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Cold Comfort Farm, DH Lawrence & English Literary Culture Between the Wars

Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) has been an incredibly popular novel. Its most famous line, "I saw something nasty in the woodshed", has become a catchphrase, and the book has sold in large numbers during the whole period since its first publication in 1932. It has been adapted as a stage play, a musical, a radio drama and two films, thereby reaching a still larger audience.[1] Its status within the academically-defined literary canon, by contrast, is low. One full article on *Cold Comfort Farm* was published in 1978, and since then, only a few paragraphs of criticism have been devoted to the novel. Critics are apparently reluctant to admit *Cold Comfort Farm* to be properly "literary", and it is rarely mentioned in studies of the literature of the interwar years. This is curious, because *Cold Comfort Farm* is an extremely sophisticated and intricate parody, whose meaning is produced through its relationship with the literary culture of its day, and with the work of such canonical authors as DH Lawrence, Thomas Hardy and Emily Bronte. The novel's engagement with the gender issues of the 1930s also repays detailed examination. My reading of *Cold Comfort Farm* will focus on its relation to its literary and cultural context, and will work towards an understanding of the reasons for its marginal position in the canon of English fiction.

Stella Gibbons (1902-1989) worked as a journalist during the 1920s, and became instantly famous on the publication of her first novel, *Cold Comfort Farm*. She went on to publish twenty-three more novels and several collections of short stories and poetry. Most of these were reasonably successful but they are now all out of print. Briefly summarized, *Cold Comfort Farm* concerns a London woman, Flora Poste, who loses her parents at the age of nineteen, and decides to live with some of her relatives until she marries. She chooses a family of Sussex farming cousins, the Starkadders, and resolves to tidy up their lives for them. She eventually persuades them all to abandon their eccentric behaviour and adopt what she considers to be civilized, rational lifestyles.

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[1] In 1965 a musical version, *Something Nasty in the Woodshed* was produced, and three years later the novel was made into a film. It has also been adapted for the stage by Paul Doust (first performed in 1991), and read on the radio by Kenneth Williams. A BBC radio dramatization was broadcast in May 1981, and issued as an audiobook in 1989. A second film version, directed by John Schlesinger, was released in 1997.

Flora is clearly marked as belonging to the fictional world of Jane Austen. We are alerted to this early in the narrative when she mentions her ambition to write a novel as good as *Persuasion*, and adds: "I think I have much in common with Miss Austen" (20). Flora often reads *Mansfield Park* to sustain her amid the chaos of Cold Comfort, and it is the progress from disorder to order in Austen's books which appeals to her. On her arrival at the farm, Flora enters into an alien fictional world; and she is evidently conscious of this, because she remarks that she hopes to collect material for a novel while she is there. Her entirely accurate preconceptions about her Starkadder relatives are derived from her reading of novels very different from those of Jane Austen. She is excited at the prospect of meeting a doomed family and discovering a "gloomy mystery" (58), and she expects her second cousins to be named Seth and Reuben, because "highly sexed young men living on farms are always called Seth or Reuben, […] and my cousin's name, remember, is Judith. That in itself is most ominous. Her husband is almost certain to be called Amos, and if he *is*, it will be a typical farm" (23). She makes explicit her literary source for these ideas when she remarks on discovering the tyranny of her great aunt Ada Doom, otherwise Mrs Starkadder: "So that was what it was. Mrs Starkadder was the curse of Cold Comfort. Mrs Starkadder was the Dominant Grandmother Theme, which was found in all typical novels of agricultural life. It was, of course, right and proper that Mrs Starkadder should be in possession at Cold Comfort; Flora should have suspected her existence from the beginning" (57). Flora functions as a reader as well as a character within the narrative, commenting on the story as it progresses and relating it to the patterns and conventions of the books she has read.

Although Gibbons does not identify any "novels of agricultural life" by name, there are clear indications as to which authors she is parodying, and a rehearsal of her sources gives an idea of her range of reference. In the 1920s and early 1930s, she reviewed new rural fiction for the *Evening Standard*, and for a journal of country life, *The Lady*, thereby gaining a wide knowledge of the genre. Two of the most popular regional writers of the period were Sheila Kaye-Smith and Mary Webb, and many aspects of the plot, characterization and setting of *Cold Comfort Farm* can be traced to their work. For example, Aunt Ada Doom is based on Mrs Velindre in Webb's *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920), and the description of the farmhouse at Cold Comfort parodies Webb's portrait of Dormer House. The original for Flora's cousin Reuben, who is obsessed with his ownership of farmland, can be found in Kaye-Smith's *Sussex Gorse* (1916), while Gibbons's imaginary Calvinist sect, the Quivering Brethren, refers specifically to the Colgate Brethren in Kaye-Smith's later novel *Susan Spray* (1931) and more generally to the presence in many rural novels of Old Testament theology and

belief in a vengeful God. Gibbons also parodies the prose style of these two novelists, finding especially rich sources in Kaye-Smith's purple passages.

