"AMONG THE CIVILIZED":

A CONSIDERATION OF FAMILY, POWER, MORALITY AND TECHNIQUE IN THE NOVELS OF IVY COMPTON-BURNETT

by

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"Civilized life exacts its toll. We live among the civilized."

"The conventions are on the surface," said his wife. "We know the natural life is underneath."

"We do; we have our reason. But we cannot live it. We know the consequences of doing so. If not, we learn."

A Heritage and Its History (p 160)

"Civilized life consists in suppressing our instincts".

"Or does all life consist in fulfilling them."

Manservant and Maidservant (p 38)

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PREFACE

Six years after her death, Ivy Compton-Burnett's place in English literature still has to be determined. On one hand, her place in the literary establishment is confirmed by her rank as Dame Commander of the British Empire, awarded in 1967, and her reception of "The dignity of the Companion of Literature", conferred on her by the Royal Society of Literature in 1968, "in honour of her great gifts as a writer and in gratitude for her most excellent contribution to English letters", [1] and by the praise of such fellow writers as Nathalie Sarraute, Anthony Powell, Angus Wilson and Mary McCarthy.

On the other hand, her work has aroused a great deal of mystification and criticism. Criticism has usually been focused on the characteristic and limited elements, or conventions, which recur in all but the first of the twenty novels, and which include the standard Edwardian upper middle class family setting, financially straightened manor house, opening scene at breakfast, villain-victim pattern, and so on. These idiosyncratic conventions have led to critical charges of unreality and excessive repetition, as, for example, Malcolm Pittock's comment that because of the limitations of her subject and style, "ultimately her work is unsatisfactory - an unsatisfactoriness manifesting itself as a thin repetitiveness - for though she presents with great force an interpretation of society, she has not a flexible enough art to convey any real sense of its haeccity."[1]

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[1] Speech by Lord Butler, president of the Royal Society of Literature as quoted Sprigge, E. The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett, Gollancz , (p 169)

As recently as 1963, an article in the Times Literary Supplement, contained this scathing comment on the unreality of her work :

> "The author is a ventriloquist with an obsession about families and her characters rarely rise beyond the stature of dummies, or puppets whose jerky thoughts and confined expectations, are imprisoned by their role in the family."[2]

The purpose of this thesis is to attempt to penetrate beyond these mystifying eccentricities of style to Ivy Compton-Burnett's world view, in order to show that, rather than being limited and inflexible, they are limited only to the extent that they establish the bounds within which a rich and varied world exists.

If these novels can be said to be "about" anything, they are about the difficulties of living as a civilized being in a savage world, and about the depths of human motives and reactions. To illustrate this, my approach is thematic, rather than chronological.

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[1] Pittock, M. "Ivy Compton-Burnett's use of Dialogue," English studies 51, 1970, p 46

[2] "An Author and Her Abberation", Review of A God and His Gifts, Times Literary Supplement, Nov. 21, 1963, p 941.

In the first chapter, the family, one of her standard conventions, is analysed in order to show how this presumably limiting device which is used as a framework in almost all the novels, is in effect a vehicle for the discussion of the essence of human nature.

This chapter contains a discussion of what the family convention consists of in the novels, how it differs in tone, incident and character throughout the novels, how it serves as agent for such concerns as the development of character, power structure and moral feelings, and how the family institution is used as a forcing ground for the conflict between man's nature and instincts, and the restraints of civilisation.

The second chapter deals with one of the prime effects of the family institution, the exercise of power. Power is one of Compton-Burnett's central concerns, and her attitude to those who wield power is ambivalent. On one hand, she shows power to be an outlet for energy denied any other escape by civilization's restraints, and she implicitly respects those with the energy and strength to emerge in a powerful situation. On the other hand, she shows the destructive effects which a wielder of power can have.

This chapter also contains a discussion of which elements lead to and which constitute power, and the effects of power on victim and wielder.

Because her pragmatic approach might lead the reader to assume that Ivy Compton-Burnett takes no moral position, the third chapter deals with the question of morality. Compton-Burnett rejects such commonly-held virtues as total unselfishness, the practice of religion, and the work ethic, but on the other hand, she holds strongly, as the novels show, to moral values such as recognition of truth, generosity and courage.

Because most criticism of her work has focussed on her presumably limited and repetitive style, the fourth chapter deals with aspects of technique. In this chapter, an attempt is made to show that her technique is reductive rather than limited; that it comprises an attempt to wring down words, situation and human nature to their essence. To illustrate this, her style is analysed, and aspects such as her use of aphorism and euphemism, word echoes and puns, names, structure are discussed and related to theme.

The general approach to Compton-Burnett's work in these four chapters is, of necessity, broad. To illustrate the points made in these chapters, the fifth chapter contains an analysis of a specific novel, Manservant and Maidservant. This novel was chosen, firstly, because it was written in her middle period, which is generally considered to be the period in which her best novels were written, and secondly, because it contains excellent illustrations of the themes of power, family and morality, as well as amply demonstrating aspects of her technique dealt with in chapter four.

The underlying contention of this thesis is that her so-called "limitations" in fact establish a structure within which she can depict a profound world.

The heroes of Compton-Burnett's world are men and women who live difficult and stifling lives with courage, reticence and dignity. A significant phrase occurs a number of times in the novels: "the heart knoweth", which comes from Proverbs 14:10, "The heart knoweth his own bitterness, and a stranger doth not intermiddle with his joy", which expresses this idea of suffering and joy borne with silent grace, and of the tumult of emotion beneath a placid exterior.

It was the life Compton-Burnett herself led. She valued also humour and intelligence and self-knowledge, and these qualities along with her discipline and wit are reflected in the world of these strange, thoughtful novels.

CHAPTER 1

FAMILY

"Dear dear. The miniature world of a family!
All the emotions of mankind seem to find a
place in it." - Parents & Children, (p 180)

Of all Ivy Compton-Burnett's conventions, (that is, the recurring similarities of subject and action in her novels) a family setting is the most commonly used. All twenty novels (except Dolores,) take place within a family environment - indeed, only three have action which takes place outside a family.

The constituents of the family mise-en-scene are remarkably similar. The time is recognisably, if vaguely late Victorian or Edwardian, although three books are precisely dated: - Men and Wives, in 1889, A House and Its Head beginning on Christmas Day, 1885 and Manservant and Maidservant in 1892.

The family setting is a country or suburban manor house, or rather large house occupied in tiers; master-mistress, children, and servants. In each novel the family is subject to financial stringency. Each family, (except perhaps for that in Two Worlds and Their Ways) has a dominant member, in ten cases male, in nine female. Ten novels have a cast of characters that include small children. Twelve novels have servants who are distinctive as characters in themselves or who are necessary to further action. As well, there are certain stock scenes within the family convention; for example, eleven of the novels begin at breakfast.

The family, in an Ivy Compton-Burnett novel is usually an extended, rather than a nuclear one. In eleven of the novels, for example, a grandparent is alive and very much present within the family circle, while other frequent members of the family include aunts and uncles, step brothers and sisters and illigitimate children.

The impact of the family is heightened by inbreeding in its various manifestations: incest, (Brothers and Sisters), love, with overtones of incest (as between Lavinia and her father Ninian in The Mighty and Their Fall), supposed incest (Bridget and Edmund Lovat in Darkness and Day, who through an error believe themselves father and daughter) and something approaching incest (Hereward seducing or attempting to seduce each of his son's fiancées in A God and His Gifts, and Grant Edgeworth seducing his uncle's wife in A House and Its Head).

There is little real escape for those who live within a Compton-Burnett family. "Outside" is vague and nebulous, and travel is always for a purpose within the plot rather than for the achievement of a life elsewhere. For example, when Fulbert leaves his wife and children to go to South America, in Parents and Children, this gives his neighbour, Ridley Cramner, the opportunity to attempt to claim his wife. "South America" is as nebulous a destination as the North Pole: Compton-Burnett makes no attempt to describe Fulbert's life outside the family circle, except insofar as it concerns the family. Similarly, the disappearance of Ellen Mowbray in a shipwreck in A Father and his Fate is simply a device of plot to enable her husband to take a young, nubile bride.

Evildoing also takes on a common familial form. Family-based crimes include matricide (Men and Wives), infanticide (A House and Its Head), attempted patricide (Manservant and Maidservant) and the murder of the wife of an adopted son (More Women than Men).

These are the constituents of the family convention, and the fact that some, at least, of these aspects, appear in each of the novels after Dolores, has given grounds for a critical judgement of inflexibility. As Kingsley Amis writes, in a review of Mother and Son (which he parodies

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But such criticisms do not do justice to the various aspects of her use of such convention. Within the family structure, there is variety of character, incident and tone. There is also the fact that such a framework, restricted as it might be in some respects, contains within itself scope for profound and far-reaching explorations of the nature of man and society.

One example may illustrate how tone, incident and character can very within a strict use of a conventional family situation.

In virtually every Compton-Burnett family, favouritism occurs, and can thus be regarded as part of the family convention. The mother or father, usually both, has an acknowledged "special" child, and this is neither condemned or condoned. It is simply a fact of family life, but the psychological effect on children varies from novel to novel. In Parents and Children, where parental love is spread thinly in any case among nine children, Eleanor Sullivan's obvious preference for her son Daniel and daughter Honor produce various forms of neuroticism and insecurity in her children, from Graham, next to Daniel in age, who becomes melancholic, a failure at university, a loser, down to Nevill, age three, who pathetically clings to his babyhood, which gives him a place within the family structure and at the same time keeps reality at bay.

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[1] Amis, Kingsley, What Became of Jane Austen and Other Questions, Jonathan Cape, London, 1970, p.99

In Elders and Betters, the children Julian and Dora, who are favourites of neither parent, maintain mental balance in a hostile world by inventing a religion presided over by the god Chung, a substitute father figure.

A feeling of inadequacy caused by being the unloved child can and does cause distortion of character, as in Sybil Edgeworth in A House and Its Head, who, forever fawning on a father who rejects her, loses moral sense and commits a (not unrelated) crime, infanticide.

Yet a fourth variation of this recurrent convention occurs in A Family and A Fortune. Justine Gaveston, faced with similar lack of parental love, prefers self delusion and is continually representing herself as father's darling, in the face of the most obvious and pathetic evidence to the contrary.

In spite then, of the similarity of the basic convention of family favouritism, no two books employ the same use of it. But to elaborate further on the permutations Ivy Compton-Burnett can draw within a stock situation would be repetitious.

More important is the second aspect of her use of convention, that is, the use of such conventions to explore the nature of man.

I believe she uses the family institution in two ways in her novels. Firstly, the family institution serves as a structural form, an agent for her study of such concerns as the development of character and personality, power structure and moral feelings. Secondly, family is used as a metaphor for civilization versus nature, as a background and forcing ground for the conflict between man's nature, instincts and cilvilization's restraints.

In Compton-Burnett's own copy of Samuel Butler's Notebooks, the following passage is heavily marked:

> "The Family
>
> I believe that more unhappiness comes from this source than any other - I mean from the attempt to prolong family connection unduly and to make people hang together artificially who would never naturally do so. The mischief among the lower classes is not so great, but among the middle and upper classes it is killing a large number daily. And the old people do not really like it much better than the young."[1]

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[1] Jones, H. F. (ed), The Notebooks of Samuel Butler, A.C. Fifield, London, 1918, p 31.

It is likely, according to Hilary Spurling [1] that this passage was scored soon after World War I, when Compton-Burnett first read and was influenced by Butler, and although Compton-Burnett's views of family are ultimately less vituperative and more balanced than his, there is abundant evidence that the psychopathology of family relations interested her throughout her career.

Compton-Burnett's own background provided abundant resource material. The first child of the second marriage of her father, who was a kind but peripheral family figure, and the first marriage of her mother, an imperious dynamic woman frustrated by isolated suburban life and many children, Ivy Compton-Burnett was a witness to her mother's victimization of her five stepchildren and occasionally her own seven. The intensity of the growing girl ("I was a child of passion", she maintained later [2]) was revealed only to her two brothers, whom she loved intensely and who both died early. To the rest of the household, she was resolutely withdrawn. As head of the house after her parents death, she became an implacable tyrant until the dissolution of the household in 1915. The tragedy of the joint suicide of two of her sisters followed. In this early history lies the germ of many of her views on the family.

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[1] Spurling, H. Ivy When Young, Gollancz, 1974, p 226

[2] From a conversation with Maureen Beresford, as quoted in Spurling, op. cit. p 46

A family, particularly the sort of family she chooses to describe, is a closed environment, where family members, denied any other real outlet (such as an engrossing career) react upon one another so that life becomes a struggle between weaker and stronger members. In such a forcing ground for human behaviour, truth about individuals and human nature cannot be concealed long, and the family setting as convention becomes to Compton-Burnett, a most fruitful vehicle for a study of important human relationships.

In her studies of the pathology of family relationships, Compton-Burnett is treading a well-documented and popular path. Her insights are abundantly reinforced by contemporary psychology and psychiatry.

Particularly similar are the family studies of R.D. Laing, who adapted the "double bind"theory of the origins of schizophrenia developed originally by G. Bateson.[1] Bateson, delineating a neurotic family situation described a scenario remarkably evocative of an Ivy Compton-Burnett novel: a passive father, dominant, emotionally dishonest mother, who sets up unrealistic demands on the family scapegoat, whom Bateson labelled Charles/Clarissa Doublebind. Naturally Charles/Clarissa cannot meet these unrealistic demands, but neither can he/she opt out of the endeavour.

[1] Bateson, G., Jackson, D., Weakland, J. "Towards a Theory of Social Behaviour". Social Behavioral Science, Vol. 1, 1956, p 251-67

As a result of being caught between a pair of conflicting injunctions or "binds", the victim is put in a position of being a perpetual loser, subject to constant reproach from the tyrant parent. Any counter-move by Charles/Clarissa is met with a successful counter-counter-move, designed to place him/her in an untenable position. In Bateson's description of a schizophrenic family, the victim eventually becomes a type of combined Cordelia/Lear figure, expelled from the family kingdom by being declared "insane".

Compton-Burnett's novels are all variations of this sort of family power exercise, although the situations in her novels are considerably more complex and have greater variations. The closest approximation to the 'Doublebind' family (and it is very close indeed) is the Stace family of Brothers and Sisters, whose family tyrant, Sophia Stace, closely resembled Compton-Burnett's own mother.[1] Sophia is a past master of the doublebind technique, as illustrated in this conversation between Sophia and her children, at dinner, following the death of her husband.

> "No, I won't have anything to eat", said Sophia, raising her eyes to Patty's face. "I will just try to drink a glass of wine". .... "I don't know whether you all like sitting there, having your dinner, with your mother eating nothing? On this day of all days! I don't know if you have thought of it".
> "Oh, I understood that you wouldn't have anything", said Patty, rising and hurrying to her side with food. "I am sure I thought you said that".
> "I may have said those words", said Sophia, "It is true that I do not want anything. I hardly could, could I? But

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[1] Spurling, H. op. cit. p 129

> I may need it. It may be all the more necessary for me, for that reason. I don't think I should be left without a little pressing today, sitting here as I am, with my life emptied. I hardly feel you should let me depend quite on myself". (p 157)

Her children are doomed to be moral losers, whether they ply their mother with food or whether they don't, whether they themselves eat, or not; in fact, caught in a doublebind situation, they lose regardless.

Sophia's system of setting up untenable positions for her children extends to life situations as well as conversations. Her son Andrew is nominal manager of the family estate owned by Sophia. In fact, however, he has very little to do. But because of the job which he owes to Sophia, he is under compunction to continually voice gratitude to her. If he tries to assert independence, he is ungrateful. But since they both know that he is in effect doing nothing, Sophia is in a position where she can continually treat him as a lazy, dependent child.

