a utopian reading of the final outcome for the heroine: that is, Louisa's escape from her father's house in The Man Who Loved Children, and Teresa's emergence out of the 'womb of time' and into the 'citied plain' of human history and her own freedom, in For Love Alone (p.494). Yet problems begin to show when, for instance, it is recognised that For Love Alone has a doubled ending, in that the final scene is one of repetition, not of resolution and closure: Teresa sees her former lover-tormenter in the street and reflects 'bitterly': 'It's dreadful to think that it will go on being repeated for ever, he-and me! What's there to stop it?' (p.502).

The limitations of this approach become clearly evident. however, when one looks to. Stead's later novels, in particular Letty Fox, Cotters' England and Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife and I'm Dying Laughing). In each case the female protagonist is neither a victim nor a heroine but a survivor. both self-deceiving and exploitative of others. None of them can be read as moral models; nor can they be read as myths of female creativity-except by ironic inversion. Their literary antecedents do not come from the female ·great tradition' celebrated by

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gynocritics but. more likely. from female protagonists constructed by male writers-Moll Flanders, Emma Bovary, various evil and grotesque women in Dickens. Indeed their precedents are not necessarily literary: Eleanor Herbert. as I shall

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argue later, is the 'ordinary woman' constructed by popular cultural forms in the 1930s and 1940s; Letty Fox, it has been suggested,2 is a secondary figure out of 1940s Hollywood detective films, the wise-cracking, hard-boiled receptionist; Nellie Cotter is perhaps derived from folk tales, pagan residues in English popular culture. With Letty and Eleanor, the question of their representativeness as women is foregrounded-and pre-empted by the characters them- selves: Letty announces herself a 'typical New York girl' and Eleanor insists that she is 'just an ordinary woman', a pillar of the conservative middle class.
I want to take Miss Herbert as an extreme manifestation of the dilemmas posed for feminist readers by the assumptions of gynocri-tics. If we attempt to read this text, as Elanie Showalter recommended we set about reading all women's texts, in order to learn 'what women have felt and experienced' (1979:27), we are con- fronted with some unpleasant things about this determinedly 'ordinary' woman, things which appear to confirm many misogynist accusations of women's 'innate' conservatism. It is difficult to know how to weigh the text's construction of its protagonist, for she appears sometimes as the heroine of a realist novel, given light and shade by narrative irony, while at other times she becomes the object of satire; but the distinction between these two positions is often so slight as to be indistinguishable. Eleanor's ordinariness is of course the point, and in relation to this, Stead's writing acts as a reminder that what language gives us access to is not unmediated experience but ideology. When language appears most transparent and 'natural', it is probably closest to the dominant ideology, in- scribed in the register we expect to find. In fiction we are usually made aware of the constitutive work of language when it draws attention to its own literariness. But in Miss Herbert the language is remarkable for its extreme ordinariness: it is the cliches which draw attention to its ideological character. The following passage explicit- ly comments on the process of editing her reactions in conformity with the ideological norms of femininity which marks Eleanor's whole text:
As she worked she became wrapped in herself, spoke automatically to the children, and, to her confusion. indignant phrases repeated them-selves in her mind while she recalled scenes which had left her sore-even though she had always been considerate, sensible, humane and ·exercised her saving sense of humour'. Fiery, a complaint: 'Leni comes to help Henry; no one comes to help me.' A scene. In the original: ·Henry. what you call self-reliance and self-control, I call plain self. If

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you would discuss our differences of opinion, you might find yourself in the wrong, so you retire into this self-sufficiency, to humiliate me. I

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won't be humiliated.' This mental record ran quickly through, and she edited as it ran, till it then took on its enduring form: 'Henry dear, let us just sit down awhile and thrash this thing out. A little frank speaking and soul-searching will do this family a world of good. You and I have had love and a deep sense of togetherness, and now we have our futures and the future of our children; we have everything. It's perfect, what we have. So just let's pull the mote each from his own eye, and see this thing clearly.' Henry then ideally replied, 'I admit I am too self-sufficient; and I grant that there is a grain of selfishness in self-sufficiency. You have a better form of it, self-reliance. A mother is closer to the human race.' 'Oh, but you, too, Henry, have the human touch-' but this rainbow interchange was coarsely interrupted by fierce words hurtling across her mind: 'He gets the best end of the stick and leaves me all the dirty work. He's a brute, the cold little climbing devil.' (p.111)

We are not even offered the luxury of seeing her as a victim of those popular culture institutions which circulate such ideological norms (talk shows, advice columns, magazine feature articles on 'communication skills in marriage' [Coward, 1984]). For Eleanor writes them herself-she is actively implicated in the cultural construction of femininity, circa 1936. During a dinner party, for instance, she almost weeps because her husband queries her management of pre-dinner drinks: Over and over again she had read that 'before dinner just one cocktail or one glass of sherry, according to your guests' fancy and pleasure, is correct; nothing more is needed to give them that pleasant anticipatory glow.' She had written it herself. 'More leads to raised voices and flushed faces.' Now, mortified, in her mind accusing the immoderate habits of Continentals, she went away ('slipped away' she thought to herself) and put on the dinner; Henry should not have the second bottle of sherry.