The anthropomorphized cows, plants and porridge in *Cold Comfort Farm* mock the emphasis on man's intimate connections with the natural world which is characteristic of primitivist writing, and which is often expressed through the use of the pathetic fallacy. All Mary Webb's landscapes, for example, function as metaphors for human passions (see Barale 88, 100, 151). The pathetic fallacy is similarly used in the work of JC Powys and of DH Lawrence, both of whom were influenced by primitivist thinking. For the contemporary reader, DH Lawrence is the most easily identifiable of Gibbons's targets, and he is particularly important to a reading of her work because she not only parodies his prose style but also satirizes his ideas about gender and sexuality. Among the many details in *Cold Comfort Farm* which point to Lawrence are the incestuous desire of Judith for her son Seth, which links her with Gertrude Morel in *Sons and Lovers* (1913), and the name of Seth's mistress, Meriam, which recalls Paul Morel's lover Miriam. As for JC Powys, there is a certain Gothic dimension to his Sussex novels which is parodied in Gibbons's dark secrets and gloomy mysteries. Also, the critic WJ Keith identifies a reference to TF Powys's *Mr Weston's Good Wine* in *Cold Comfort Farm* (Keith 175), and Stella Gibbons's nephew and biographer Reggie Oliver emphasizes the importance of the Powys brothers among the sources for *Cold Comfort Farm*.[2] Oliver also enumerates some of the third-rate novels which Stella Gibbons received to review or précis while she was working for the *Lady*, and he makes particular mention of *Gay Agony* (1930), by one H.A. Manhood. The names for Gibbons's characters Micah and Amos were probably borrowed from *Gay Agony*, and Oliver's quotation from Manhood sufficiently demonstrates that novels such as this formed part of the inspiration for *Cold Comfort Farm*: "Rain had come like a belated passion. Daylight seemed no more than a pale reflection surviving from some past day. […] Hissing screens obscured the moor, breaking against the windows of the Black Smock with a sound suggestive of the birth of thorns" (qtd in Oliver 142).

A further possible source for *Cold Comfort Farm* is *Ethan Frome* (1911), Edith Wharton's tragic story of rural poverty and doomed love. In a brief article, Jackie Vickers lists a number of

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[2] Oliver's biography sets out the connections between Gibbons's novel and the work of JC Powys, and he later commented: "I may not have perhaps have placed enough emphasis on the Powys brothers (particularly JC) as a source for her parody" (letter to the author, dated 15 July 2000). See Oliver 112-119 for a discussion of the sources of *Cold Comfort Farm.* I am very grateful to Reggie Oliver for invaluable help with my research, and for the excellent material provided in his book.

striking correspondences between the two novels, which constitute persuasive evidence that Gibbons had Wharton in mind alongside the British regional writers. Tauba R Heilpern, in an unpublished essay on *Cold Comfort Farm*, makes a case for including Eugene O'Neill's play *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) among Gibbons's influences. Both books, Heilpern argues, emphasize the sinister influence of nature on human life, and include motifs of divine retribution and incest. As with Wharton, the evidence is fairly convincing, but in a letter to Ms Heilpern about her sources, Stella Gibbons said she did not consciously parody O'Neill.[3] Mention should also be made of Hugh Walpole, whose four Lake District romances appeared between 1930 and 1933 and were modelled on the novels of Walter Scott. Although there are no obvious similarities between Walpole's four *Herries Chronicles* and *Cold Comfort Farm*, the foreword to Gibbons's novel parodies a pompous dedication with which Walpole prefaced one of his books.

Raymond Williams in *The Country and The City* suggests that instead of comparing *Cold Comfort Farm* with its obvious early twentieth-century forbears, "it ought really to be read side-by-side with, say, *Wuthering Heights*, *Adam Bede*, *Tess of the D'Ubervilles*" (253). He does not argue that Gibbons parodies these authors, but that she shares some of their preoccupations, in terms of "the tension of an increasingly intricate and interlocking society" and "the changes of urbanism and industrialism" (253). However, in the cases of Hardy and Bronte, there is a certain amount of evidence that Gibbons deliberately included them among her targets. She mentions *Wuthering Heights* at one point, and two of the characters in *Cold Comfort Farm*, the incredibly ancient servant Adam and the religious bigot Amos, have similarities to Emily Bronte's character Joseph. The connection to Thomas Hardy is stronger, since he too makes heavy use of the pathetic fallacy, and some of Gibbons's nature descriptions are definitely reminiscent of those in his 1887 novel *The Woodlanders* (see Ariail 66-67). Gibbons also exaggerates Hardy's dependence on coincidence in his fictional plots by including a great many improbable coincidences in her own, and her choice of the name Elfine for the Starkadder daughter points to Elfride in Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873). The relationship with Eliot is less obvious, but according to Gladys Mary Coles, who approached Gibbons about her sources: "Miss Gibbons has confirmed that she was satirising the rural tradition in the work of many authors, including Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Hardy, DH Lawrence, the Powys brothers, and Sheila Kaye-Smith as well as Mary Webb, and also the numerous minor country novelists of the early nineteen thirties" (Coles, *Mary Webb* 150-151). Coles uses this information to defend Webb against the charge

[3] I am grateful to Tauba Heilpern for this information, and for permission to draw on her research.

of being the main target of Gibbons's attack, while Webb's other biographer, Dorothy Wrenn, states rather proudly that Webb's *The House in Dormer Forest* was the inspiration for *Cold Comfort Farm* (68). These contrasting approaches reflect differing assessments of the purpose and impact of Gibbons's parody. According to Coles: "*Cold Comfort Farm* dealt a severe blow to the genre [of the rural novel]: and it effectively damaged Mary Webb's reputation (but not immediately the sales of her books), since it helped to reinforce among academic critics and intellectuals [an] antipathy towards her work" (*Flower of Light* 326). Wrenn, by contrast, argues: "*Cold Comfort Farm* is a very entertaining book, and well worth reading. So is *The House in Dormer Forest*. To obtain the maximum amount of pleasure from each of them, read both, one after the other" (68). A further reason for this divergence is that Wrenn's focus is on the pleasure of reading Webb, whereas Coles's is on Webb's critical reputation.