Sophia is the archtypal Mrs. Doublebind, but variations of her sort of moral dishonesty in a family situation recur continually.

Duncan Edgeworth, in A House and Its Head, places his children in an untenable position, not by turning every action or remark into a personal affront as Sophia does, but by forcing them into obviously dishonest positions. At Christmas, ironically described by him as a festival of family life, he demands of his children, a description of the meaning behind Christmas, and orders them to "make a New Year's resolve when I order you, and tell us of it". What is their choice? Either they invent a patently dishonest and obviously insincere resolve to fit the occasion, or they refuse and are guilty of dishonouring Christmas and their father. They lose either way.

Small children, being the most vulnerable, are the most frequent sufferers. Julius, judging how best to behave after the death of his mother, in Elders and Betters, puts the doublebind situation succinctly:

> "We shall be supposed to be settled in a routine and then condemned for being in it. Or we shall be supposed to be thinking about Mother and then reproached for not putting our minds into our lessons. Oh I know how it will be." (p198)

But the complexities of family relationships can involve far more than simply the stronger victimizing the weaker. The evils that a familial situation can generate are virtually without limit, and Ivy Compton-Burnett explores a great many of them.

A passage from A father and His Fate is apposite:

"The house is not a torture chamber"

"Then it is different from many homes." (p 8)

The tortures that living in a family can inflict range from the petty exercise of power, as in the opening of The Mighty and Their Fall, where Agnes, the eldest child, lines up the other children to use the bathroom in an order which seems to be alphabetical rather than according to need, to the larger tortures of meanness, spite, and withholding of parental love.

Though families, by and large, do a great deal of damage, Ivy Compton-Burnett is far too complex a writer to rely ultimately on Samuel Butler's form of polemic against family constraints. Her books deal with the family relationship as a force for good as well as harm, and with all the shades in between as well. Some of the aspects of the family relationships which recur particularly in the novels are the brother-sister relationship, the parent-child relationship, the effects of heredity, and other childhood formative influences.

An examination of the novel which focuses most on the family institution, Parents and Children, can perhaps best reveal her use of the family convention in its true complexity.

Quantitatively, this novel certainly focuses on family more than any of the other novels. The cast of characters include three generations, encompassing nine children in one house, as well as three illegitimate children of the same grandfather in another.

Jesse and his wife Regan Sullivan have had three children, of which only one son, Fulbert is now alive. Because the estate barely pays its way, Fulbert and his wife and children are forced to live with his parents; there are thus three generations living in the house. The triple pattern seems to multiply, as it were, geometically in this house. As well as three generations, there are nine children divided into sets of three - nursery, schoolroom and adult. There are also three grown-up children, illigitimate offspring of Sir Jesse, who live in genteel penury on the outskirts of the manor house.

Life in the manor house seems idyllic to these latter three, even as it does to the Sullivans' curious neighbours, the Cranmers. Inside the house however, life seems more like hell - with certain compensations.

Fulbert's wife Eleanor, resents living in Sir Jesse's house, which is under the rule of her mother-in-law Regan. Eleanor's relationship with Regan is better than average, as mother-in-law, daughter-in-law relationships go, but it is not conducive to a relaxed home atmosphere:

> "[Regan] could not see her with affection; as they were not bound by blood; and the motives of her son's choice of her were as obscure to her as such motives to other mothers; but she respected her for her hold on him, and was grateful to her for her children. And she had a strong appreciation of her living beneath her roof. If Eleanor saw it as a hard choice, her husband's mother saw it as a heroic one and bowed to her as able for things above herself. The two women lived in a formal accord, which had never come to dependence; and while each saw the other as a fellow and an equal, neither would have grieved at the other's death." (p 16)

Fulbert himself is a man of great vigour, an unsuccessful and retired lawyer with little to apply his capabilities to, whose powers and attention are thus forced inwardly on his family. At fifty, he is still subservient to his father, Sir Jesse. Fulbert and Eleanor spend much of their time criticizing each other's faults, a habit which suggest that there is little love between them.

In this emotionally and financially constrained atmosphere, the nine children grow up. It is a real mark of Compton-Burnett's talents that each child appears in the novel as a totally rounded individual, whose modes of speaking, acting and reacting are completely differentiated from one another. Though each suffers, they suffer in different ways and to different extents.

The eldest three are Daniel, twenty-two, best adjusted, who is a favourite of Eleanor, Graham, an awkward twenty-one year old, nobody's favourite and bullied by Daniel, and Luce, twenty-four, one of Compton-Burnett's over-dramatic, compulsive speakers of truth.

In the nursery group are Nevill, age three, who has come to realise very early on that the baby of the family is in a privileged position, and so hangs on tenuously to his baby mannerisms, Honour, age ten, who is intelligent and aware of her intelligence, and Gavin, age nine, insecure and inferior to Honor in intelligence, yet adoring her and uneasy in the knowledge that his mother loves him best, though he does not deserve it.

Eldest of the middle three is Isabel, fifteen, who is clever and self-sufficient in all respects except in her overwhelming love for her father, whose favourite she is. Venice, thirteen, is bewildered by her father's obviously lesser love for herself, She is less clever than Isabel, but protected by her, since the two sisters are intimates. Left out is James, twelve, who "lived to himself like Nevill, but with less support, so that his life had a certain pathos." (p 38)

The children, except for the eldest boys who are at Cambridge, live in a completely self-contained environment. Only James goes out to school and he does not dare to bring friends home because of his strange family. The others have no outside friends at all. They have no future to look forward to either -there will not be enough family income to stretch nine ways and they will all have to earn their living in ways which are seen as unpleasant. (All Compton-Burnett's characters of any intelligence consider working for a living distasteful and shameful).

The main cause of stress however, is the painful desire of each of the children for a share of parental love, and at the same time a desire to be away from their parents, whose expectations and demands are impossibly high. The truth is that Eleanor loves only two of her children, and understands none of them, and Fulbert, while kinder, is hardly more understanding.

This scrambling for love and security in the family structure has moulded their personalities. Honor and Isabel, the strong confident ones,have toughened, but the rest have been warped. Graham, too often compared unfavourably with his elder brother by his mother, has simply given up, and becomes melancholic, one of life's losers:

> "You will make your mother proud of you?" said Eleanor, who saw her preference for her eldest son as simple tribute to him.
> "I believe you see it as a discredit to me, that I have not won your interest in equal measure" said Graham.
> Eleanor looked at him in faint surprise.
> "Do you think your ability is equal to Daniel's"
> "Yes, but different in kind".
> "Any sign of self-respect is a good thing", said Daniel.
> "The respect of others may follow".
> "I think it often comes first", said his brother.
> "Mother," said Luce, looking after the two young men,
> "Do you know that you treat those boys quite differently?"
> "A mother often has an especial feeling for her eldest son".
> "Isn't that hard on the second one? It does not follow that he is inferior".
> "He does not think he is", said Eleanor, in a tone of seeing a new light on the position. "So it has not had much effect on him". (p 23)

Eleanor's obtuseness with regard to the feelings and needs of her children borders on oblivion, but she is not really malicious. Like many adults, Compton-Burnett implies, her main concern is herself, and she really believes she is quite a good mother. Her position of power in this closed family circle reinforces this belief. No one, other than her children, to whom she does not listen anyway, dares to tell her otherwise. In any case, Jesse and Regan are no wiser in understanding their grandchildren.

Eleanor, like a true family tyrant, is a master of the doublebind technique, which helps to keep her children in perpetual bonds of insecurity. They simply do not know how to behave in any given situation in order to please her. When Fulbert leaves for South America, for example, they keep away from his final farewell, in case Eleanor wishes to be alone with him. But of course they have inexplicably done the wrong thing, Says Eleanor, "Tell them all to come. I cannot understand this lackadasical attitude. You might not have a father. I simply do not feel I can understand it." (p 136)

The children's confrontations with their mother have a nightmare quality. They are forced to act a role that they hope will be the one their mother wants, without quite knowing what is expected of them. The last thing they dare do is simply be themselves.

James, typically, is put in this position, where in an incident at the dinner table, he is served with a dessert which he is unable to eat since it will make him ill. So he puts it in his pocket to take upstairs. His motives are, "a reluctance to appear to fuss about himself; a purpose of transfering his portion to his sisters and a hesitation to meet his grandfather's kindness with anything less than gratitude". (p 61)

These are creditable emotions, but faced with his mother's incredulous disapproval, and impotent to state his reasons in front of the whole family, he can only cry, at which he is banished from the room. James's natural reaction to every confrontation with his mother is to hide his true feelings, even though there may be nothing wrong with them. Building a barrier around himself is one protection for his vulnerability. Of course this causes his mother to see him as a strange ignorant creature, which again lessens his self-respect and reinforces the circle.

When Fulbert is believed dead, Eleanor's reaction is typically obtuse. She breaks the news at once to her children, without sparing them at all. Her inadequacy as a mother is demonstrated by the speed with which she becomes engaged to Ridley Cranmer - she simply cannot bear the burden of parenthood alone. The limited love she has for her children cannot withstand the demands made on her. Given a chance of escape, she chooses marriage and abandonment of her children. The children thus have to bear at once the burden of being abandonded, at having lost two parents, and the guilt at actually being glad she is leaving.

When Fulbert returns, although there is the initial joy of having him back, and seeing Ridley leave, there is no happy ending. The family life goes on. The children have the knowledge that Eleanor wished to leave them and the painful reality that she is going to stay, and their father, almost deified in their memory, is seen on his return as just a man, not a hero:

> "Do you like father as much as you thought you did, when you believed he was dead? [Gavin] said.
> Honor hesitated, or rather paused;
> "Well, I don't think so much of him, I thought he was a more remarkable man. But I am quite reconciled to his being of common clay. I think that is better than those in authority over us". (p 272)

Family life is (exemplified at its worst in Parents and Children) an unequal struggle between the powerful and the relatively powerless, a constant battleground in which the victim must develop defensive maneouvers, including counter-attack by wit and truth (as Honor and Isabel do), building an impenetrable wall around private aspects of the personality, (as James does) and developing a totally false front, which is designed to placate and please the power-figure (as Nevill does). The alternate is breakdown and defeat as in Graham's case.

However, family is a force for good as well as evil in this novel, as in her others. There are many compensations which make family life bearable, even at times pleasurable and rewarding.

Her families, though they may suffer from a parent-tyrant, are still places of great love. None of the children can really love their mother totally, but their capacity for love is hardly blunted; it is merely focused on objects more worthy of love. Hatton, their nurse, is a woman of great sensitivity and kindness and she is adored by all the children. To call her a substitute mother would be to demean her role - she simply understands, differentiates and loves each child.

Equally important is the strong love some of the children have for each other. Isabel and Venice "live for each other", and Isabel, the stronger, protects Venice from her mother. Similarly, Honor and Gavin have an exceptionally strong, mutually supportive relationship, which Hilary Spurling suggests, in Ivy When Young, was probably based on the relationship between Ivy and Guy Compton-Burnett.[1]

Love between siblings, is very often, in her books, the strongest love possible - stronger even than that in marriage.

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[1] Spurling, H. op. cit. p 59

Possibly this is because the relationship begins in the nursery and brother and sister know each other so intimately from birth. Very often such a love is so intense that it borders on a kind of innocent mental incest:

> "Why can't brothers and sisters marry", said Gavin.
> "Because they have to start a family" said his sister.
> "If they married people in the same one, there would never be any new ones. But they can live together."
> "Do they have any children then?"
> "I don't think they do so often. But they can adopt some".
> "He will be your little boy", promised Nevill in full comprehension." (p 40)

One of Compton-Burnett's central concerns is the conflict between civilisation and nature, between the true self, and the assumed personality. Family serves as a convenient background for such a concern, for she saw the family structure as a permanent, stable institution imposed by society to the more anarchic tendencies of man.

Family is envisaged as basically indestructable. Though Compton-Burnett died in 1969, she maintained that basic aspects of Edwardian family life survived and would continue to survive:

> "Oh yes. I've known quite a different world in a sense - in a sense. But I don't think it's as different as people say. I think that a good many of the differences are aeroplanes and motorcars and things on the top. I don't think that human relationships are very different".[1]

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[1] Dick, Kay, Ivy and Stevie, Duckworth, 1973, p 7

and -

> -I don't think that people do alter - if they do they react[1] back again, don't they. There must be a family life."

Family life is necessary, as the mores and rules of civilized society are necessary, to contain and channel the natural impulses of man, which are in many people, base, selfish and cruel.

There are a great many inter-family discussions in the novels which centre around the words "natural", and which imply that natural man and natural behaviour are best hidden.

In Parents and Children, Luce comments,

> "It is natural to the boys to be as they are", [said Luce]
> "We cannot always leave our natural selves unmodified and expect other people to bear with them."
> "It is about what most of us do", said Sir Jesse, with some thought of his own illustration of the point. (p 148)

Later, Eleanor teasing her children, rather like a cat playing with a mouse, asks them if they hide their natural selves. James, whose life of doing just that has become a habit, is at a loss.

> "Do you show your natural self, James?" said Eleanor, with one of her accesses of coldness.
> "No; yes; I don't know", said James, looking surprised and apprehensive.
> "Do you pretend to be different from what you are?"
> "Oh no", said James, suddenly seeing his life as a course of subterfuge. (p 148)

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[1] ibid p 6

The point is that Eleanor is showing an aspect of her natural self, a natural sense that should be hidden and disguised. In a Compton-Burnett novel, to be true to oneself, is often to be false to everyone else, since one's true self is often mean and petty.

The family institution acts in some ways as a check on man's instincts, since the rules of family living, which include obedience to conventional manners and modes of behaviour and respect for authority, areattempts to contain instinctive behaviour. In this way, Compton-Burnett's restricted family setting is actually a metaphor for the larger civilized world of society, which attempts to do the same thing. Her ideas on civilization and society are similar in this respect to those Freud expressed in "Civilization and its Discontents":

> "Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressive instincts, and to hold the manifestation of this in check by psychical reaction-formations. Hence, therefore...the ideal's commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself, a commandment which is really justified by the fact that nothing else runs so strongly counter to the original nature of man."[1]

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[1] Freud. S. "Civilization and its Discontents" the major works of Sigmund Freud, Encyclopedia Brittanica, U. S. 1929. p 767 translated Joan Riviere.

Of course family life, like civilization, often fails to contain the natural instinct, as the constant flourishing of the family tyrant shows. Indeed, the family environment often acts as a hothouse for the encouragement of man's baser instincts, since a closed family environment allows few outside outlets and energies are vented within the family, rather than productively and creatively outside it. And this is the basic dichotomy of the family institution. Family to Ivy Compton-Burnett is at once necessary and destructive, a force for good and a force for evil.

Clemence Shelley puts the matter well in Two Worlds and Their Ways ; "We can only hide our heads at home. Homes cause the shame, but they also provide a hiding place for it, and we have to take one thing with another"../"You see things whole, Clemence". (p 284)

CHAPTER TWO

POWER

1

"You are such a powerful person that it seems to be right that you should use your powers."

(More Women Than Men p 153)

An important concern in the novels of Compton-Burnett is the dichotomy between the natural instinct in man, and the restrictive constraints on the exercise of his instincts, which civilized society attempts to impose on him. In the previous chapter, the role of the closed family circle in both encouraging and containing the natural instincts, was discussed.

To Compton-Burnett, the inevitable result of such a conflict situation, as well as the means by which this conflict is carried out, is the exercise of power. To use military metaphor, family serves as the battlefield, power at once as the weapons and the victor's spoils.