The reference to 'Continentals' here-her husband is German-is one of the many indices of Eleanor's unreflective, populist racism. She is portrayed as a dyed-in-the-wool Tory, and indeed the novel can be read, as Angela Carter has suggested, as an allegory of 'the home life of Britannia from the twenties until almost the present day' (Carter, 1982). I would suggest, though, that the distance offered to the reader by an allegorical text is not consistently maintained here, and that while we

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recognise the incessant inscription of contemporary ideologies of gender, race and class, we are also positioned vis-a-vis Eleanor in such a way as to invite a certain degree of identification with her plight and her determination. Rather like reading popular romance as a feminist, it is impossible to deny the heroine's

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relation to ourselves as social subjects, women, caught up in the same processes even as we read critically. The notion of 'reading woman'- introduced by Mary Jacobus into the debate about 'reading as a woman' to which I referred earlier--could be useful in untangling the issues here. As I understand the notion, it can encompass several distinct concerns with the discursive construction of femininity and with gendered reading/writing: 'reading woman' can connect 'woman' as the object constructed by the text (say, Eleanor Herbert), the writer's project of critically reading cultural constructions of femininity (as Stead does repeatedly), and the woman reader's complicity in this process (through identification) as well as her critical capacity to position the text among others and to read it against the grain.
The acid test for 'reading woman' in Miss Herbert is the point at which the consistent ordinariness of the language shifts violently into another key, one that seems to represent passion, desire, all that has been signally absent from the story of this woman's life:

Her heart had begun a great circular thrumming, so it felt. Round and round it gadded, making larger swoops, and her head turned, making larger swoops, as if she were floating, with her large body, round the great dome. Her heart began pounding out hard and real thoughts, like pieces of metal, too; and she heard them, forceful, unanswerable: This is love and he knows it; it would be too strong for me, my life would be carried away into a whirlpool, round and round and down, in the center, lost and gone; I wouldn't want to get out of it, I would lose myself; I'd be swept away; I don't want that. I couldn't live, then all would mean nothing. I can't live like that; what of the past and future? There'd be no meaning to the world or time, but this hour and the future hours with him would break into everything, flooding every- thing, everything would be washed away: I couldn't stand it, I'm not strong enough, I'm too old to go in for it-

Meantime the people had settled, the music had begun and Eleanor, who was somewhat musical, began to be ordered by and drawn into the music. What a terrible, powerful beat the music had, threatening and promising sullenly, something tremendous, nothing good. In it was a life Eleanor had never known, and which frightened her, but now, for the first time, attracted her-a great potency, passion, which she had been always unconscious of; some great thing approached her and for

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the first time spoke to her, as if a new world came somewhere near her world and she felt its attraction and feared to be pulled away off the earth, out of life.

What is at stake here is the mode of representation of passion. Is this a love scene from one of Eleanor's magazine stories? Is it the eruption of a utopian desire? There is no narrative resolution which would allow us to decide one way or the other. All that happens, in

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one sense, is that the discourse changes key, and this change is set up in the paragraph preceding the above quotation by two different modulations. First, the occasion is a visit to the opera, a performance of Verdi's La Forza de/ Destino, in which Eleanor's namesake, Leonora, in following the dictates of passion, is herself destroyed and brings about the deaths of her father and brother. Yet Eleanor's resistance to such fated passion is suggested in her mistake over the name: '(for some reason Eleanor always called it La Sforza def Destino)' (302). Certainly, sforza, exertion and effortfulness, is the keynote of her destiny.

The second lead into the passage quoted draws on another cultural form altogether, a sub-Lawrentian or Mills and Boon discourse on sexual attraction. Eleanor has just met her daughter's fiance, at which moment he 'looked straight into Eleanor's eyes with the glance of a man who understands a woman wants him and who gives himself and means to take all, a dark look that existed long before language. Eleanor looked away, to hide it from the others' (p.303). Reading woman becomes a particularly shifty business at this point, as the female protagonist's point of view takes up a projected masculine one.

In this unnerving context of Verdi superimposed on Mills and Boon, together with such shifts in the protagonist's point of view, it is perhaps inevitable that the following paragraph of rare narratorial comment, on her response to the music, should gain a certain authoritative weight. But it does not, I think, come down on the side of Verdi or of Mills and Boon. Nor is it the last word, by any means. Eleanor is given that, as she promises on the final page to sit down and write the story of her life. If the narrative we have been reading is written from the final position of knowledge of the protagonist, as it is in classical realism, then it would seem that her encounter with passion and death at the opera has made no impact at all on Eleanor Herbert (the suburban wife).

This practice of identifying the discourses at work in the text constructing sexual difference is but one of the reading practices made available to feminist criticism when it takes on 'reading' in the strong, post-Barthesian sense, as work to produce meaning. The feminism of feminist criticism, in this mode, is a function of reading, rather than

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something which resides in the text or in the writer's intentions. The readings made possible by available feminist dis- courses can intervene in particular debates in the interpretation of texts or in cultural studies generally. Feminist readings, as presented here, have the potential to bridge the gap between 'gynocritics' and 'feminist critique', drawing on gynocritics for its insistence on the culturally specific conditions of women's literary production.

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Though it need not confine itself to texts which address or construct female subjects, feminist criticism, 'reading woman', will have a particular interest in such texts, especially in their transformations of sexual and textual norms (Miller, 1986:270-78). The case of Chris- tina Stead, and in particular her difficult later novels, is one which both requires and rewards such reading.

NOTES

To ignore this is comparable to those readings of Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook which celebrate the integrated heroine of the golden notebook narrative and ignore the irreconcilable ending of the 'frame' narrative, 'Free Women', where Molly remarries and Anna joins the Labour Party and becomes a social worker!

Meaghan Morris, in conversation, September 1985

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