In the light of Coles's argument, it is somewhat ironic that critics and intellectuals also seem to have an antipathy towards Stella Gibbons. It is possible that this antipathy derives in part from the low critical standing of some of the authors she parodies: Mary Webb is not widely read or taught today, nor are Kaye-Smith, the Powys brothers or Walpole.[4] Certain commentators have argued that the canonical status of a parody is largely dependent on the status of its target works (for examples see Rose 39, 122), and WJ Keith applies this argument to Gibbons's novel: "*Cold Comfort Farm* was an immense success in its time […] Inevitably, however, its point has been blunted by the decline of the genre that it helped to dislodge. […] many of its finer points will be lost on modern readers, and some of its implications need to be spelled out in detail" (175). This may be partially true, but there are two counter-arguments to be advanced. Firstly, the most recognizable target of *Cold Comfort Farm*, DH Lawrence, still holds a central position in the canon of English fiction, as of course do Hardy, Eliot and Bronte. Secondly, it is demonstrable that Gibbons's parody still functions effectively even though the fashion for regional fictions is so far behind us. It is certainly true that few readers today will be able to put a name to all Gibbons's sources, or recognize the specificity of her jokes as they apply to individual authors. However, the parody is ultimately directed at a fashionable genre rather than an individual, and as Margaret Rose explains: "The dual structure of parody allows it to keep both its target and its own parodic function alive. Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*, for instance, is still

[4] The reputation of the women rural writers has been bolstered somewhat by the republication of Kaye-Smith's *Susan Spray* and *Joanna Godden* (1921) and Mary Webb's *Precious Bane* (1925) in the Virago Modern Classics series, but in the Oxford and Cambridge Companions to English Literature, the entries for Kaye-Smith and Webb refer to *Cold Comfort Farm*, implying that the primary reason for remembering these authors is as the targets of Gibbons's parody.

comic even if one does not know the specific works it parodies, because its parody of those works has evoked them for the reader while making fun of them by exaggerating their peculiarities" (122).

Rose rejects the contention that a parody will no longer be recognized as such once its originals have been forgotten, and argues that parody's ambivalence derives from "its ability to criticise and renew its target as a part of its own structure" (41). This can be applied to Gibbons in that she recreates the primitivist novels within her text and inscribes their conventions onto her work, thereby ensuring their continued existence. For example, the women rural novelists often relied on Victorian-style melodramatic plots, revolving around "family hatreds, ancient houses and violent elemental interventions" (Trodd 104). These plots dated rapidly, causing the novels to fall out of fashion while Lawrence and Hardy continued to be widely read. *Cold Comfort Farm* parodies rural melodrama by setting up two mysteries in the novel - what happened in the woodshed, and what are the unspecified "rights" which Judith and Ada attribute to Flora. Gibbons declines to solve either of these mysteries, except by hinting that the explanations are entirely trivial; and yet some of the interest of her narrative depends on the reader's curiosity about them.

Thus *Cold Comfort Farm* situates itself in a somewhat contradictory position: both in the tradition of rural writing and also outside it, commenting on it from a position of ordinary common sense. This positioning is typical of parodic texts. Gibbons depends on the traditional structures of the agricultural novel - the family feuds, the isolated setting, the landscape description, the gloomy mysteries - but she also critiques the use of these motifs in the texts she parodies. Many of her jokes can only be fully appreciated by a reader familiar with a number of novels by half a dozen rural writers, and in this way, Gibbons seems to be addressing a reader who is an avid consumer of rural fictions; yet through her mockery of those fictions, she constructs a reader who shares her scepticism about primitivist writing.

A further ambivalence inheres in Gibbons's relationship with the concepts of literature and literariness; and this, again, can be discerned through attention to the kind of reader which is constructed by the text. Gibbons's many intertextual references and subtle parodic and satiric strategies seem to address themselves to a sophisticated, highly-educated and widely-read audience, but her criticism of the literary establishment is evidently directed towards a reader of common sense, who distrusts elites. The author's foreword to the novel provides the first indication of this tension: "I

found, after spending ten years as a journalist, learning to say exactly what I meant in short sentences, that I must learn, if I was to achieve literature and favourable reviews, to write as though I were not quite sure what I meant but was jolly well going to say something all the same in sentences as long as possible" (7). This implies that "Literature" is defined according to the rather arcane tastes of an elite, who have sufficient power to influence literary fashions. Her reference to journalism is glossed by the English Studies Group at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies, in their article on 1930s fiction: "The middlebrow novel takes journalism as its model. […] [*Cold Comfort Farm*] ironically disclaims any pretensions to 'literary' status - a disclaimer entirely characteristic of middlebrow writing" (14-15). Gibbons's foreword is addressed to one Anthony Pookworthy, Esq, and Pookworthy represents Hugh Walpole, whom Gibbons once interviewed. According to Reggie Oliver, she saw in Walpole "not only an over-rated writer with an unduly high opinion of himself, but the representative of a smug, self-congratulatory literary establishment" (76). The letters she puts after Pookworthy's name, ABS, LLR, stand for Associate Back Scratcher and Licensed Log Roller, clearly indicating that she perceives the literary establishment as exclusive and somewhat corrupt. Gibbons's ridiculing of the literary elite firmly aligns her novel with a middlebrow or commonsense position, and this is reinforced by the fact that *Cold Comfort Farm* was published not by one of the elite publishers, such as Cape, Hogarth, Chatto or Faber, but by Longmans. It was reprinted in 1938 by Penguin, which was "by then the most successful of the new distinctively middlebrow publishing ventures" (English Studies Group 14).