In an interview quoted in Orion, Compton-Burnett posits, "Imagine a Winston Churchill, untaught and untrammelled and unadapted in the sense that we mean, and then immured in an isolated life in a narrow community and think what might have happened to his power, what would have happened to it." [1]

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[1] "A conversation between I. Compton-Burnett and M. Jordain". Orion : A Miscellany op. cit. p 23.

What would have happened to his power, no doubt, was what Compton-Burnett makes happen to the power of Sophia Stace, of Anne Donne, of Horace Lamb, and of all her long string of power tyrants. The inner spirit of such larger than life characters finds outlet in venting power autocratically, even irrationally, on the heads of their weaker victims within the family circle.

Power is an outlet for frustrated energy, but this is not the only reason the exercise of power figures so largely in the novels. For to Compton-Burnett power is not merely an escape hatch, but an acceptable outlet for energy, in terms of what civilized society tacitly allows. If power is exercised according to the rules, then society will not officially approve, and there will be no conflict between the desires of the instinct and the constraints of civilization. "According to the rules" is, of course, the operative phrase, and a good deal of hypocricy is involved in reconciling what society allows with what the individual desires to do.

The society in which Compton-Burnett's characters live generally proscribes venting hostility by, say, physical aggression, but it does not necessarily prohibit such subtle means of venting hostility as mental torture, humiliation, and bullying, provided that what is happening is never openly acknowledged and can take place under the cover of a society-approved posture. In this way, energy repressed and limited can find an outlet in the almost unrestrained exercise of power.

For example, Horace Lamb in Manservant and Maidservant, a frustrated man, discharges his malicious energy by victimizing his wife and children. He can do this, by assuming the officially society-approved posture of being head of the family, and doing what is best for them, at considerable sacrifice to himself. Similarly, Sophia Stace, in Brothers and Sisters, bullies her children and thoroughly dominates their lives, while still operating within the rules of society, by assuming the rationale that she "knows better" and is "doing it for their own good."

Society as Compton-Burnett draws it, allows even power-based crime to occur, if performed within limits that allows society to turn a blind eye. Matthew Haslam, in Men and Wives, for example, murders his mother and is found out, but because he and his family can pretend that he only imagined he killed her, he undergoes no formal punishment.

This is not to say that society approves. Society has limits, and the lack of punishment that can accompany an immoral act does not mean that its evil is not perceived, but the point is that very little can be done to stop it. Power is very often an outlet for repressed energy not formally prohibited by society.

Compton-Burnett's conception of power is a broad one. As expressed in the novels, it appears to coincide with A. Etzioni's definition of power as "a capacity to overcome part of the resistance, to introduce changes in the face of opposition".[1] All Compton-Burnett's tyrants, though they differ in other respects, have this capacity in common.

Power, however, goes further. The exercise of power is a common occurrence, a part of the social acts which make up the day to day fabric of life. As the sociologist Amos H. Hawley writes, "Every social act is an exercise of power, every social relationship is a power equation, and every social group or system is an organization of power. Accordingly, it is possible to transpose any system of social relationships into terms of potential or active power. Perhaps such a transposition is nothing more than the substitution of one terminology for another."[2]

This is probably an oversimplification, but it is relevant to Compton-Burnett's novels because many of the actions and positions and much of the wit assumed by her characters are at base jockeyings for power, or a defence against such power plays.

Consider this extract, from The Present and the Past, in in this light. The situation is ostensibly a straightforward one - it records the first meeting after a long interval between Cassius Clare, an intolerable tyrant, and his first wife who has returned, after nine years to visit her children, now living with Cassius and his second wife - but in fact every posture, manoeuvre and sentance is a bid for, or a defence against, the exercise of power.

[1] Etzioni, A. The Active Society, The Free Press, New York 1968, p 314

[2] Hawley, Amos H., "Community Power and Urban Renewal Success", The American Journal of Sociology, vol. 68 January 1963, p 424.

"Well Catherine, I thought it best to take the bull by the horns. Preparing for the interview and working ourselves up would do no good. So I braced myself and acted on the spur of the moment. And standing in front of you as I am, I still think it was the right thing. I often find my impulses lead me in the right direction. This isn't by any means the first case of it. Well, how are you Catherine, after all these years? It is best to ask the question in the usual way. The less awkwardness the better. You are very little changed."

"Perhaps to your eyes. To me the change is great."

"Well no one would know it. I don't know how much I am changed myself. I expect you would have recognised me."

"There is little outward difference."

"Well as I say, I took my courage in my hands and came before I had time to think. A deadlock would not have served us. Well, it is a long time since we met."

"Yes it is nine years."

"Not since Fabian was a child of four."

"Not since then."

"You would be surprised to see him now."

"As a boy of thirteen? No, that is how I think of him."

"So we are to let the dead bury its dead?"

"The past is dead", said Catherine, in a low tone. "It has no dead to bury. My sons' lives are young."

"Yes that is true. But they have had a good mother in my wife."

"They have had a good woman with them."

"You left them of your own will."

"You made it a condition. I had no choice but to leave them."

"Well, well, we need not go into that..." (p 72)

Catherine, has, by Etzioni's definition, emerged as the wielder of power in this encounter, because she has succeeded, by maneouvre and counter maneouvre, in overcoming Cassius' resistance to her re-entering their family circle on her own terms. At the same time, Cassius has been totally unable to change her independent stance. This social conversation has been a series of attempts to exercise power and to defeat the exercise of power, thinly disguised as friendly conversation.

Let us examine how this works:

Cassius feels it necessary to assert his power over his former wife because of his gigantic ego and also because he is still sexually attracted to her. However, he is no longer in a position of strength: he can no longer bully her as a husband and he has made a weak first move by approaching her first, rather than by letting her approach him.

His first speech is an attempt to re-assert his masculinity, ("take the bull by the horns") transfer his intense curiosity to see her again to them both ("preparing for the interview and working ourselves up would do no good"), and overwhelm her with his charm and personality by means of self-flattery ("I often find my impulses lead me in the right direction. This isn't by any means the first case").

However, Cassius' ego blinds him to his transparency. Obviously he has been motivated in seeking her out so soon by overwhelming desires to see her, rather than, as he intimates, by being the blunt direct hero acting on impulse. The contradiction implicit in having "braced himself", implying forethought and "acting on the spur of the moment", gives him away, as does indeed, the patently contrived nature of most of his speech.

The only sincere note he speaks is the last sentance, "You are very little changed", which is poignant in its admiration and desire.

Catherine puts Cassius clearly in his place with her reply: "Perhaps to your eyes. To me the change is great", which is meant to tell him that all thoughts of a resumption of their relationship are out of the question. But Cassius is not quite prepared to accept this, and digs for flattery - "I expect you would have recognised me ?" Catherine's laconic reply, "There is little outward difference", has an irony that not even Cassius, conscious that Catherine left him nine years before, can miss.

Cassius then switches tactics. He will assert power not by invoking personal attractions, but through their children. He still holds a high card; he can deny her access to the children. He is not really prepared to do this, but a little subtle revenge is in order.

First he implies that she has neglected the children and then intimates how greatly they are changed (in other words she would not really know them, nor they her) - "Not since Fabian was a child of four... You would be surprised to see him now." Then he brings in his second wife, who has taken over Catherine's role - "They have a good mother with them."

Catherine refuses to acceed -"They have had a good woman with them," and Cassius plays his last card, a mother's abandonment - "You left them of your own will", after which Catherine firmly places the blame back where it belongs, on Cassius - "You made it a condition. I had no choice but to leave them."

Catherine has thus won the power game which has been waged under the facade of polite social intercourse, and Cassius can only capitulate - "Well, well, we need not go into that..."

This fairly typical extract illustrates how power can serve as the means and result of a great many social acts, and at the same time, can be a socially acceptable outlet for energy to her characters. (This of course is just one of the uses of power. As also shown in this passage, power can also be used as a means of gaining something desired).

Power to Compton-Burnett, is ubiquitous, and it is fundamental in human relationships, but it is not always readily available to those who wish to exercise it.

What gives an individual power? In Compton-Burnett's novels, the characters who possess power must have (in addition to motive) firstly, tangible resources, of which the two most important are money and position, and secondly intangible resources, such as intelligence, cultural conditioning, and personal qualities such as largeness of spirit, dominance, essence. These resources bear individual examination.

MONEY

The value of money to Compton-Burnett personally, is reflected in the comments of her friend Kay Dick...[1]

> "What particularly interested[Ivy]was money. How much or how little everyone had whom she did or did not know - that was proper luncheon or tea conversation. In later years she professed hard times. In fact, often, one actually thought she was really poor, and a remark she made to Kathleen Farrell not long ago typifies this later pose:

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[1] Dick, Kay, op. cit. p 26

> "I'm afraid I shall soon have to ask you all to bring your own buns! Then she laughed. Even so, it came as quite a surprise to many that she left £84,249."

As Compton-Burnett, so all her tyrants profess poverty and pinch pennies. Horace Lamb dresses his children as scarecrows, and Cassius Clare follows the very meat his wife eats, with his eyes, to her mouth with scarcely concealed regret. Clement Gaveston, in A Family and A Fortune is in fact a literal miser, who hoards a pile of gold coins. Money is safety; money is security in a world of uncertainty and insecurity.

Money, in fact, is a source of power. Not only does money keep away the demons of humiliation and insecurity, but it is a weapon for the exercise of power. Tyrants hold the power of money over their wives (as Duncan Edgeworth who begrudges his wife Ellen the expense of a competent doctor, in her final illness), their children (an example among many is Jesse Sullivan, in Parents and Children, who bullies his grandsons, because he is paying for their university education), and their servants.

For the sake of money, some of Compton-Burnett's most frightful crimes are committed. Anna Donne's will-burning and de facto murder of Jessica in Elders and Betters is at least partly motivated by greed, and will-burning is wholly motivated by greed in The Mighty and Their Fall, when Ninian Middleton destroys a will which leaves his brother's fortune to Ninian's daughter, in favour of one enriching himself. The desire for money and the power (as well as the comfort and freedom) it brings is so strong, that Sybil Edgeworth, in

A House and Its Head, arranges for the murder of a child, so that her husband will succeed to its inheritance. Almost as culpably, her husband Grant agrees a reconciliation with her, in spite of the knowledge of her evil act, for the sake of her money.

There are crimes less heinous, but still morally suspect, committed for the sake of money in many of the novels. One thinks of the rift between the previously devoted brothers Edgar and Duncan Edgeworth in A Family and a Fortune, caused by Edgar stealing Duncan's fiancée, so that Duncan's money will not descend to a possible family of his own, and of Hugo Middleton, who breaks his engagement, in The Mighty and Their Fall, because he will forfeit the money left to him by his mother if he marries the woman he loves. Money, which means independence in this case, and is a means of being free of the power of others, comes before love.

Again, Camilla Christie, the sensual wanton in Men and Wives, pursued by a series of men, chooses to marry a platitute-spouting hypocrite, Dominic Spong , because of his money.

Money may lead to meanness and crime, but it is never despised, indeed, it is treated with great respect by everyone except fools. Money buys freedom - the freedom of leisure and the freedom of never having to be subservient and imposed on by the powerful. Felix Bacon in More Women Than Men puts it nicely in his comments on the values of being poor and having to work for a living : "If I chose to behave in an undignified manner for a pittance, it is my own affair. That is the best definition of work I have ever heard." (p 43)

There is no dignity in poverty. The poor inherit nothing but lack of dignity, lack of respect, and a difficult life. As a character remarks in More Men Than Women, "Things like poverty and old age and death are shameful. We cannot help them; but that is the humiliation. To accept conditions that would not be your choice must be a disgrace." (p 26)

In a world where poverty is a disgrace, money is indeed power.

POSITION

Class distinction exists, indeed, flourishes in the novels, but Compton-Burnett is not a snobbish writer. Class lends no distinction other than material and tactical. The upper middle classes are superior neither in intellect, ability nor sensibility, to those lower. Conversely, the privileged possess no sense of obligation or noblesse oblige. Governesses and companions, for example, are usually either grudgingly kept on when their usefulness is at an end, or else summarily dismissed, as when Matty Seaton abruptly dismisses Miss Griffin, by sending her out in the snow, in A Family and A Fortune.

As with money, Compton-Burnett's attitude is that position (in the sense of relative social rank) exists, it is a good thing to have, and among its benefits is the sense of power it can levy.

Very few of Compton-Burnett's tyrants are of the English upper class. The baronetcy is as high as her characters aspire, and members of this rank include Sir Godfrey Haslam, in Men and Wives, Sir Robert and later Sir Felix Bacon, in More Men Than Women, and Sir Jesse Sullivan, in Parents and Children. For the most part, her protagonists are impoverished landed gentry. They are nevertheless at the head of the class scale as it exists in her milieu. Beneath them come members of the professions - doctors, solicitors, followed by clergymen (much satirised) and teachers. Writers fit loosely in this level, depending on their success. Beneath them come tradespeople such as Miss Buchanan, the storekeeper and letter-drop in Maidservant and Manservant, and finally the servants, who have their own hierarchy - governess, butler, cook, footman and scullery maid, the latter so little regarded socially that they some times lack even an acknowledged name.

All recognise their relative position, although some chose to deceive themselves and others about it, as for example, Josephine Napier and Lesbia Firebrace, the schoolmistresses in More Women Than Men, and Two Worlds and Their Ways, who continually bolster their own esteem by pontificating about the value of their role as teachers.

Basically the role position plays is simple. Those in a high position have, and can exert, power over those lower down. Everyone knows their place and is expected to keep to it, as this servant hall conversation in Maidservant and Manservant illustrates :

> "A servant I am and a servant I remain, George" said Bullivant in a low melodious voice, addressing the idea at George and the walls of the kitchen, and glancing to see if Cook were also of the audience. "So it is; so it has been, so it will be; and I am satisfied." (p 167)

There are exceptions, of course, and Bullivant is one of them. He has considerable power in the house and this may be the reason he is so satisfied.

However, he is quite naturally not taken very seriously by his workmates. No servant in Compton-Burnett's novels who has any intelligence whatever, would choose to be a servant if he could be a master.

There is one servant in the novels who has democratic pretentions.[1] This is George, the footman in Manservant and Maidservant, and his experience is an interesting illustration of how position is relevant to power.

George makes his appearance concurrently with the jackdaw trapped in the dining room chimney, a jackdaw being, as Mary McCarthy notes, a proverbially loquacious, thieving bird, who as a character in The Ingoldsby Legends, steals and reforms.[2] George's loquaciousness prompts him to reveal to the Lamb family his personal history, (he was brought up in the workhouse), in the belief they will pity and respect him. He is mistaken. A servant is not meant to have an independent existence, or at least not supposed to make it known, because if an underling is seen as a person with a will of his own, the family's absolute power and lack of consideration for him is in some degree lessened. George's confidence is greeted not with interest, but with embarrassment.

George ignores his place in less ingenuous ways; he steals and finally attempts to murder Horace Lamb. George's real aberration however is his total disregard for position. He refuses to accept his lowly role in the order of society and absolutely believes he is, with some truth, at least as clever

[1] Another is Ainger, in Two Worlds and Their Ways, who however has a valid claim by virtue of his illegitimate relationship to the head of the house.

[2] McCarthy Mary, Op. cit. p 118

and capable as Bullivant and most members of the Lamb family. And paradoxically, this gives him a kind of power. Along with his self-esteem, he has the perspicuity to see the faults of his "betters" and the wit and cynicism to express what he sees. Others are a little afraid of him, and even Bullivant has trouble handling him.

