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CHRISTINA STEAD :
THE AMERICAN YEARS

Anita Kristina Segerberg

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English,
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Till minnet av mina föräldrar
Betty och Johan Forslund

ABSTRACT

CHRISTINA STEAD (1902-1983) is a major Australian woman writer, and this thesis explores one of the least known periods in her life and work, the years she spent in the United States (1937- 1946). During this time she wrote her two best known novels, *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone*, both based on autobiographical material. This study explores contextual aspects of Stead's life and work in New York, drawing on a considerable amount of new material. (Chapters I and II) During this period Stead wrote partly out of a personal need to understand her own life situation, and psychological readings of three novels, *The Man Who Loved Children*, *For Love Alone* and *Letty Fox*, seen as a 'father trilogy', are designed to open up new lines of enquiry into aspects of all of these novels. (Chapters III and IV) The thesis also discusses formal aspects of Stead's work, beginning with her own formulation of an aesthetics of the novel, which occurred during a course she gave in New York in 1943 called *Workshop in the Novel*. (Chapter V) The relevance of this course for her own practice as a novelist is also explored, with particular reference to the two later American novels *A Little Tea*, *A Little Chat* and *The People With The Dogs*. (Chapter VI) In Chapter VII an exploration of Stead's interest in the genre of the novella, focussing on the collection *The Puzzleheaded Girl*, continues the formal lines of enquiry opened up in the previous two chapters, and in the following chapter the same collection provides a starting point for a consideration of Stead's deep interest in the situation of women in modern society, especially the recurrent figure of the wanderer or female rebel. The last chapter concentrates on the literary self-portraits which appeared in Stead's American fiction after *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone*, and their curiously limited characterization is compared with the more vigorous portrait of her provided in one of the novels of her husband, William Blake.

This thesis, then, argues that Stead's life fed her fiction, especially in her American period, and that her work was part of a broader personal quest. Understanding this quest is relevant to a discussion of her literary style, and to her personal use of autobiographical material in her fiction, and it illuminates aspects of the creative process itself. Stead's need to understand her own life not only shaped her fiction, it also provided it with the 'intelligent ferocity' she aimed for, and resulted in a major 'realist' writer.

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Christina Stead in New York in the early 1940s.

(from Chris Williams, Christina Stead, p. 173)

Life is so strange, and we know it so little...

Christina Stead