Gibbons's choice of a sustained comic mode also functions to align her work with the middlebrow, since she employs comedy to ridicule certain unambiguously "literary" texts, and to articulate a common-sensical outlook in opposition to them. Her use of humour as a method of highlighting the failings of the rural novel is particularly effective in the light of the humorlessness of her originals. She writes in her dedicatory foreword:

> You see, Tony, I have a debt to pay. Your books have […] given me […] joy. It is just possible that it was not the kind of joy you intended them to give […] But it was joy all right.
>
> […] I have more than once hesitated before the thought of trying to repay some fraction of my debt to you by offering you a book that was meant to be … funny. For your own books are not … funny. They are records of intense spiritual struggles, staged in the wild setting of mere, berg or fen. Your characters are ageless and elemental things, tossed like straws on the seas of passion. You paint Nature at her rawest, in man and in landscapes. The only beauty that lights your pages is the grave peace of fulfilled passion. (8)

The age-old hierarchy of tragedy over comedy persists to a certain degree in many literary histories, and this may be a further reason why *Cold Comfort Farm* is not admitted to the ranks of "Literature". Further, as Reggie Oliver points out, Gibbons's tendency to eschew the artistic functions of subversion and questioning and instead attempt to "amuse, elevate, inspire, even comfort" through her writing was unfashionable in the interwar years. Oliver suggests that her "warm and optimistic" attitude "went against the grain of modernism" (124), and that this has affected assessments of the importance of her writing.

A second mention of book reviewers in Gibbons's foreword suggests that their discriminations between "Literature" and non-literary writing are fairly spurious:

> it is only because I have in mind all those thousands of persons, not unlike myself, who work in the vulgar and meaningless bustle of offices, shops and homes, and who are not always sure whether a sentence is Literature or whether it is just sheer flapdoodle, that I have adopted the method perfected by the late Herr Baedeker, and firmly marked what I consider the finer passages with one, two or three stars. In such a manner did the good man deal with cathedrals, hotels and paintings by men of genius. There seems no reason why it should not be applied to passages in novels. It ought to help the reviewers too. (7-8)

Baedeker, in EM Forster's *A Room With A View* (1908), is firmly associated with vulgarity, but Gibbons uses Baedeker to represent the common-sense middlebrow position, in opposition to pretentiousness and elitism. Her asterisk system ridicules the way that passages of "fine writing" in rural novels are isolated from the rest of the text. Several of the agricultural novels of the period, particularly those of Webb and Kaye-Smith, include many dialect words, and the attempt to represent regional speech contrasts sharply with the lyric landscape descriptions in the educated voice of the narrator. This inevitably constructs the characters as far less cultured and articulate than the author, an attitude which Gibbons apparently found patronising, but which Anthea Trodd suggests was deliberate: "For the mostly urban reader for whom [Kaye-Smith] is writing, Sussex is picturesque, historical, literary, but she is constantly pointing out that this view is entirely alien to [her heroine] Joanna" (Trodd 105). Gibbons, by contrast, has her Sussex character Elfine appreciate the countryside and write poems about it in a manner which, although naïve and eccentric, is yet presented as far more authentic than the rhapsodizing of the visiting London author, Mr Mybug.

Gibbons uses her asterisk system to dramatize a conflict between two literary modes - the melodramatic and metaphorical style of the regional novel and the brand of understated realism used by Gibbons's beloved Jane Austen. These two modes are, of course, represented by the earthy

sensuality of the Starkadders and the matter-of-fact rationality of Flora respectively. The following extract describes the first meeting between Flora and Reuben:

> "Hullo", said Flora, getting her blow in first. "I feel sure you must be Reuben. I'm Flora Poste, your cousin, you know. How do you do? I'm so glad to see somebody has come in for some tea. Do sit down. Do you take milk?"
> * * * The man's big body, etched menacingly against the bleak light that stabbed in from the low windows, did not move. His thoughts swirled like a beck in spate behind the sodden grey furrows of his face. A woman … Blast! Blast! Come to wrest away from him the land whose love fermented in his veins, like slow yeast. […] Break her. Break. Keep and hold and hold fast the land. The land, the iron furrows of frosted earth under the rain-lust, the fecund spears of rain, the swelling, slow burst of seed-sheaths, the slow smell of cows and cry of cows, the trampling bride-path of the bull in his hour. All his, his …
> "Will you have some bread and butter?" asked Flora, handing him a cup of tea. "Oh, never mind your boots. Adam can sweep the mud up afterwards. Do come in."
> Defeated, Reuben came in. (77)

From Reuben's point of view, Flora belongs to a separate social world with a set of rules he does not understand. To the reader, however, it is clear that Flora and Reuben speak different languages because they are characters from two entirely different kinds of novel. The clash of discourses which results from their encounter is evident in the above quotation, which juxtaposes the conventional phrases of ordinary social intercourse with the highly metaphorical and colourful language used to describe Reuben. This description is a very obvious imitation of Lawrence's rhythmic prose, repetitive phrasing, and frequent use of sexual imagery, and it also has affinities with the style of the women rural novelists. The imitation is so little exaggerated that it is only marked as parodic by its incongruity with the register used in the rest of the passage. Compare, for example, the opening description of the Brangwens in Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915):