By refusing to play by the rules, George places himself outside the rules. It is impossible to imagine any other servant than George attempting to murder his master, and escaping with nothing more than a reprimand. George is an exception to the general rule that position contributes to power, but his very singularity shows how unique his case is. Only by attempting to be outside the conventions of society, can someone like George achieve any power whatever. And it must be remembered that George never achieves equality; he remains a servant.

INTELLIGENCE

> "By wise one means what? Perception?"
> "Yes, perception, I think, and seeing things as they are, really, and knowing about things as they are. I think that most intelligent people are wise up to a point in that way."
>
> - interview with Ivy Compton-Burnett. [1]

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[1] Dick, Kay, op. cit. p 12-13.

In considering the role intelligence plays in the acquisition of power, the distinction between cleverness and wisdom must be made. As she intimates in the quotation above, Compton-Burnett considered wisdom to mean perception and knowledge, including self-knowledge.

There are many wise people in the novels - the Nance Edgeworths, Dinah and Andrew Staces, Dudley Gavestons, - who understand exactly what is happening in their world and why and how people are acting as they do. Very few are in positions of power.

Power is usually inimical with wisdom because wisdom generates compassion. To understand oneself and others is to be generous to them, and a tyrant is, by definition, generous only to himself. Appositely, Spurling comments '[Intelligence] is the moral principle which underlies all her work, the source of perception (without which there can be no self-knowledge) and so of all generosity. Conversely, ignorance is the pretext which enables the insensitive safely and with a good conscience to practice all forms of meanness."[1] (The moral questions raised by the exercise of power, and Compton-Burnett's ethical standards in general, will be discussed in Chapter Four).

To exercise power requires, very often, a certain willful and self-justifying blindness to one 's own actions and motivations. Although such tyrants as Sophia Stace and Horace Lamb on a subconscious level are no doubt aware of what they are doing, [1] they prefer to dissemble to others and themselves. Sophia bullies her family because she claims, she is more experienced than they, Horace because he claims he is economizing for the family's good. And so, Compton-Burnett's most memorable tyrants are not really intelligent in that they are not capable of seeing and acknowledging the truth, or rather, one might say that they suppress their potential wisdom.

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[1] Spurling, H., op. cit. p 80

They are almost all, however, very clever. Anna Donne is the most obvious example of a powerful figure whose crafty manipulations contribute wholly to her power.

When Sophia Stace, in Brothers and Sisters says "Ah,you will never get to the end of finding what I can do... You will always go on discovering that. I sometimes find myself marvelling at the gulf between the average person and myself" (p 100), the reader smiles, but in part he agrees. Her wit, quickness and cleverness are indeed above the average, as are those of other memorable Compton-Burnett tyrants, and these qualities contribute to their power.

[1] "...I don't think there is such a thing as self-deception. When people say they do things unconsciously and subconsciously, I am quite sure they do them consciously." Ivy Compton-Burnett, as quoted, Dick, Kay, op. cit. p 10.

PRESENCE

The most important attribute contributing to power - greater than position, money, or intelligence - is that vivid personal quality which enables her tyrants to take centre stage with every appearance.

All Compton-Burnett's power wielders are on a larger-than-life scale, to which others automatically defer. They dominate every scene they are in, not so much because of what they say, but because of what they are, and what they are is larger, denser, rounder than anyone around them. Like Becky Sharp, or Gwendolen Harleth, indeed, like Lear, Compton-Burnett's tyrants dwarf those around them. It is one of her talents that she can create characters of such density.

They may be selfish and self-seeking (egocentricity, as a matter of fact, is a trait all her tyrants hold in common), they may even be intentionally cruel, hypocritical, ignorant, or bombastic, but boring, never. Theirs is the quality which Burkhart labels "quidditas", or whatness. [1]

A larger-than-life quality takes various manifestations; physical passion (Duncan Edgeworth, Anna Donne, Miles Mowbray, Verena Gray,) forthright bravado (as when Duncan Edgeworth introduces his new, and unexpected second wife to his family, without a murmer of apology), great capacity for love (Sophia for Christian Stace), jealousy, and sometimes sheer gall. It is always instantly recognizable.

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[1] Burkhart, Charles, I. Compton-Burnett, Gollancz, 1965 p 68

These three factors, intelligence, position and presence, are important in the make-up of a tyrant, but there is a fourth also. This last is neither an intrinsic personality trait nor a fortunate circumstance of birth, as is elevated position, but instead what might be termed a nurture or developmental factor. In other words, wielders of power are sometimes made, not born.

Two Worlds and Their Ways contains a classic account of the genesis of a tyrant in this sense. It is a psychological portrait of an innocent girl, Clemence, ("Mercy") and her adaptation to the ways of the world - her civilization - which amounts to the loss of her relative purity and innocence. The account of Clemence is an allegory of the Fall from Eden, though there is not a perfect parallel, because through Compton-Burnett's realistic eyes, there is no such thing as a wholly innocent childhood.

Clemence and her brother Sefton are the children of Sir Roderick Shelley, a genial, stupid baronet, and his second wife Maria, who feels inferior in her role of second wife and tries to compensate by attempting to be better than her predecessor. Her children are tools in this attempt, Maria wants, indeed expects, her children to impress their father by being cleverer, better, more loveable than their elder half brother and sister and thus reflect well on her. This places an impossible burden on the two children. Too much is expected of them. As a result, they withdraw into an isolated life of their own, centred around beloved nanny, governess and butler.

Outside this closed circle, the children are unsure and insecure and consequently they become unspontaneous, never daring to show emotion or affection outwardly.

Abruptly, they are sent from this environment to school, which is depicted from the viewpoint of a sensitive child. The judgement is harsh. School has totally arbitrary rules: lessons give no pleasure and have no application to life, masters are concerned only with self-aggrandizement. It is a world of boredom and hostile children. "[School] taught me to trust no one and to expect nothing... to keep everything from everyone, especially from my nearest friends"... as another character in the book comments. (p 119)

Clemence is fourteen, the youngest of her form, and faced immediately with shrewish class mates, she begins to lie. Her family is impoverished gentry - she elevates them to "the squire" and family. Her muslin dresses are hideous - her good ones are all at home. That the girls see through these pathetic lies panics her and she soon learns to invent better lies. Her unsightly mother is passed off as her governess. All the symbols of security at home, in this slippery world mean nothing. Clemence has no foothold, nothing on which to base a sense of self-worth among her peers.

At the same time she is pressed from outside. Her parents expect her to do very well. Her only salvation is academic distinction, for her Latin and Greek are praised on the first day. But then she has a further worry - can she keep it up?

So she resorts to cheating, by peeking at an open book inside her desk. The open book, a symbol of guiltlessness and transparency, becomes a symbol of guile and deceit. The remnants of her innocence cause her to think that she will not be found out, and that if she is, her judges will have mercy. But there is no mercy, and the realization involves another aspect of knowledge -

> "Clemence lifted her eyes in incredulous consternation. Surely human beings could not have such power over each other and wield it without thought or mercy". (p 107)
>
> (Her brother Sefton, meanwhile, is making the same discovery; "He felt strange knowledge welling up within him, knowledge that did not come from outside; knowledge of the world of school, the world itself; knowledge that the parallel between them was a shallow thing.") (p 151)

This growing knowledge involves for Clemence a realization that she too can be on the side of the victors. She is cleverer and more imaginative and sensitive than most others, and finally learns to use these assets to gain what she has always wanted, a sense of superiority.

Clemence no longer needs to hide things or be ashamed of them, once she realizes that others needn't matter. Power and self-aggrandizement are the basis of survival.

As a schoolfriend notes, "This harsh upbringing will make hard women of us. We shall want others to suffer as we have." (p 95) This accounts for part of Clemence's development. The other motivation is pure survival, a desire to escape too much pain. Ultimately this becomes the desire for power for its own sake.

Clemence becomes a fledgling tyrant. This is fully seen in the book's last scene. Aldom, the butler, plays their old game of mimicking a member of the family, and Clemence, who has formerly delighted in such mockery, reacts thus:

> "Be silent Aldom. Do not dare to say another word. And don't dare to do such a thing again. Don't you know better than to listen at doors and repeat what you were not meant to hear? You are a dishonorable, ill-mannered young man. This is the very last time. Do you understand? I see you do; so we need have no more words. I have said mine, and I wish to hear none from you. I have heard enough." (p 195)

The tone of the speech is familiar; a tyrant is being created.

What power is as well as what power does is a necessary consideration. Power reverberates on its victim, obviously, but it also has effect on its possessor. Just as the lust for power can lead to evil things, so can the exercise of power lead to abuse. Power, in a word, corrupts.

It is also addictive. Once experienced, the delicious thrill of power becomes druglike, hard to give up, and those who have once possessed it will do a great deal to avoid losing it. "You are in a beautiful place, I do not wonder you talk about it", says Mortimer to Horace Lamb, commenting on the lures and dangers of the exercise of power. "It must be wonderful to have power and use it with moderation and cruelty. We can so seldom be admired and self-indulgent at the same time." (p 120) Similarly, the young Sophia Stace, criticizing her tyrant father with complacent virtue, can say "I would not stoop to use absolute power like that. It shows how degrading absolute power can be." (p 16) before she herself has tasted the corrupting delights of power.

In its effects lies its dangers. Not only is the exercise of power so evidently rewarding and enjoyable, but because the wielder of power is in such an invulnerable position, no one can really challenge his abuses on an equal level. The tyrant is often all too ready to believe himself better, wiser and more deserving of power of those around him - and few can argue. As Matty Seaton says, characteristically, to Miss Griffin, in A Family and A Fortune,"I am a very exceptional person and in a tragic position and you will have to grasp it or you are no good to me." (p 60)

Power corrupts most often through fostering pride. Tyrants rarely possess power over themselves, for they feel no need to temper their worst natures. Lack of self control is a general feature of Compton-Burnett tyrants. (Anna Donne is an exception), and their drives are consequently almost beyond control, as with Cassius Clare, in The Present and the Past, described as "driven by something within. He is master of everyone in the house but himself." (p 127) or Horace Lamb, of whom his wife says, "You must face the truth Horace. You are not so much the master of your own fate and we are none of us the masters of our own feelings." (p 172)

Few of the wielders of power in Compton-Burnett novels are happy people. Power brings spoils but rarely final contentment. Tyrants pretend, usually voluably, that they are fulfilled, but if only subconsciously, they are well aware that essentially power serves in their lives as an unsatisfactory outlet for potentially enormous capabilities. Thus Sophia Stace, claiming herself a happy woman all her life, dies of "some internal illness that was mortal", (p 119) presumably cancer, which serves as a symbol for her frustrated capacities. Through her exercise of power and will, these capacities eat up and destroy her husband and children's lives and eventually herself. Her life is a blighted, tragic one.

Similarly, the incorrigible Josephine Napier, who picks up the pieces of her domineering life several times within the course of More Women Than Men, arouses the rhetorical question from one of her victims - "It had not struck me," said Miss Luke, "Had it struck any of you, that Mrs. Napier is a tragic figure." (p 211) It had struck the perceptive reader.

The paradox of power as tragic and yet enviable is compounded by another paradox: power, in Compton-Burnett's world view is necessary.

The victim, with one part of himself, needs to be dominated as the victor needs to dominate; subconsciously the victim offers his neck to the powerful one.[1]

> "Sometimes [people] absorb other people's [lives]"
> "More often when they are offered them. Or more often than is thought." (p 24)

comment two characters in Darkness and Day, a remark which finds an echo in almost every one of her tyrant-dominated books.

When Sophia Stace, in Brothers and Sisters, dies, her children are rudderless and drift off to London, in spite of the fact that their life, ostensibly, has been a fruitless attempt to liberate themselves from her grasp. Sophia the destroyer, is called "wisdom" by her children, and her death is mourned far more by the village than was the death of her blameless husband.

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[1] This may perhaps stem from incidents in Compton-Burnett's own life, particularly in the period after her mother's death in 1911, when she undertook the management of the household at Hove, with a true tyrant's hand, until 1915, when the household disintegrated; "There always had been a tyrant - she inherited the position and she used it", said her sister Vera (as quoted in Spurling, op. cit. p 209) and "Those were years in which Ivy wasn't master of herself - something was mastering her and it wasn't the best part of her". (ibid. p 209) Unlike her tyrants, Compton-Burnett sustained defeat. Her sisters left her rule, and in 1917, two of her sisters committed suicide. Co-mingled self-justification and guilt, one speculates, may have influenced her attitude that the victim of power generates his own victimization.

Similarly, when Felix Bacon and Helen Keats manage, with great triumph, to break free from the tentacles of Josephine Napier in More Women Than Men, and retire in splendour to the ancestral home, they find themselves lonely and bored. And when Horace Lamb almost dies of illness in Manservant and Maidservant, his family is appalled, even though they have wished him gone. His illness and recovery and the reactions of those around him to the potential loss of his power are evident in this remarkably cogent passage:

> "They stood aloof and unaware of each other. They did not feel that the head of the house was to die, that the husband and father was to die, that the friend of a lifetime was to die. Horace was to die. Horace, who might drive others to their death, but was himself immune from danger. They knew that they had imagined him weeping for themselves, weeping in remorse and grief. The trial, the bondage, the safety of their lives would be gone. They would be unprotected, dependent on themselves. The helpless lives they had defended would be their own responsibility, their own burden." (p 227)

For the tyrant is ultimately in a sense God the father, as well as a representation of evil; this is why all Compton-Burnett's power tyrants are such complex characters, and why her "bad" characters did not seem so bad to her as critics would have.[1]

[1] "They [her characters] don't seem to me such monsters as they do to other people. I think, as I have said many times, that a good many of us, if subjected to a strong and sudden temptation without any risk of being found out, would yield to it." Millgate, M. "Interview with Miss Compton-Burnett", op. cit. p 110

Though subjected to abuses of power, the victims in return gain freedom from responsibility, which the father-tyrant assumes. Life, under the tyrant's shadow, is sheltered and safe. To the victim, though he seldom acknowledges it, domination and the overcoming of his resistance and opposition (to return to Etzioni's definition) are valid prices to pay for life in the womb.

Power is finally a symbiotic force - occasionally positive, more often abused, but always necessary alike to practitioner, victim, and society.

CHAPTER THREE

THE QUESTION OF MORALITY

"Without a moral standard there could be no civilized life."
(letter from Ivy Compton-Burnett, 1964) [1]

Does Ivy Compton-Burnett have a moral sense?

Her pragmatic approach to the abuses of power, her implicit sympathy with the psychological nature of the tyrant, and the frequency with which evil triumphs in her novels, may suggest that ethical sensibility is not a major preoccupation. Indeed, critics have suggested that she lacks moral sense, in that she makes little distinction between what is traditionally held to be right, and what is held to be wrong. P.H. Jackson, for example, has labelled her "the most amoral of living writers", [2] and she has been accused of writing of "a gentry lower both in status and morality". [3] Frederick R. Karl devotes a chapter of a book to writing about "the law of the jungle",[1] in Compton-Burnett's amoral world in which "morality is attached to self-gain, both material and psychological".[2]

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[1] Letter from Ivy Compton-Burnett to John Ginger, 1964, as quoted in his article, "Ivy Compton-Burnett, originally published London Magazine, Jan. 1970, reprinted in Burkhart, The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett, p 173.

[2] Johnson, P.H., I. Compton-Burnett, Longmans Green & Co. 1951, p 11.

[3] Kermode, Frank, review of A Heritage and its History in "Fiction Chronicle", Partisan Review, summer 1960, XXVII, p 553.