> Their life and inter-relations were such; feeling the pulse and body of the soil, that opened to their furrow for the grain, and became smooth and supple after their ploughing, and clung to their feet with a weight that pulled like desire, lying hard and unresponsive when the crops were to be shorn away. […] They took the udder of the cows, the cows yielded milk and pulse against the hands of the men, the pulse of the blood of the teats of the cows beat into the pulse of the hands of the men. (10)

Gibbons's contrasting of different fictional discourses, and the commentary on it which she provides in the foreword, indicate the emphasis which the book places on the subjectivity of perception. One phrase which often occurs in the three-star passages is "the farm crouched, like a beast

about to spring". But after many repetitions of this phrase, the narrator eventually observes: "The farm no longer looked like a beast about to spring. (Not that it ever had, to [Flora], for she was not in the habit of thinking that things looked exactly like other things which were as different from them in appearance as it was possible to be.)" (204). At one point, Flora explicitly highlights the contrast between her literal mode of perception and the metaphorical one which prevails in the world of rural fiction: "Flora supposed that some people would say that [Amos] walked in a lurid, smoky hell of his own religious torment. In any case he was a rude old man" (86). She contrasts her own straightforward evaluation with a far more melodramatic and literary one, and adds: "it was too true that life as she is lived had a way of being curiously different from life as described by novelists" (87). Once again, the middlebrow position of commonsense is set up against the perceived pretentiousness and distortion of regional writing.

The word "middlebrow" in this article, following the usage by the Birmingham English Studies Group, is intended to be non-evaluative, but the term is used by more conventional literary historians with derogatory intention. Alison Light, discussing Paul Fussell's 1980 book on travel writing between the wars, comments on this, and links it with gender: "Fussell's account is one of many which suggests in how many different ways aesthetic judgements are intertwined with those about gender. Just as for him truly literary culture and the masculine are inseparable, so the feminine is implicitly associated with the 'middlebrow', a term always bordering on contempt" (7). This masculine bias in the definition of "Literature" is the major cause of Gibbons's antipathy towards the literary establishment; it is also one cause of her neglect by that establishment. The literary elite which Stella Gibbons resists is clearly characterized as masculine because she uses Walpole as its representative. This is reinforced in the body of the novel when Flora correctly predicts that the Bloomsbury author Mr Mybug is about to claim that Branwell Bronte wrote *Wuthering Heights*. Flora comments: "There has been increasing discontent among the male intellectuals for some time at the thought that a woman wrote *Wuthering Heights*" (76). Gibbons's objection to male intellectuals, and their undervaluing of female intelligence, was strikingly justified by some of the reviews of *Cold Comfort Farm*. Several reviewers expressed incredulity that a mere journalist, and a woman at that, could have produced such an accomplished work, and one even speculated that Stella Gibbons was a pen-name of Evelyn Waugh.

Despite the similarities between Waugh's comic and parodic practice and Gibbons's, it is difficult to imagine how a reviewer could mistake *Cold Comfort Farm* for a male-authored book, since

there are several points in the narrative when feminist ideas emerge and the narrator appears to be envisaging a female reader. This is most clearly visible in the treatment of DH Lawrence and his attitudes to women and to sexuality. In the late 1920s Stella Gibbons was part of a social set in which Lawrence's ideas were being used by men as an excuse for harassment of women. She told Libby Purves in a 1981 interview on Radio 4: "I got in with a rather intellectual set […] in Golders Green. The men used occasionally to try to kiss me and also to talk to me about sex, like Mr Mybug does. […] Lawrence was just beginning to be a cult with these people". Lawrence described his attempt to follow the instincts of the flesh as a "religion" (Lawrence, *Letters* 53) and this provided Stella's male acquaintance with a rationale for seducing women, and accusing those who rejected their advances of being sexually repressed. This behaviour is reproduced in Mr Mybug, and Gibbons attacks the followers of Lawrence through Mybug's Lawrentian poses and dubious views about sexuality and gender. On meeting Flora in Sussex, he greets her: "Hullo, Flora Poste. Do you believe that women have souls?" (100), and when she says she is not very interested, he replies, "Aren't you? Good girl … we shall be all right if only you'll be frank with me. As a matter of fact, I'm not very interested in whether they have souls either. Bodies matter more than souls" (100-101). His insistence on frankness about sex and his privileging of the body over the mind instantly demonstrate that his ideas are derived from reading DH Lawrence. His attitudes to women - marked out by his patronising phrase "good girl" and his readiness to believe that women might be spiritually inferior to men - also link him to DH Lawrence. Lawrence's belief in man's natural right to dominate woman is clearly evident in his essay *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922), in which he asserts man's "supreme responsibility to fulfil his own profoundest impulses, with reference to none but God or his own soul, not taking woman into count at all" (97). He also refers to the "genuine, not spurious, divinity" of a man, and to the chaos which would ensue if women were given increased power (97).