The error here, I believe, lies in confusing her pragmatic world view, with her ethical standard. Because, in novel after novel, evil triumphs and evil characters are often more delightful than good ones, it has been assumed that Compton-Burnett rejects the idea of moral worth. There is also a confusion between the moral standards and practices of her tyrants and power wielders, and those of the worthy characters in the novels; characters such as Dudley Gaveston, Dinah Stace, Rachel Hardisty, Jessica Calderon.

In fact, a strong moral sense permeates the novels. The world being what it is, crime often pays, but that does not mean that crime is right. In Compton-Burnett's view, the triumph of wrong behaviour is simply a realistic way of recording what happens in life. As she stated in an interview, "I shouldn't mind being described as amoral, but I don't think guilty people meet punishment in life. I think it is a literary convention. I think the evidence tends to show that crime on the whole pays."[3]

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[1] Karl, Frederick R, "The Intimate World of Ivy Compton-Burnett" in A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel, Lowe and Brydone, London, 1963, p 201.

[2] ibid, p 203

[3] Millgate, Michael, "Interview with Miss Compton-Burnett" Op. cit. p 109.

Though the ill-doer triumphs frequently, a moral sense of his wrong action always emerges in the horrified recognition of the deed as evil by other characters. When Matthew Haslam, for example, kills his mother, in Men and Wives, he ostensibly meets no retribution. But his own conscience almost drives him mad, and he confesses to his fiancée, who thereupon breaks their engagement. His own family are totally unable to come to terms with the truth, and so maintain the ludicrous pretence that the murder never happened. Thus there is a very strong sense of moral shock at matricide, even though Matthew escapes without legal punishment.

Even in the one novel where an evil act is not recognised as such by other characters, Elders and Betters, Anna Donne's contrived murder of her aunt Jessica is recognised with horror by the reader, as Compton-Burnett intended. Also, the evil nature of her deed is not lost on Anna herself, though she does not feel enough guilt to stop herself committing the act.

Evidence for this is seen in several of Anna's ambiguous speeches. Accusing Jessica unjustly of spreading gloom over her family, Anna claims, "You are like some dark angel, honestly and unselfishly serving the cause of evil", (p 157) which, though Jessica does not realise its real sense, is actually true; Jessica is unwittingly serving Anna, the cause of evil. Again, giving her family an account of the scene in which Anna drives Jessica to suicide, Anna comments, "I almost returned to the beliefs of infancy and credited the tales of satanic power", (p 162) in which she is ostensibly accusing Jessica of dark powers, but in fact, referring to her own satanic power over Jessica. Anna's recognition of evil for what it is, is confirmed in another ambiguous statement to her family, "Aunt Jessica gave me the strongest sense of guilt" (p 163). Even Anna Donne, possibly the most immoral creature Compton-Burnett created, recognises the difference between good and evil, though her overwhelming desire for the money that will buy Terence Calderon for a husband, is more than equal to submerging any guilt she might feel. But this very recognition of moral standards demonstrates that critics who have labelled Compton-Burnett totally amoral err.

Ivy Compton-Burnett's moral sense, though strongly present, is uniquely her own. Although she respects the civilized manners and modes of behaviour of Edwardian England, certain virtues that society tends to hold in esteem; such as total unselfishness, selfless humanitarianism, religious piety, the values of hard work, are to her simply subjects of comedy.

Unselfishness, as Thomas Calderon points out in Elders and Betters, is "too good to be possible. It comes of a foundation that must break down...a person who can really be called an unselfish person has no place in life" (p 18). Elders and Betters is in part an elaboration of this philosophy, for it is the study of a woman who is truly unselfish, and her inevitable destruction by forces of evil in a harsher world than her own. As Compton-Burnett remarked, "I think it is rather terrible to see [good] being done. On the whole I think it is rather terrible..."[1]

For the most part, extreme unselfishness - living for others-is treated as humour rather than as tragedy. Compton-Burnett's vocal do-gooders, her Dulcia Bodes and Justine Gavestons, are subjects of high comedy, and their unselfishness is revealed as, at bottom, either hypocritical, self-seeking, or the result of stupidity.

A House and Its Head has two of the most memorable of Compton-Burnett's altruistic comic butts: Rosamund Burtenshaw, a former missionary, and Beatrice Fellowes, her cousin, whose lives devoted to good works are mildly hindered by rivalry over their mutual infatuation for the local rector. One of the high comic moments of the novel, occurs when Beatrice makes a fervant circuit of neighbourhood families on Christmas afternoon, bringing them "once more the simple message of Christmas". (p 46) Her ludicrous and sanctimonious calls are greeted with embarrassment, and Beatrice is forced to return home without the dinner invitation so transparently sought. Following this, she and Rosamund spend the holy day bickering about the rector.

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[1] Millgate, M. "Interview with Miss Compton-Burnett" op. cit. p 111.

Their pose of lives devoted to others reaches its apex of transparent hypocricy at the revelation that the rector, coveted by both, is to marry Nance Edgeworth. Rosamund barely rises to the demand: "A wish to mine has come true, that the lady of the rectory should be taken from our midst." (p 261)

Clerics receive similar satirical treatment.[1] Some of her early clerics include Mr. Bentley, a domestic tyrant, and Rev. Francis Fletcher, a sanctimonious fool, both from Pastors and Masters, and Edmund Dryden, in Brothers and Sisters, who begins as a solemn observer of ritual, and ends as a caddish hypocrite. He is surpassed in caddishness by Jonathan Swift, in More Women Than Men who seduces both a young woman and a young man, and provides no support for his illegitimate child, while claiming the credit for support.

[1] Her scorn was a personally held belief, not merely a comic convention. In an interview with Kay Dick in 1963, she said, "But I never liked the religion I never liked it. I didn't like all the atonement and all that, you know. I didn't like it at all. I thought it was a disagreeable and humiliating religion..." (Dick, Kay, op. cit. p 2-3)

Compton-Burnett herself was baptised, confirmed and sent at fourteen, to a high church school, but commented to Elizabeth Taylor in 1957 "I was brought up perfectly ordinarily in the Church of England but when I was sixteen or seventeen my reason naturally rejected such nonsense. No good can come of it. Its foundations are laid in fostering guilt in people - well, that obviously makes it easier for our Pastors and Masters when we are young," (as quoted, Spurling, op. cit. p 77).

The work ethic, religion and selfless piety are subjects generally condoned by large sections of her society which Compton-Burnett mocked. Conversely, certain actions proscribed by society, are judged morally very leniently by her. Incest is one example. The practice of incest actually occurs in the novels only once, in Brothers and Sisters, but near incest, or what might be called mental incest, (extraordinarily strong love between members of a family,) occurs very frequently. In More Women Than Men, a woman falls in love with her nephew, in Elders and Betters, and again in The Mighty and Their Fall, a daughter has an unnaturally close relationship with her father, in A House and Its Head, a nephew seduces the wife of his uncle, which also happens in A Heritage and Its History. In this latter novel the plot is further complicated when a son falls in love with his half sister. In Manservant and Maidservant, a secret elopement is planned between a man and his sister in law, and in Darkness and Day, the plot revolves around the belief that a woman has married her father.

Although incest never occurs with both parties knowing what they are doing, the reader nevertheless is left with the strong feeling that Compton-Burnett sympathised with the incest-related drive, and felt incest to be not a particularly shocking act.[1]

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[1] That Compton-Burnett sympathised with the incest-related drive, and used it not merely as a dramatic convention, can be deduced from her own extraordinarily strong relationship with her two brothers Guy and Noel. Hilary Spurling, (op. cit. p 58) comments that "the relationship itself, beginning for mutual comfort and protection in the nursery, strengthening on contact with harsh or intemperate adults into a deeper protective bond, provides an intimacy more satisfactory and closer - or at any rate examined in greater depth - than even the happiest marriages." According to Compton-Burnett's sisters, the intimate relationship between Honor and Gavin Sullivan in Parents and Children was probably modelled on that between Ivy and Guy Compton-Burnett (ibid p 59). Noel's death in 1915, after Guy's in 1905, she said "quite smashed my life up." (ibid p 256)

Society disapproves, and Compton-Burnett tacitly approves in other cases. In The Mighty and Their Fall, Lavinia Middleton steals and hides a letter to her father Ninian from his fiancee, and subsequently the engagement is broken off. When the letter is found, Lavinia tries to impute the blame to her grandmother. This is obviously a morally blameworthy action. But as Compton-Burnett creates the situation, Lavinia is hardly guilty at all, since firstly, she has been provoked beyond reason by her father's cruelty, secondly, she does it out of love for Ninian, rather than malice, and thirdly, she had the courage to commit the act and feel remorse for it. By contrast, Compton-Burnett shows Ninian to be much more blameworthy, though he does nothing technically "wrong", for what he does is the more subtle mental crime of cruelly rejecting and diminishing Lavinia when he takes a second wife. An act of mental cruelty is worse, in many cases, than an actual immoral deed.

These are some of the ways in which Compton-Burnett's moral standard is somewhat more individual, than conforming to the traditionally accepted one of the period of which she writes.

Compton-Burnett's sense of moral priorities derives from the fact that her realities are harsh ones. For her characters, there are no easy escapes, no better world after death. But it would be wrong to label her cynical; rather, she is realistic, pragmatic, wary. To Compton-Burnett, the practice of morality and basic human nature are at odds, and this is why the restrictions of civilization are necessary. Her characters recognise the worth of such values as generosity of spirit and kindness , but the difficulty these characters encounter (and much of the humour of the novels) lies in the reconciliation of practising these virtues and practising self-interest.

However, although all except her pious hypocrites acknowledge self-interest openly, this does not mean that self-interest is held to be the highest good. Some of her characters are more selfish, more ungenerous than others. A relative scale exists - and its very existence shows Compton-Burnett's acknowledgement of the values of these traditional moral standards. Anna Donne, in claiming all of Sukey Calderon's money is certainly less moral than, say, Sukey, who is merely selfish and demanding. And Lavinia Middleton, in The Mighty and Their Fall, although fully aware of her own interest, is generous and self-sacrificing in helping her father after the death of his wife, and is thus on a higher moral scale than he (as mentioned above).

Compton-Burnett, then, possesses a moral sense in that in her novels right and wrong modes of behaviour are acknowledged and differentiated and at the same time, her moral values are her own, rather than strictly traditional ones.

A fruitful light on what exactly her moral sense encompasses, can be thrown on the novels by comparing them to the works of a novelist similar in some respects, Jane Austen.

There are obvious surface similarities - the restricted canvas, the bedrock respect for manners,(the comment from Compton-Burnett's last book "Nothing goes deeper than manners. They are involved with the whole of life. It is they that give rise to it and come to depend on it. We should all remember it," (p 16) might well have been written by either), and the delight in pricking comic flaws, particularly transparent pomposity and self-importance. One feels that Emma Woodhouse, with her verve and intelligence, and Anne Elliot, with her superior understanding, sensibility, and mental fortitude, are heroines of the sort Compton-Burnett aimed to create in her Nance Edgeworths, Dinah Staces, Ursula Mowbrays.

The differences between Ivy Compton-Burnett and Jane Austen are more revealing of the Compton-Burnett's moral standpoint than are the similarities. Compton-Burnett's Anne Elliot figures never triumph in the end, for to her, life was not like that. The rewards of her heroines come simply from the incidental pleasures of life, such as friendship, exercise of wit, love between members of a family. Good rarely triumphs. In Compton-Burnett's world, the least morally deserving often walk off with life's prizes.

There is another significant difference. Where both writers consider manners and civilized behaviour to be of supreme importance, Compton-Burnett's emphasis is on the fact that manners mask the horror underneath, hiding the true nature of man and thus manners act as a safeguard. Jane Austen's emphasis, on the other hand, is on the intrinsic order and decency that good manners imply, as well as the occasional restrictions and inadequacies of manners alone.

Thus, Jane Austen treats filial respect within families as one of societies necessary modes of conduct. Mr. Woodhouse may be a fool, but Emma treats him with deference and love, even to the extent of subjugating her independent married life to his convenience. Even Mrs. Bennett is generally suffered quietly by her daughters.

To Compton-Burnett, the Mr. Woodhouses of society deserve only the baleful eye of truth, and they get harsher treatment. Woodhouse can be treated mostly comically by Jane Austen, but Ivy Compton-Burnett, influenced by Samuel Butler's vitriolic condemnation of parental folly, would have had less sympathy.

A character very like one of Compton-Burnett's father tyrants is Walter Elliot, in Persuasion, (who is, it is true, treated harshly by Jane Austen). Though Anne acknowledges to herself that she is ashamed of him, she remains outwardly a subservient and dutiful daughter. Jane Austen's treatment of this father figure can be compared to Compton-Burnett's treatment of Miles Mowbray in A Father and His Fate, who resembles Elliot in being vain and self-flattering, and bullying his three daughters, particularly his eldest, Ursula, a wise, long-suffering woman who is rather similar in character to Anne Elliot. There are some similarities of plot as well: the family estate is entailed, and financial retrenchment is necessary. Unlike Persuasion, however, the novel focuses on the uses to which such a vain and foolish man can put unrestrained power, and Compton-Burnett explores possibilities that would never have been subject matter for Jane Austen.

Miles, who has a strong sexual nature, embarks on an affair and engagement with his nephew's fiancee, forty-four years his junior. That Miles' wife is still alive is a minor obstacle that he keeps secret.

Ursula, like Anne, marries, but hers is a marriage of convenience. Few Frederick Wentworths present themselves to Compton-Burnett's heroines, for to her life seldom has such neat and happy endings. Further, marriage is never seen as a culmination and escape from the frustrations of constrained life. There are few escapes, and a sense of morality is rarely rewarded.

The basic difference lies in Compton-Burnett's stoic approach to life. Wary, cautious, courageous and dignified, her heros and heroines could never agree with Mr. Knightley's philosophy: "My Emma, does not everything serve to prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with each other?"[1]

The possibility of living a life of total openness, truth and sincerity is no more than hopeless, if desirable, fantasy, which would render her characters even more vulnerable than they already are.

[1] Austen, J. Emma, Penguin Books, 1970 p 430

Compton-Burnett's moral realities are not quite as bleak, though, as a comparison with Jane Austen might tend to intimate. An analysis of the moral situation in one of her novels, A Family and a Fortune, which explores various moral issues, ranging from honesty and dishonesty to generosity and selfishness, illustrates some of the more positive aspects of her point of view.

In this novel, Compton-Burnett adopts an effective structural device to demonstrate these polarities; a scene is set, characters are established in their assumed personae, and then an event occurs which shakes each character out of its accustomed pose. Like a kaleidoscopic shift, each character is tested, then tested again as still another pattern emerges.

The book begins with the usual breakfast set piece at which the Gaveston families appear in their customary poses, that is, in the moral character with which they wish to be regarded by others. Edgar, the father, is a forebearing, though distant, loving head of the family, Dudley is his devoted and financially dependent younger brother, Blanche, a devoted mother, and Justine, an honest, outspoken, unselfish sister, living for others.

The first change in the accustomed order occurs when Blanche's sister Matty is forced, by financial constraint, to seek to let the empty lodge belonging to the Gaveston estate. Matty is one of Compton-Burnett's comic horrors - selfish, dramatic and demanding. Immediately everyone is seen as slightly less than they were originally, through Matty's eyes. Justine's do-goodism becomes officious and slightly stupid, and Edgar, who likes to think of himself as generous, is shown as mean when the rented lodge, regarded by Edgar and Blanche as "cozy" is seen by Matty as "a hutch".

A more momentous change occurs when Dudley, who all his life has depended upon Edgar, comes into a large inheritance. His reaction is at first typically unselfish and generous. He is delighted at his good fortune, and worried that the family may be too proud or embarrassed to take what he has to give. His worries are, of course, unfounded. The family is only too happy to take his money; they take his giving it away to them quite for granted. Dudley then feels a small degree of resentment, some wish for gratitude, and a desire for some respect. He also has the desire, now, to keep some of the money for himself. These wishes are openly voiced with wry humour and perception, for Dudley, with self-knowledge, tolerance and kindness is one of Compton-Burnett's genuine moral heros. His not overly unselfish reaction is intended to be perfectly natural and not at all reprehensible. What is more reprehensible is the reaction of the family.

Accustomed to taking Dudley for granted in his subservient position, they uneasily resent his new prominence instead of genuinely rejoicing for his good fortune.

The strain heightens when a new character enters the book, with whom Dudley falls in love. Should he marry her, of course, he will keep his money for himself. The effort to appear generous becomes high comedy, as the family awkwardly pretend they are delighted that Dudley will at last have a home of his own; the humour lying in the contrast between the effort to show what is supposed to be felt (civilised manners), and what is really felt (jealous greed).

This contrast is shown clearly when Blanche becomes seriously ill, and is unable to maintain a civilised pose. The truths that underlie her veneer as the perfect, selfless, satisfied wife and mother become evident. She rebukes her daughter Justine for telling her what to do (usually Blanche listens to Justine, and praises her good sense), she orders the butler, whom she has always secretly disliked, out of her presence, she bursts into uncontrolled weeping at the thought of Dudley (and his money) leaving, and tellingly, at her death, she asks her only, ostensibly beloved daughter Justine, "Are you my beautiful daughter? The one I knew I should have? Or the other one?" (p 167)

With Blanche's death, Edgar's pose as morally blameless breaks down. For the first time, he is tested, and he comes out very badly. Part of his pose has been the loving father, husband and brother. In reality, he is incapable of love. The myth that he loved his wife and brother is broken, when, very soon after Blanche's death, he takes advantage of Dudley's temporary absence to become engaged to Dudley's fiancée. His motive is partly avarice, for if Duncan does not marry, his money will go back to Edgar's family. Edgar's low deed is compounded by the exceptional cruelty with which he breaks the news to Dudley:

> "Dudley, I must say what I must. Everything comes from me. You must hear it from my lips. Maria wishes to be released from you and has consented to marry me. We would not continue to lie to you for a day. I cannot ask you to wish us happiness, but I can hardly believe, with my knowledge of you, that you will not wish it. And I can say that I wished it to you, when it seemed that things were to be with me as they are with you." (p 194)

The comment upon generosity here is evident. Edgar assumes that Dudley is going to be generous and large-natured, as always, and takes this knowledge for granted, so that no apology is given. Dudley is genuinely a man worthy of respect, but Compton-Burnett implies that if he thought a little more of himself, he would not have been taken advantage of, or have been made to suffer to this extent. Self-interest is a necessity for self-preservation, in an often cruel world.

A really giving nature is not only vulnerable, but also not really possible. For Dudley, who is a most sympathetic creation, also has a mildly dubious motive at the basis of his generosity. He wants to be admired and loved, particularly by Edgar, and this is one of the reasons for his giving away his money so freely. When he sees that he has lost his brother's love, and further, that his brother has never really loved him at all, and is unworthy of the love Dudley has given to him, Dudley loses all sense of worth, contracts an illness and almost dies. In his illness, as in Blanche's, his facade breaks down, and self-pity and reproach of Edgar emerges. He finds a mode of continuing a worthwhile life only when Edgar is able to acknowledge that he needs Dudley even more than he needs his new wife.

As demonstrated in this novel, the qualities that Compton-Burnett appears to admire and respect, and which form the basis of her moral sensibility, include courage, wisdom, generosity, a broad-minded and forgiving nature, and a respect for the truth.

Truth, in particular, is a word and a concept that permeates all the novels, and it has various manifestations. Secrets, or the hiding of truths form part of the structural basis of each novel, for every novel has at least one secret, and many plots concern the futile effort to keep its revelation from emerging. Suppressed wills and letters, and illegitimate children are frequent hidden and emergent truths.

A bi-product of these secrets is curiosity, which also occurs in every novel, and is rarely condemned, and usually results in gossip. Gossip is also seen as a pleasure rather than a sin. "Our curiosity is neither morbid nor ordinary. It is the kind known as devouring", (p 52) says Evelyn Seymour in Daughters and Sons, and Sarah Middleton, in A Family and A Fortune, expresses much the same thought: "I don't like things to pass me by without my hearing about them. We are meant to be interested in what the Almighty ordains." (p 146)

Other aspects of truth explored from a moral standpoint are the necessities of recognizing truth, and paradoxically, the necessity of hiding truth: the necessity and perils of self-knowledge; and the necessity of facing the ultimate truths, which are, as Selina Lovat puts it in Darkness and Day, "that life is short and will soon be gone, and that it is sometimes like Ambrose's [the butler's] while it lasts". (p 52)

The paradoxical nature of truth, once again, lies in Compton-Burnett's root preoccupation with the tension between man's occasional savage and cruel tendencies, and the restraints that civilized society imposes on him. The truth about man's nature, as can be seen in almost every novel, are often painful and ugly and are better unacknowledged openly.

So maxims which urge total openness and honesty are frequently shaken inside out, as for example,

> "Know thyself is a most superfluous direction. We can't avoid it . We can only hope that no one else knows".
> Dudley Gaveston in A Family and A Fortune (p 14)

and

> "Ah, to know all is to forgive all", said Rhoda.
>
> "I confess I have not found it so , my lady", says Deacon the butler.
> "To forgive, it is best to know as little as possible".
> A Heritage and its History (p 10)

and

> "Oh must we be quite so honest with ourselves, my dear?" "We do not know how to avoid it", said Terence. "That is why there is horror in every heart and a resolve never to be honest with anyone else."
>
> Elders and Betters (p 223)

The horrors that lie within the human heart and that are better concealed are those which civilized man has learned to repress outwardly. They include jealousy, as shown by Edgar Gaveston and Josephine Napier, and many others, avarice (Clement Gaveston), murderous hatred (Anna Donne), and delight in others' misfortune (Matty Seaton).

When these feelings are revealed openly, there is often a sense of embarrassed discomfiture among onlookers, as if revelation were better withheld. Such an embarrassed atmosphere greets the accidental discovery, in A Family and A Fortune, that Clement Gaveston has been secretly storing away a cache of gold coins, while professing poverty. The sordidness of nature revealed, is almost worse to the family when they learn the secret, than the profit they will now share.

An incident in Parents and Children shows that the revelation of an unpleasant truth about an action, in no sense ameliorates the moral worthlessness of that action.

Fulbert Sullivan makes a favourite of his child Isobel, and his wife Eleanor is jealous of this affection. When he sends a private letter to Isobel, Eleanor opens it:

> "There is nothing in the letter", said his mother putting it down. "Isabel can have it when someone goes upstairs."
>
> "You might put it in a fresh envelope", said Graham.
>
> "I am not ashamed of anything I do," said Eleanor, raising her brows. " I should not dream of hiding it. I have opened Isabel's letter and she may know I have done so."
>
> "I am sorry for that", said Daniel.
>
> "I never know why revealing baseness makes it better", said Graham. (p 162)

Although Eleanor of course, has no moral right to be engaging in such a small and mean act at all, brazen revelation of the truth about the act appears to make it worse rather than better. Hiding the truth, at least, is taking a moral standpoint in tacitly acknowledging that a deed or posture will be seen as wrong, and is therefore best hidden. Flaunting it openly, as Eleanor does, almost amounts to denying moral responsibility.

The public acknowledgement of a truth is not a virtue in itself, as is evident in novel after novel. It may even been morally suspect, as when Moreton Edgeworth, in A God and His Gifts, reveals that his father Hereward has had an illegitimate child by his son's fiancée. The ultimate revelation of this secret is perhaps inevitable and necessary, but in revealing it, Moreton causes his mother and brother pain. Patently, his intention is malicious revenge.

The novels abound with intrepid truth-speakers without discretion, who far from establishing a moral standard, are seen as either positively immoral, as with Anna Donne, whose pose as a blunt speaker of truths gives her the opportunity to make any cruel and hurtful comments that serve her purpose, or else are seen as comic fools.

Justine Gaveston, in A Family and a Fortune, is such a well-meaning fool, whose total honesty under all circumstances makes her incorrigible. In a comic scene near the beginning of the novel, Blanche, her mother, a complaining insomniac, tries to elicit sympathy from her family because of her sleeplessness. Instead of providing the sympathy tacitly requested, Justine sees it her duty to remark that, not only does her mother sleep during the day, but she snores! This takes away Blanche's claim for sympathy, and also makes her appear undignified. Blanche is placed in the impossible position of having to deny (untruthfully) that she sleeps during the day:

> "But I was not snoring," said Blanche in the easier tone of one losing grasp of a situation. "I should have known it myself. It would not be possible to be awake and not know it."
>
> Justine gave an arch look at anyone who would receive it. Edgar did so as a matter of duty and rapidly withdrew his eyes as another.
>
> "Why do we not learn that no one ever snores under any circumstances", said Clement.

> "I wonder how the idea of snoring arose", said Mark.
>
> "Mother, are you going to eat no more than that?" said Justine. "You are not ashamed of eating as well as sleeping, I hope". (p 13)

Justine's blundering truth speaking is not necessarily intentionally malicious, but it does demonstrate that recognition of truth, a moral necessity, is not to be equated with the exposing of truth, which is not.

In the discussion of truth which follows this scene, Justine maintains that "truth is true and a lie is a lie."

Her family finds this inflexibility unrealistic:

> "What is truth?" said Aubrey. "Has Justine told us?"
>
> "Truth is whatever happens to be true under the circumstances," said his sister, doing so at the moment, "We ought not to mind a searchlight being turned on our inner selves, if we are honest about them."
>
> "That is our reason", said Mark. "'Know thyself' is almost superfluous direction. We can't avoid it."
>
> "We can only hope that no one else knows", said Dudley (p 14)

Justine's simple-minded, black and white view of truth, is, as the novels demonstrate, erroneous in two respects. First, people should indeed mind a spotlight being turned on their secrets, for some truths should remain unacknowledged, as Dudley and Mark note, and second, that truth is relative rather than rigid.

Dark, guarded secret truths appear as a theme in every novel. Frequently, it is true, such secret truths should never have been kept a secret, but in many cases the motivation for keeping the secret is perfectly reasonable. There is, for example, Miss Buchanan's secret in *Manservant and Maidservant*, that she is illiterate, and Sir Edwin in *A Heritage and A History*, that his acknowledged son has really been fathered by Simon Challoner ("But the boy is mine Uncle. You and I know it, though others do not. We can only abide by our knowledge. What you and I know is forgotten. The real truth is not that truth to us.") (p 139) There is also the example of Mrs. Spruce's unselfish supression of the fact, in *Darkness and Day*, that as well as being the family cook, she has been Sir Ransom Chase's mistress and is mother of Bridget Lovat.

We hide truths, Compton-Burnett maintains, from necessity. Should some of the baser truths about human nature emerge, the normal civilized order would be threatened.

Sir Ransom Chase, a percipient man very much in control of his wits and powers at age 88, makes this point, which is central to all the novels, in *Darkness and Day*:

> "We can only be ourselves, Sir Ransom."
> "The truth is so hard and sad. No wonder it is said
> to be difficult to face. We can only try day by day to
> seems to be someone else. I should have thought we did."
> "Examine into your heart. If you were what nature
> meant you to be, where would you be now?"

> "I daresay where I am. Though I like to think I should be higher."
> "Somewhere hiding from justice. Or somewhere where justice had placed you."
> "We are trained from the first, Sir Ransom", said Jennet, smiling. "And I was well brought up."
> "We are saying the same thing in different words." (p 8)

"Truth is truth and a lie is a lie", Justine remarked in A Family and A Fortune, and this is a second disputable point, as contentious as her claim "We should not mind a spotlight being turned on our inner selves", discussed above.

Children demonstrate this, with their misty perceptions of truth: '"Youngest are best", said Neville. /

"You won't be the youngest if there is another baby", said Honor./ Neville regarded her for a moment. /"He will", he said.' (Parents and Children, p 41)

Neville may not always be the youngest child in the family in a physical sense, but he perceives dimly, as we do, that the youngest is favoured, and Neville will probably always retain some personality characteristics of baby of the family.

Another child who perceives the relativety of truth is Megan in The Present and the Past: "So there's no such thing as truth. It is different in different minds." (p 180) While this is a childish simplification, there are nevertheless facts that can be seen as true from more than one angle, and this accounts for tolerance as opposed to rigidity being a virtue Compton-Burnett respects.

A case in point is Hereward Egerton, in A God and His Gifts, who, when his family discover that he has seduced both his wife's sister and son's fiancée, refuses to acknowledge that he has acted morally reprehensibly. His reason is that "I am a man of great powers, swift passions and a generous heart... as not all men are. It is the force in me that carries me on. All force may at times go astray". (p 169)

There is some truth in this. Great powers do excuse a great deal in Compton-Burnett's novels, and a powerful tyrant is forgiven, (both by characters within the novel, and by the reader), more than ordinary men. At the same time, a greater degree of truth lies in the opposite point of view. As Sir Michael, Hereward's muddled, but right-minded father points out, "Well, I suppose it is true. There is truth in it, of course. But I can't go the whole length. I feel we should keep our human laws." (p 170).

There is no easier way for truth to be manipulated than in the adroit use of words. Anna Donne realises this when she convinces Jessica Calderon that she is harming her family simply by being alive, by manipulating the meaning of such words as "baleful". (This is discussed fully in the next chapter).

All of Compton-Burnett's tyrants are adept at confusing truth by manipulating words; this is a major source of their power.

A fairly typical example is Josephine Napier's clever attempt to twist a straightforward statement made by her nephew Gabriel, that he is going to be married to Ruth Gifford, into something very different. (p 115)

She manages to suggest at least half a dozen untruthful variations, by, for example -

- treating Gabriel and Ruth as children: "Well, amusing each other, like the good children of old friends?"

- purposefully misunderstanding: "You have not said anything definite, have you?"

- treating the idea as too ridiculous to be taken seriously: "You will forgive me for not taking you very seriously? Silly little people".

- accusing them of selfishness: "The less said about that [ruthless egotism in leaving Josephine alone] the better."

- taking the position that their love is immature: "Now be a boy a little longer, and you, my child, be satisfied with your youth; and presently find a partner more advanced to man's estate, than this beardless boy of mine."

- assuming a mistake has been made: "Gabriel has not been unworthy of himself in his first stumble".

and so on.

Though truth may be twisted and misrepresented, and though understanding of the various sides of truth that an issue may have is necessary, to Compton-Burnett there is nevertheless a basic truth at bottom of every moral issue which is the centre of her morality.

The simple truth is that Hereward Egerton is wrong at bottom, in spite of his extraordinary personal powers, and that however Josephine Napier chooses to misrepresent the case, her nephew and Ruth are mature adults with every right to marry, as, of course, all three of them recognize.

"Without a moral standard there could be no civilized life". Compton-Burnett wrote.[1] Her moral standard is a stoic one, for few rewards accrue to the moral man, but even though evil prevails on occasion, her worthy characters share a number of traditional moral values.

[1] Letter to John Ginger, 1964, as quoted in London Magazine, Jan. 1970 and reprinted, Burkhart, Charles, ed. The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett ,op. cit. p 173.