Mr Mybug echoes some of Lawrence's most reductive ideas about women, telling Flora, for example, that: "a woman's success could only be estimated by the success of her sexual life" (122). By having such a ridiculous character express such sentiments, Gibbons reveals her contempt for this aspect of Lawrence's thought. His views gained legitimacy through their affinities with the theories of the sexologists of the period, who believed that physical and mental health were damaged by prolonged celibacy. Lawrence, however, went further than the sexologists in that he attempted to elevate sexuality over intellectual activity, and was convinced that social problems could be solved through heterosexual sexual fulfilment. These ideas were most famously articulated in his novel *Lady*

Chatterley's Lover (first published in expurgated form in 1928), and are mocked by Gibbons through the speeches of Mr Mybug: "There were many homosexuals to be seen in Hyde Park. Prostitutes, too. God! those rhododendron buds had a phallic, urgent look! Sooner or later we should have to tackle the problem of homosexuality. We should have to tackle the problem of Lesbians and old maids" (121-122). This passage demonstrates that Gibbons's characterization of Mybug is partly parody of Lawrence's prose and partly satire of his ideas, and of the enthusiastic readers who espoused them. Contemporary theorists of parody contend that parody is directed at literary or linguistic targets, that is, coded forms of discourse, literary genres or particular texts; whereas satire may attack the actual values and behavioural practices of a certain society or group more directly (see Hutcheon 43-45; Rose 80-86). Linda Hutcheon points out that many writers use parody for satiric purposes, and that women authors from Jane Austen onwards have found this particularly effective. Hutcheon's comment illuminates Gibbons's strategy of parodying Lawrence's writing in order to satirize his view of woman's role as primarily sexual and reproductive.

In terms of sexuality and women's roles, Gibbons is firmly aligned with Austen and against Lawrence. Lawrence's own comment on Jane Austen adds an interesting dimension to Gibbons's juxtaposition of the fictional worlds of the two authors: "In the old England, the curious blood-connection held the classes together […] we feel it in Defoe or Fielding. And then, in the mean Jane Austen, it is gone. Already this old maid typifies 'personality' instead of character, the sharp knowing in apartness instead of knowing in togetherness, and she is, to my feeling, thoroughly unpleasant" (*A Propos* 333). Lawrence insists on defining Austen in terms of her lack of sexual experience, and fails to acknowledge that for a woman in her era, the control of the rational mind over the desires of the body was absolutely necessary for social survival.[5]

Lawrence wrote in his 1930 essay *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*: "When a woman's sex is itself dynamic and alive, then it is a power in itself, beyond her reason" (316), a view which is explicitly satirized by Gibbons. Like many of the women in Lawrence's fiction, the Starkadder females view themselves as being subject to the forces of nature, particularly in terms of sexuality and fertility, but Flora vigorously rejects this outlook. She would have agreed with novelist Winifred Holtby, who argued in 1932 that sexologists and psychologists were limiting women's possibilities by

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[5] Despite the total dissimilarity between their work, Sheila Kaye-Smith was a fan of Austen's. Kaye-Smith and Gladys Bronwyn Stern's book *Talking of Jane Austen* (1943) is extremely admiring of its subject.

claiming that their primary source of fulfilment was sex and motherhood.[6] Meriam, the hired girl at Cold Comfort, becomes pregnant by Seth regularly every spring, imitating the reproductive patterns of the natural world; and Flora is determined to rescue her. She meets Meriam shortly after the birth of her fourth child, and finds her already predicting her next pregnancy:

> "who's to know what will happen to me when the sukebind is out in the hedges again and I feels so strange on the long summer evenings-?"
> "Nothing will happen to you, if only you use your intelligence and see that it doesn't," retorted Flora firmly. [...] And carefully, in detail, in cool phrases, Flora explained exactly to Meriam how to forestall the disastrous effects of too much sukebind and too many long summer evenings upon the female system. Meriam listened, with eyes widening and widening.
> "'Tes wickedness! 'Tes flying in the face of Nature!" she burst out fearfully at last.
> "Nonsense!" said Flora. "Nature is all very well in her place, but she must not be allowed to make things untidy." (69)

Flora rejects Meriam's passive construction, "what will happen to me", and replaces it with an active one: "use your intelligence and see that it doesn't." In this way, she resists Lawrence's contention that women are governed primarily by their bodies rather than their minds.

The introduction of contraception to this rural backwater is related to the debates in the 1930s around family planning and childcare, and is part of the novel's larger engagement with gender issues. Gibbons's consideration of the possible power of the woman in literature and in 1930s society is couched in comic terms throughout, yet it is worth analyzing seriously, since it is a major element of her subtly inflected theme of progress versus stagnation. The conflict between Flora and her great-aunt Ada Doom clearly relates to this theme, because Flora's modern thinking is contrasted with Ada's clinging to tradition, epitomized in her repeated pronouncement that "there have always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort". Ada claims that ever since a mysterious shed experience which befell her as a small girl, she has not been quite right in the head. She uses her supposed madness in order to keep the enormous Starkadder family under control: whenever anyone threatens to disobey her, or to leave the farm, she has "an attack". However, Flora recognizes in her aunt a degree of astuteness and decision which makes her a possible ally rather than an enemy:

> 'I saw something nasty in the woodshed,' said Aunt Ada Doom […] 'Twas a burnin' noonday - sixty-nine years ago. … And me no bigger than a titty-wren. And I saw something na-'
> 'Well, perhaps she likes it better that way,' said Flora soothingly. She had been observing Aunt Ada's firm chin, clear eyes, tight little mouth, and close grip upon the *Milk Producers' Weekly Bulletin and Cowkeepers' Guide*, and she came to the conclusion that if Aunt Ada was mad, then she, Flora, was one of the Marx brothers. (171)

[6] See Holtby, *Virginia Woolf* (29). The point is reinforced in Holtby's novel *South Riding* (1935).

But before Aunt Ada can become Flora's ally, she must relinquish the kind of power which she holds, and accept Flora's version of self-fulfilment. The Birmingham English Studies Group points out that: "Flora's […] struggle against Aunt Ada Doom […] can be seen as a conflict between two forms of female power: Aunt Ada, representing the power which accrues to the female within the traditional extended family, is opposed by the power of the newly independent woman" (16-17). This is certainly true to an extent, but the situation is complicated by the fact that Flora makes Ada over in the image of conventional femininity. She tempts her away from the farm with a Paris hotel brochure, an issue of Vogue magazine and some photographs of glamorous middle-aged socialites.

In this instance, then, Flora appeals not to the committed feminist but to the ordinary woman reader, and the ground of her appeal is the pleasure which a woman with a degree of autonomy can gain for herself. Flora's version of feminism is one particularly designed to appeal to a middlebrow reader, because it is not based on political idealism, but can co-exist with a fairly conventional lifestyle. Part of Flora's mission is to transform the Starkadders into "normal" people, and her conception of normality includes observance of codes of dress and social behaviour. She reiterates that she is "properly dressed" whereas the Starkadders wear peculiar shawls, cardigans and handmade jewellery. She insists that her young cousin Elfine wear court shoes and adopt a less eccentric hairstyle. None of this betokens a politically radical woman, yet Flora's seizing of power within the Starkadder family presents a clear image of female ascendance and defiance which exists in a curious tension with her emphasis on conventional feminine behaviour.

In terms of her matchmaking and interfering, Flora is comparable to Austen's Emma Woodhouse, but she is more successful than Emma. She rewrites the plots of the Starkadders' lives, introducing them to particular people and arranging their destinies exactly as a novelist would. Flora, as mentioned before, is a reader within the text; she is also a novelist within the novel. This is signalled by her initial remark that she will be collecting material for a novel while at the farm, and becomes increasingly evident as her power over the other characters is revealed. Her Austenian aesthetic biases which explain Flora's endorsement of marriage, and her requirement for closure and happy endings, all of which contrast with the plots and value-systems of the majority of regional fiction. Gibbons's choice of an epigraph from *Mansfield Park*, "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery", gestures towards the large measure of grief, misery and unhappy liaisons which feature in

rural fiction. Flora makes sure that all the single characters, including herself, are married off by the end; but again, there is a tension between conservatism and freethinking, since she also intervenes to divide Judith from her husband Amos, and send them off abroad separately. For Judith, self-fulfilment and marital duty are in conflict. In her case, Flora does not insist on the primacy of the marital tie, and her view in this situation aligns her with feminist thinkers.

In the area of women and employment, there are similar ambiguities which demonstrate the way that the novel balances between conventionality and feminism. Flora herself refuses to take up a career - a choice which was not characteristic of the forward-looking, unmarried woman of the 1930s.[7] As Anthea Trodd points out, the increase in career opportunities for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had led to the emergence of the "working girl", who was financially independent and perceived as glamorous and pleasure-loving. The novel attests to this when Flora's friend Mrs Smiling comments to her: "You know perfectly well that you will be *miserable* if you haven't got a job when all your friends have" (15). *Cold Comfort Farm* is set "in the near future" (6), which raises the possibility that Gibbons may be extrapolating slightly from current trends; nevertheless Flora's choice to live on her relatives until she has found a suitable husband makes her seem rather old-fashioned. On the other hand, her reason for this choice implies that she expects to have more personal power if she lives with relatives than if she becomes an employee. When Mrs Smiling suggests that she get a job, Flora replies: "I am sure it would be more amusing to go and stay with some of these dire relatives. Besides, there is sure to be a lot of material I can collect for my novel; and perhaps one or two of the relations will have messes or miseries in their domestic circle which I can clear up" (21). In her book on women's writing in the 1920s and 1930s, Alison Light argues that the literature of the period represents the home as a space newly available for women's creativity and control. This generalisation could be applied to *Cold Comfort Farm* since it is in the domestic space that both Ada and Flora exercise power and (in Flora's case, at least) creativity.

Although she is in many ways a conventional woman, in the context of Cold Comfort Flora is emphatically the representative of modernity and progressive thinking. She shows the Starkadders the attractions of modern conveniences, aeroplane and car travel, London fashion houses, and psychoanalysis, and as a result, they leave the farm one by one. This aspect of the novel refers to the

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[7] The same was not true of married women. Anthea Trodd, in her extremely useful book on women's writing 1900-1945, explains that it was the norm in the 1930s for women to give up work when they married - the idea that a man's status and

anxieties evident in much rural fiction about the violence of change, modernisation and urbanisation. The enormous contrast between Flora's London milieu and the life of the Sussex farm replicates a characteristic of regional fiction which is pointed out by Anthea Trodd: "Despite their reception as affirmations of the continuity of rural life, it was their insistence on the gulf between countryside and urban modernity which characterized the rural novels" (108). *Cold Comfort Farm* actually exaggerates this because its futuristic setting means that Flora is able to travel in private planes and use video telephones, while the Starkadders have no bathroom and wash dishes using a thorn twig. As KDM Snell points out in his book on the regional novel: "In *Cold Comfort Farm* the apparent distance between the rural and urban worlds was magnified: like a modern anthropologist, the urbane heroine finally leaves the earthbound churlish boors and returns to the metropolis by aeroplane" (52). Stella Gibbons did have a great love for the countryside, and her ecological concerns, and dismay at industrialisation are evident in some of her poetry (see Oliver 54). But since none of the modern lifestyle choices which Flora advocates are presented as at all damaging, Gibbons cannot be said to share the nostalgic attitude of writers such as Webb, who laments the estrangement between man and nature, and celebrates characters who still live in harmony with the natural world.