Her moral characters are courageous and dignified in living lives that can be difficult; honest, yet compassionate in expressing the truths they see; generous, tolerant, profound, capable of great love, and civilized. They are truth seekers, seeking also self-knowledge. Her moral heroes, who include Dudley Gaveston in *A Family and A Fortune*, Terence Calderon in *Elders and Betters*, Emily Herrick in *Pastors and Masters*, and Joanna Egerton in *A God and His Gifts*, have many faults, but their worth is implicitly acknowledged by almost every other character, even by the tyrant, who often makes their life impossible.

These moral heroes are all perceptive about the real truths that underlie surface appearance, and they are intuitively capable of seeing below the veneer of civilization.

There is a recurrent phrase in the novels which sums up this ability to grasp realities: "the heart knoweth", from Proverbs 14:10, "The heart knoweth his own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with his joy". As well as giving a sense of the bleak necessity of self-knowledge, and of the essential truths which the perceptive, wise man discerns intuitively, the proberb also carries the impression of the wariness and dignity which a Compton-Burnett hero carries as a self-protective cover, and which she herself did personally.

Violet Powell notes [1] that the phrase "the heart knoweth" is used twice, in Daughters and Sons and A Family and A Fortune. I have found it as well in Darkness and Day, Elders and Betters, and A House and Its Head, and The Last and the First; its very frequency and the fact that the phrase is always spoken by a morally responsible character, or a child, and is never treated unseriously, suggests how seriously Compton-Burnett considered it.

Coincidentally, her brother Noel, whose death shattered her life, used these words in a sense very similar, in a letter from the trenches of World War I: [2] "I feel the profound loneliness of life, deepened and darkened, as I realise that only the heart knows his own weakness and bitterness".

The occurance of this phrase, sheds light on some aspects of Compton-Burnett's moral standpoint.

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[1] Powell, Violet, A Compton-Burnett Compendium, Heinemann, 1973, p 85

[2] letter from Noel Compton-Burnett to Jack Beresford, as quoted, Spurling, Hilary, op. cit. p 225

In A House and Its Head, "the heart knoweth" is used to illuminate the strengths of pride and dignity. Nance Edgeworth is a Compton-Burnett heroine, badgered by her father, yet wise, amusing, and self-sufficient. When her mother dies, Nance has to console him unceasingly for a short time, and then suffer his too-early remarriage. Yet Nance's dignity never allows a view of her personal suffering to escape to curious outsiders, and Dulcia Bode remarks, "However your hearth knoweth its own bitterness, there is not a trace of it in your bearing." (p 185)

In Elders and Betters, Dora and Julius seek the refuge of their shrine to their imagined god Chung, after the death of their mother. As well as their grief, they have to cope with the additional grief of sensing that their father seems to be reconciled to her death, and consoled too quickly. They pray, "And grant that our father may not form the habit of talking of our mother, and thus cast a cloud upon us; but rather may lock up all such things in his heart, and commune solely with himself upon them, so that his heart may know its own bitterness." (p 191)

This poignant prayer is not as much a wish to be personally spared the burden of their father's memories, but a reproach to him, and a wish that he might know the bitterness of sorrow, which he appears to be forgetting, and perhaps know the bitterness of realising he may be partly to blame for his wife's death.

There is irony in the fact that their mother's death can be attributed to taking to an extreme the words "the heart knoweth its own bitterness". Her suicide was, in part, a melancholic reaction to the gap between her efforts to lead a morally blameless life, and her human failings, which she saw as harming her family.

The self-protective necessity of concealling one's deepest emotions from unsympathetic outsiders is seen in A Family and A Fortune, when after a series of traumatic events, including the death of his mother and the despicable behaviour of his previously admired father Edgar, Aubrey, a sensitive and unusual adolescent intimates that he envies the dead, and that he acts callously to conceal his vulnerability:

> "We need not mind being though callous sometimes", said Maria, seeing the aspect preferred.
> "No, The heart knoweth", said her stepson, turning away."
> (p 259)

Aubrey means that he cannot escape his own feelings, nor the painful knowledge of the moral wrongs done in his family.

The phrase is used cynically in The Last and The First, when Jocasta Grimstone having just heard read the will of her son Hamilton, who has left his fortune not to her, but to a woman he once wished to marry, tries to pretend to her butler Hollander, that she doesn't really mind:

> "[The will] is a surprise and a shock. But it doesn't bear on the real trouble"
>
> "No, ma'am,"said Hollander, in sympathy. "Not on the knowledge that after all his feeling was not yours."
>
> "No, I could not think that.I meant the trouble of his death."
>
> "Yes, ma'am, but the heart knoweth. And other words ensue". (p 102)

Hamilton refuses to accept what Jocasta pretends to feel - that is, the money isn't important, the fact of his death is worse than the loss of the money, one must speak well of a dead son - and penetrates to the hurt and anger that she in fact feels.

In Darkness and Day, the phrase has bearing on the moral value of generosity of spirit in judging one's fellow man. Mrs. Spruce, who is one of Compton-Burnett's figures of wisdom uses the phrase when explaining, in the servant's hall, why Bridget Lovat hesitates to return to the family house.

> "Alice, the heart can only know itself. Spirits may recoil before what may be intangible to the unseeing eye. And in this instance it was the case. We must feel that suffering commands respect and give it our measure." (p 59)

Mrs. Spruce is referring to the fact that Bridget ostensibly finds Mrs. Lovat senior an overwhelming burden in their shared home. Her words, however, also apply to the real reason Bridget does not wish to return - Bridget's secret, known in the heart, that she believes her marriage to be incestuous. In both cases, Mrs. Spruce's message is valid: generosity should temper judgement.

Later in the book, the phrase occurs again, in a conversation between Ambrose the butler, and Mrs. Spruce. Bridge and Edmund Lovat have now returned to his mother's home, and the servants are discussing the atmosphere in the house while they were away:

> "It is true that this absence has kept us up to the level," said Mrs. Spruce. "It seemed that time would never pass".
>
> "Or that too much time was passing," said Ambrose. "Thefuture is the shorter".
>
> "You put it more truly Mr. Ambrose. It is anything before which we hesitate. But the heart knoweth." (p 92)

Mrs. Spruce refers here to the ultimate reality of death, a topic which recurs constantly in the novels. Acceptance of death is the ultimate self-knowledge, for it is a truth which not even the most determined hypocrite can avoid.

Her characters joke about death, especially her very old characters who are nearest to death, or pretend that death will make an exception of them. (When, for example, a neighbour fancifully imagines Sir Ransom Chase's, age eighty eight, deathbed scene, and the reactions of his small grandneices, Sir Ransom is moved to comment that they may not still be alive for the occasion). All Compton-Burnett characters are afraid of death, and either ignore its inevitability or else joke about it. But the heart knoweth.

Compton-Burnett's world is a moral world, in which good and evil exist and are recognised, though good is seldom rewarded and the paradox exists that evil characters can be more interesting and attractive, (both within the world of the novel, and outside, to the reader), than more worthy ones. The truth encompassed in her universe is that life is difficult (though there are compensations), that justice is not always served, that people have an unworthy side and do not always hide it. Her novels are about a world in which life plays terrible tricks on people, the most terrible being death; a world in which some are born to dominate and some to succumb. In spite of this there are enduring values - dignity, honest, compassion, the ability to bear suffering and be tempered by it - and her moral universe is not without its conpensatory incidental joys, which include wisdom, humour, affection, and deep love.

CHAPTER FOUR

ASPECTS OF TECHNIQUE

"The distortion of words is an easy line".
"An average device", said Alice.

Darkness and Day (p 8)

Family, power and morality are important issues to Compton-Burnett, but an appreciation and understanding of her novels rests as much on her mode of expression as on the ideas expressed. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to consider certain elements of her technique in order to relate technique to theme, and to illustrate the complexity and depth of her methods.

Common criticisms of Compton-Burnett's style are that her novels all seem alike, and that her dialogue is so stylised that a reader can recognise a fragment of writing as hers instantly, but at the same time finds it extremely difficult to identify which novel the fragment might have come from. Servants, masters, children, all appear to talk in balanced, rhythmic cadence, which seems to bear little resemblance to the way people talk in life, and which differs little from novel to novel. Kingsley Amis, for example, comments on the (in his view) artificiality and limitations of her style, by remarking that it would be inconceivable for a Compton-Burnett character to say "Oh my God", or "give me a kiss...", or "you bore me..."[1] and Frank Kermode in an interview raises the same point more tactfully; "Well may I just take another aspect of your work which obviously comes to people's minds when they are thinking about this question, namely the nature of your dialogue, and the relative uniformity of dialect, shall we say. Among people of all classes, parents, children and so on".[2]

She herself disagreed that dialogue in her novels was stylised, in the sense of artificially conforming to the roles of a conventional style.

In "A conversation between I. Compton-Burnett and M. Jourdain", published in Orion,[3] she commented, "I think that my writing does not seem to me as 'stylised' as it apparently is, though I do not attempt to make my characters use the words of actual life... It seems to me that the servants in my books talk quite differently from the educated people, and the children from the adults..." This, however, is more an opinion than a defence.

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[1] Amis, Kingsley, op. cit. p 48

[2] Kermode, Frank, The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists, in Partisan Review, XXX Spring, 1963, p 71

[3] 'A Conversation Between I. Compton-Burnett and M. Jourdain', Orion: A Miscellany, op. cit. p 3

An important aspect of this alleged limitation of style is the recurring use of the same conventions in each of the novels, that is, the constantly recurring elements of character, setting, social environment, and so on, which serve as structure or scaffolding in the novels. Mary McCarthy captures some of the central elements of her conventions in this parody:

> "The setting is standard; a large country house, capable of being converted into a school - with visiting days for parents. There are a great many stairs (hard on the help) and passages, suitable for eavesdropping. At the sound of a gong, old and young, brothers and sisters, men and wives, masters and servants muster in the dining room. Other points of assembly are the nursery, the kitchen and the common room. Ther period is late Victorian; the subject is human nature, cut from the old block, ribbed in the Adam pattern of murder and incest. Felix Culpa, an adrogyne bookworm is in the schoolroom, curled up with a popular novel, the book of Job. His sister, Maxima Culpa, is in the library; a sulphurous smell of will burning proceeds from the grate..." [1]

What McCarthy is delineating here is what might be (and has been) criticised as a superficial repetitiveness of incident, character type and situation, which recur in each of the nineteen novels after Dolores. They are her plot conventions, and the reader learns to expect them in each novel. To quote Mary McCarthy again, "she produces Compton-Burnetts as someone might produce ball bearings". [2]

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[1] McCarthy, M. op. cit. p 112

[2] ibid. p 113

Whether or not these conventions are seen as limiting, it is undeniable that plot and style conventions are present in the novels. An analysis of a characteristic passage from Brothers and Sisters will help to define them.

In this passage, the characters are Sophia Stace, who has just been widowed, her children, and the governess Patty. They are at dinner.

> "No, I won't have anything to eat," said Sophia, raising her eys to Patty's face. "I will just try to drink a glass of wine."
>
> The five sat silent, the young people at the end of their strength. Patty made a few attempts at talk, but when Sophia spoke, it was not to respond.
>
> 'I don't know whether you all like sitting there having your dinner, with your mother eating nothing? On this day of all days: I don't know if you have thought of it."
>
> "Oh, I understood that you wouldn't have anything", said Patty rising and hurrying to her side with food. "I am sure I thought you said that."
>
> "I may have said those words", said Sophia, "It is true that I do not want anything. I hardly could, could I? But I may need it. It may be all the more necessary for me, for that reason. I don't think I should be left without a little pressing today, sitting here as I am, with my life emptied. I hardly feel you should let me depend quite on myself". (p 158)

The most obvious stylistic point about this passage is that it is dramatic, rather than narrative. Characters are seen from the outside; we are not told directly what is going on within a character's mind. We are told indirectly of course, by dialogue and through the use of irony, what Sophia and her family are feeling, but Compton-Burnett avoids a directly explanatory sentance such as "Sophia felt sorry for herself and felt abandoned". Compton-Burnett is an unobtrusive writer, and she becomes less obtrusive with subsequent books.

Dialogue is heavily employed. There are only two sentances that are not dialogue. Even the two adverbial clauses relating to dialogue are oblique. For example, the sentance; '"No, I won't have anything to eat", said Sophia, raising her eyes to Patty's face"' does not directly say that Sophia was reproaching Patty. Rather, the point is made by action: Sophia lifting her eyes away from the food on the table. At the same time, the action implies that Patty is in some way to blame, in Sophia's eyes.

This passage reads as much like a play as a novel, with the narrative portions sounding a great deal like stage directions. In fact this was one of her admitted intentions;

she aimed to write something between a play and a novel.[1]

Other obvious points about this passage are the regularity of construction of the dialogue, which is mostly composed of simple, declarative sentances, short rather than long. It is hard to imagine a style generally less florid, more spare. The numbers of adverbs and adjectives are few, and when they occur, they are generally utilitarian, such as, in this passage, the adverbs "hardly" and "just". Dialogue is rhythmic, balanced in a way reminiscent of Congreve, Shaw, or some of Jane Austen. Even Sophia's monologue has a spare, precise rhythm.

The characters appear to employ vast resources of vocabulary, but in fact, vocabulary is relatively small. As C. Burkhart has noted, "it is much closer to the two thousand words of Racine than the thirty thousand of Shakespeare".[2] In this passage, there are only three words over two syllables in length - "anything", "understood", and "necessary" - none of them at all abstruse.

[1] "I think I should call my books something between a novel and a play, and I feel the form suits me better than the pure play. It gives me more range and a little more length, and it doesn't subject me to the mechanical restrictions of a play".

from "Interview with Miss Compton-Burnett", Millgate, Michael op. cit. p 109.

[2] Burkhart, Charles, op. cit. p 40

The recurring conventions, the ostensible repetitiveness, the individualised dialogue, the balance and precision of word rhythms in this passage - all these may be taken to be flaws or limitations, but I believe they are not. What Compton-Burnett intends to achieve is what might be termed a reductiveness, or a wringing down of words, situation, human nature, to the very essence.

Compton-Burnett is in the Richardson rather than the Fielding tradition. There is no broad panorama in these novels. Instead she sets rigid limitations within which she can work very freely to explore the themes that interest her. These themes include broadly, truth, power, family relationships, and the restrictions of civilisation on human nature.

Her particular way of using words therefore, is functional rather than limiting. Characters talk like actors in a play because in fact they are often acting; they are playing conversational games according to the rules of civilised society, while the real meaning of their words is contained under the surface, in nuance.

Her reductive technique (she herself talked of a "condensed" style [1]) inhibits her very little in her aims, as can be seen clearly from some of the ways she employs language.

One of the results of a reductive vocabulary is that every word assumes a precise value; meaning is wrung out of every word. This effect is heightened by various devices. These include word echoes, words broken into constituent parts which have additional meanings, words used as puns, and words used one way, which are seen on analysis to have additional meanings deepening understanding of theme and character.