This aspect of the rural novels is cited by Anthea Trodd as an explanation for their high status during the interwar years: "The classic status enjoyed by rural writing in this period derived from the insistently diffused belief that the real England was rural England [...] in which continuity with the past was still clearly visible" (103). In the 1928 Literary Fund speech, Stanley Baldwin endorsed the value of Mary Webb's work, and suggested that a common love of the countryside, as articulated in Webb's writing, was one basis for national unity. Other successful examples of rural writing by women were Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* (1939), Vita Sackville-West's long poem *The Land*, which was published in 1926 and won the Hawthornden Prize, and Constance Holme's Westmoreland novels, which were published in the World's Classics Series. During the 1920s, both Holme and Webb won the prestigious Prix Femina-Vie Heureuse, and *Cold Comfort Farm* was awarded this same prize in 1933 despite the fact that it ridicules the previous prizewinners.

The Femina prize demonstrates that Gibbons's novel benefitted from the prestige achieved by rural writing in general, and partly explains why the novel had a higher status at the time when it was published than it does today. *Cold Comfort Farm* may ridicule certain aspects of rural writing, but it

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respectability depended on his having a wife who did not need to work was so pervasive that between 1901 and 1931 only

does not ridicule the countryside. The love of nature and of beauty which are evident in Gibbons's poetry surface momentarily in some of the less ridiculous descriptive sentences in *Cold Comfort Farm*, and attest to what Raymond Williams refers to as the "suburban uneasiness, a tension of attraction and repulsion" (253) which can be found in the novel's attitude towards the countryside, and towards the literature which celebrates it. According to Reggie Oliver, Gibbons "could never entirely identify with Jane Austen. The poet in Stella, mystical, deeply entranced by the world of nature, was more akin to Christina Rossetti. […] There was, as it were, an Elfine as well as a Flora Poste side to Stella Gibbons" (89-90). The Elfine "side" actually admired DH Lawrence: Gibbons especially praised his verse, and once described him as a genius ("Do Women Write Novels?"). Her own poetry is at times somewhat reminiscent of Lawrence's, particularly her early poems "The Fabled Ones" and "The Giraffes". This love-hate relationship with Lawrence is reflected, on a larger scale, by Gibbons's ambiguous positioning both within and outside the tradition of rural writing as a whole.

The fluctuations in the status of *Cold Comfort Farm* in relation to the English literary canon can be explained with reference to the priorities of readers and critics in different periods. In the 1920s and 1930s, writing "which recorded life in rural England enjoyed a special kind of prestige" (Trodd 103), and some of this prestige accrued to *Cold Comfort Farm* because of its inextricable connections. with straightforward regional writing. The erosion of the relationship between the countryside and English national identity caused a decline in the literary standing of *Cold Comfort Farm* along with other once-popular regional writers. The low-point in its status seems to have occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, and editions of the Oxford and Cambridge Companions to English Literature which date from this period do not even list Gibbons. In more recent editions, *Cold Comfort Farm* merits a brief entry, which suggests that there has been a small improvement in its status. This contention is supported by the recent promotion of the novel as part of the Penguin twentieth-century classics series, and by Penguin's issue of a new edition dated 2000. However, I also looked Gibbons up in twenty-one literary survey studies and reference books, almost all published between 1988 and 2000, and she was mentioned in only half of these. The studies of regional fiction which I consulted referred to her in passing, as did one of the three books on parody, whereas the companions to twentieth-century literature omitted her entirely. Only three of the ten guides to the literature of the 1930s or the interwar

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10 per cent of married women were recorded as working (14).

years mentioned Gibbons, and two of those three were devoted to the women's writing of the period. However, all five of the general handbooks of women's literature included an entry for Gibbons.[8]

Stella Gibbons's gendered perspective and preoccupation with issues of female power is one aspect of her work which sets it apart from the kind of literature which is generally perceived as typical of her period. This would explain why there is a certain interest in her on the part of specialists in women's writing, but very little among experts in the writing of the 1930s. Alison Light comments:

> It is extraordinary how much the literary history of 'the inter-war years' […] has been rendered almost exclusively in male terms: whether it be the doings of the right-wing aesthetes or the radicalism of the 'Thirties poets', the dying moments of English liberalism, the late flowerings of high modernism, or the making of social documentary and social realism - it has been male authors who are taken to represent the nation as well as those who are disaffiliated from it. (6)

The separation between high culture and popular culture which became entrenched during the heyday of literary modernism continues to inform our judgements about the literature of the 1920s and 1930s, as does the association of the popular or middlebrow with the feminine. These assumptions about gender, popularity and literary value are part of the explanation for Stella Gibbons's marginalisation. Further, the humorous, non-political content of her work is discontinuous with the literary trends of her era. These factors are compounded by her uneasy relationship with the (male) literary establishment, and her deliberate distancing of her book from contemporary conceptions of the literary. It seems, therefore, that literary-historical accounts of the interwar years have left out *Cold Comfort Farm* because it does not fit with the broad paradigms used by critics. Raymond Williams's comment on the novel -"what has to be said about that odd work is not easy" (253) - is perhaps representative of the uncertainty of literary historians and critics when faced with *Cold Comfort Farm*.

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[8] Gibbons is mentioned briefly in Beauman; Blain et al; Cunningham; Keith; Rose; Sage; Schlueter and Schlueter; Shattock; Snell; Todd and Trodd. She is omitted from Dentith; Hanscombe and Smyers; Hawkins-Dady; Hutcheon; Hynes; Joannou, *Women Writers*; Joannou, *Ladies Please Don't*; Light; Montefiore; and Willison.

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