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[1] "I like condensed work, but that may be because it is natural for me to write condensed", from "Interview with Miss Compton-Burnett", Millgate, op. cit. p 110

Also, "And I am surprised if my style is as intricate as Henry James. I should have thought it was only rather condensed".
"A conversation between I. Compton-Burnett and M. Jourdain", Orion: A Miscellany, op. cit. p 24

Compton-Burnett's constant use of aphorism is well known. She takes phrases that are commonly assumed to be self-evident truths, and inverts them, so that the reader is led to question their value. For example, from Parents and Children: "Heaven helps those who help themselves". / "It sounds grudging of Heaven to stipulate for its work to be done for it". (p 8) From A Family and A Fortune: "Know thyself is a most superfluous direction. We can't avoid it. We can only hope that one one else knows". (p 14) From Brothers and Sisters: "It is more blessed to give than to receive", said Latimer. / "Ha ha! There is something in that." said Peter. "We have to have things before we can give them". (p 44)

Euphemisms receive similar treatment. To a novelist to whom words are a precision instrument, standard use of euphemisms would be considered sentimental, and so they are frequently exploded. In Pastors and Masters, a character remarks, "I think it might break him up if anything were to happen to me. You know that means if I were to die". (p 35) The same applies to conventional pieties. In More Women than Men, there is a passage where a conventional but hypocritical character is trying to console Felix on the death of his father. "His religion was of no help to him?", said Fane. / "None at all. He died", said Felix. (p 180)

Aphorisms and euphemisms used like this can be little more than showy demonstrations of wit, but her real skill lies in the far less obtrusive use of word echoes and puns.

For example, in More Women Than Men, a mild example of a word-theme pun occurs. Josephine Napier, a tyrant who runs a girls school, loves her twenty-three year old nephew passionately. When he marries, against Josephine's will a young woman named Ruth, who is not willing to share him with Josephine, Josephine intentionally exposes the girl who is sick, to a draught, and Ruth dies. The pun is implicit - Josephine is ruthless in order to be Ruth-less. This might sound far-fetched, but it is almost certainly intentional. There are dozens of puns like this in the books. Every word counts, virtually every word is there for a purpose, and every word has to be considered.

The following quotation is a more complicated example of how words can be broken into constituent parts which rebound and echo, and enrich the original meaning. In Manservant and Maidservant, Horace Lamb, the father and tyrant, is alone in his study after a thoroughly tiresome visit from boring neighbours. One of them has left a surreptitious illicitly acquired letter for him, which is from his wife to his brother, and is about their plans to run away together. As a result of the shock of this letter, Horace reforms overnight, seemingly, and becomes the perfect husband and father. The sentance reads, "She gave her nephew what he needed, picked up a letter, put it at his hand, and left him to recover." (p 110)

The word to consider is "recover". What he is initially recovering from, at this precise moment, is the neighbour's visit, but he also sonn has to recover from the effects of the letter. In fact, Horace recovering, in the sense of recovering from malady, is a major part of the plot of the book, for he recovers from three murder attempts, as well as from a near-fatal illness at the end. Thus the word echoes and emphasizes both his susceptibility and his durability. But Horace also re-covers himself, by assuming a new personality, which, as the word implies, proves to be strictly surface. Is character change possible, or is a purely artificial civilized surface gloss - a re-cover - the only alternate available to natural man? This is one of the concerns of the book - indeed one of her central concerns as a novelist. As one of the more self-aware characters in Darkness and Day remarks, "What can we be but ourselves?". (p 87) This is the ironic dilemma of Horace Lamb, and the use of a word like "recover" helps to translate it to a verbal level, with a degree of depth.

A word to put the reader on guard always is "will". It is no coincidence that the books are full of people making and destroying wills. An early work develops this rather simply in ways that are established in later novels. Brothers and Sisters is a generational novel about a family who inhabit the manor house Moreton Edge (a pun - the house is "more on" several kinds of edges: suburban-urban, moral-immoral, civilized-savage). The head of the house, Andrew Stace, rules his household with an iron will. One of the major themes in the book is the exercise of will, in the sense of power. Andrew wills obedience, as in this passage where his adopted son Christian makes a quite reasonable comment about Andrew's dispensation of the family property:

> "I will not make it a condition in my will", said Andrew. "I will not be dictated to and told of conditions, because I am old. You forget yourself, boy. I will do things as I choose. I will have you for a son. I feel to you as a son."
>
> "Well, you will have it as you will", said Christian. "I will leave the matter for the moment, as you wish it." (p 9)

The word "will" occurs eight times in this passage, as well as two synonyms, choose and wish.

Andrew, by will and testament waving is trying to impose his will on his son and daughter, in the sense of compelling them to do what he wishes. This is perhaps understandable in an autocratic man, though futile. But he is trying to impose his will, his deliberate intention, in a superhuman way as well. Christian is Andrew's illegitimate son, though this is a secret; Andrew has always maintained that Christian is his adopted son. Andrew is therefore willing (demanding) that Christian pay him the due of a natural son, and at the same time willing that the world accept him as a religious upright man incapable of fathering an illegitimate son. This is more than having it both ways. His manipulation and hauteur is almost Godlike. For "will" then, he uses the sense "thy will be done".

The futility of such pride is forshadowed by Christian's ambiguous reply, "You will have it as you will". It can be understood as either "I agree to what you wish", or "If the matter is put in writing in your will, we will have to agree, but if not, we will not necessarily act on your wishes." In fact, Andrew's daughter burns his will after his death, his son and daughter marry, and the evils of excess will are carried to another generation.

These examples demonstrate Compton-Burnett's technique of using words as pun and echo. She also uses words as symbol in an unusual way: an aphorism or cliché becomes translated to literal action, in order to make the words of the aphorism fresh and startling, and to enrich its meaning.

In Two Worlds and Their Ways, for example, a small girl is sent away to school and is forced to cheat in order to maintain her early reputation for cleverness and the respect of her peers and teachers. She cheats by glancing at an open book hidden in her desk. But in the course of this cheating, she herself is changing from a relatively open and natural child-" an open book" - to a closed book.

A more complex use of word technique occurs in Darkness and Day. A point about this scene, incidentally, is that it is effective on a purely dramatic level, even if word play is overlooked. Compton-Burnett's use of word is rarely clever for the sake of being clever; it is unobtrusive, an additional quiet joke.

This passage concerns a young girl, Viola, who is banished to a shadowy life by her parents, because they carry the guilty secret that Viola is the unintentional product of a daughter marrying her own father, a kind of reversed Oedipal tragedy. In other words, Viola's father is also her own grandfather. Viola and her sister only dimly suspect this family secret. The title has relevance to the darkness of the family sin, and the secret darkness in which the supposed sin is kept, as opposed to the light of the truth which eventually surfaces.

In this episode, Viola and her sister are being punished for tormenting their governess. Their punishment is working at spelling homework. But Viola is afraid of the nursery gloom, and yearns for the cheerfulness of the servants hall, and so she invents an excuse to go down and share the servant's tea. She decides to ask them how to spell one of the words she is supposed to be working on, the word being "metamorphosis".

> ' "How do you spell metamorphosis? The book is torn at the edge?
> "Meta", began Bartle,
> "All need not press forward", said Alice.
> "Phosis" or "Phasis", said Ambrose, with a smile.
> ... "I should write "phasis", said Mrs. Spruce, "But not with confidence".
> "I should not write it at all", said Tabby, opening her eyes.
> "Neither should I", said Viola. "It only means change".
> "I am uncertain", said Fanshawe, governess . " Such minor points do not catch my eye".
> "Rose thinks it is phosis", said Viola. "So I expect it is. But if grown up people don't know, it hardly matters. "We don't have to spell as well as that".' (p 171)

This scene is perfectly successful on a comic level. None of Viola's elders wish to admit in front of a child that they do not know the answer, and all scramble for a dignified way of avoiding the admission. The various replies are also revealing of the different characters. But the scene goes further.

The word "metamorphosis" is of Greek derivation, which is interesting in itself in a book in which everyone is deeply aware of an Oedipal tragedy, including the child.

The two controversial spellings are "phosis" from phos, meaning light, and "phasis", meaning appearance. These words echo important and related themes: the light or day in the title, as opposed to the darkness of the family secret, and the appearance of respectability versus the supposed reality of incest. These become linked ironically when it is discovered that the "secret" is no secret at all - there really is no incest. Appearance and light become synonymous, in a sense.

In addition, "meta" occasionally has the sense "change", and metamorphosis means a change in form by magic or by natural conditions, which recalls the shadows and darkness on the stairs, of which Viola is afraid. Her appearance in the servants hall is a pathetic cry for help to the servants to dispel the frightening shadows, rid her of the metamorphosis of vague and terrifying shapes in the dark.

Metamorphosis can also mean a change in character or condition, which relates to the structure of the book; scene set, secret revealed, secret revealed to be false, with all the attendant change in the way characters perceive others and themselves.

To break down the word still further, metamorphosis also contains the word morphe - form - which recalls the shadows - darkness theme. It also recalls Morpheus, the god of dreams or sleep: death is a very important preoccupation in this book. Another use of the root is morphology, which is the study of the form of words. And what is Viola concerned about here? Spelling. A final small joke, and a typical Compton-Burnett touch.

To consider another aspect of her use of words, a study of the names Compton-Burnett gives her characters aids in understanding her themes.

The first thing one notices - it is inescapable - is the enormous number of literary allusions. They are initially puzzling. What does she intend by calling her characters Dr. Smollett, or Mary Shelley, or Donne. More Women Than Men alone has a Bacon, Swift, Keats and Rosetti, and Daughters and Sons has characters named Chaucer, Bunyan, Blake and Hallam.

Firstly, it is a mistake to expect the characteristics of the originals to fit the namesakes in any way. That would be heavyhanded and obvious, which Compton-Burnett seldom is.

Rather, these familiar names are in the nature of small jokes. The humour is in the discrepancy, as in the case of Regan Sullivan, in Parents and Children.

> "Her name of Regan had been chosen by her father, a man of country tastes, and, as it must appear, of no others, who had learned from an article on Shakespeare that his women were people of significance, and decided that his daughter should bear the name of one of them, in accordance with his hopes." (p 15)

Often these highly named characters take enormous pride in possessing a "big" name. It is as if a prestigious name adds an illusion of luster to the bearer that counts almost as much as reality. A pathetic passage in Manservant and Maidservant shows how names, or surface appearance, often count as reality to the bearer. The butler and cook are questioning Miriam, the scullery maid: "What kind of name do you like?" /"A name like Rose", said Miriam with a sort of glow in her voice. /"Well perhaps you would like to be called a lily as well", said Cook. /Miriam's eyes showed that this was the case". (p 22) The actual meaning of Miriam (not given in the text,) is "bitter".

As a character remarks in Elders and Betters (p 83) "A pleasant surface makes us think there are pleasant things underneath".

This is the hope, but the hope is seldom fulfilled in the case of illustrious names. In More Women Than Men, Jonathan Swift received his name from his parents in the desire that he might turn out as illustrious as the original.

He in fact tries to be a writer, but being little more than a fool does not succeed. Swift's great life effort is to seduce a young man named Felix Bacon, who also bears no similarity to the original Bacon.

That characters are well aware of the significance of their names is shown by Horace Lamb, in Mansservant and Maidservant,who gives his children for a present Lambs' Tales from Shakespeare. So that the reader should not miss the significance, Compton-Burnett notes that these impoverished children only own and read two other books - Foxes' Books of Martyrs and the book of Job from the Bible.

Even when a character does not actually bear a literary name, he can implicitly adopt one, for the sake of his own ego gratification. Gertrude Doubleday, in Manservant and Maidservant imagines that she looks like George Eliot, and keeps a large portrait of George Eliot on her wall, so that no one will miss the resemblance. She also dresses like her. A small problem however is that George Eliot was a homely woman; Gertrude prefers to ignore this point.

As well as the literary significance, the meaning of names themselves is very often relevant to the context of the books. Two detailed examples, one from an early book, and one from a middle period work, will illustrate. In Brothers and Sisters, the central pair of brothers and sisters (there are six) are Sophia and Christian Stace, who are also man and wife.

Their father is Andrew Stace, who acts the part of an upstanding virtuous man of religion, while in fact being a unregenerate hypocrite, passing off his illigitimate son Christian as his adopted son. Andrew gives Christian that name because the name Christian exemplifies the kind of life Andrew expects the world to think he himself leads. In fact, Christian does grow up to be a worthy person.

The name "Andrew" means "manly", which in Compton-Burnett's novels is always a synonym for power and presence. But Andrew was also an apostle who was crucified, and this meaning becomes relevant to Sophia and Christian's eldest son, also named Andrew, after his grandfather, who becomes a martyr to Sophia.

Sophia's second child, Christiana, is named after her father, whom she resembles in character. But she is never actually called by her real name - she is always called "Dinah", which means "judged". These two eldest children of Sophia and Christian are always being judged (unfavourably) by their mother; they are both martyrs to her tyrannous temperament.

The third son Robin is generally left alone, because he is not loved as much by his parents. He manages to escape Moreton Edge to work in London, though he is not very successful in London. His name means "bright fame", which is only partly ironic, because at the end of the book his brother and sister sacrifice their changes of marriage for him. He will be the only one in whom the Stace name will descend.

Sophia herself is referred to as "Sophia", rather than as mother, behind her back by her children, partly, of course, because of surreptitious disrespect, but also for a reason relating to her name. She is an impossible, egocentric woman, who spends her married life attempting to manipulate her husband and children, yet when she dies, she is mourned by everyone around her much more than her saintly husband was. She epitomises Ivy Compton-Burnett's belief that power is necessary, not only to the one who exercises it, but to its victim. In the end, her family acknowledges that Sophia was necessary to them and that her ways were the very backbone of the family life. After she dies, her son remarks, "Sophia lived and died without ever knowing that her name meant wisdom". (p 269) This is a comment not only on the literal meaning of the name, but on the pathos and tragedy of a woman who based her life on the exercise of will and ego, and yet is destroyed by the realization that the effect of such exercise of will has been incest, the death of her husband and the blighting of her children's lives. Yet paradoxically, her self-awareness at her death never extended to the full realization of how much she was needed regardless, so, she "lived and died without ever knowing that her name meant wisdom".

This book uses names on a fairly straightforward level - A means B, B sheds light on A, and so on. Later novels use names with greater subtlety. A typical example of how names can add depth to theme is the 1947 novel Elders and Betters, in which an important theme deals with the contrast between good and evil. The novel pits a truly "good" character, Jessica Calderon, against Anne Donne, who is thoroughly unregenerate. The central characters are grouped into two related households. The first is Jessica's which consists of herself, her husband Thomas, two grown up children, Terence and Tullia, and two small children, Dora and Julius. There is also a tyrant rich invalid maiden aunt, Sukey, who lives with them, and makes their lives difficult. The second household is Anna's, consisting of her father, (Jessica's brother), brothers, and a number of servants. Anna, manoeuvers her way into Sukey's good graces, burns a valid will which leaves Sukey's fortune to Jessica and preserves one which leaves everything to herself. She then hounds Jessica to suicide and manipulates Jessica's son Terence, into a marriage with herself.

To consider the literal meaning of some of the character's names is only the beginning. "Anna" means "grace", which if taken to mean physical grace is ludicrous - a more lumbering, graceless person than Anna is hard to imagine. If by grace, however, is meant luck or unconstrained concession, as in "by the grace of God", then the name is certainly relevant, for luck plays an enormous part in Anna's good fortune. By a kind of morbid irony, Anna does seem to have blessings from some malevolent power. It is probably not coincidental that Jessica's name means "grace of God". The two names set the stage for confrontation between good and evil.

Christian symbolism plays an important part in this book in which good and evil are opposed, and other names help to establish this question. Early in the book, there is a scene where the young children Dora and Julian invent a set of gods to worship in order to help give some degree of order and meaning to their lives, and puzzle about what to name these gods. Julius says "We could not call a god John or Thomas", (p 38) at which they break into hysterical laughter. The joke is that their father's name is Thomas and he is neither a divine figure, nor an ideal father figure. It is evident that the children's invented gods are father substitutes, but they are also clearly at least in part, conventional Christian father and son. Dora and Julian therefore name their gods Chung and Sung Li, the latter because the name is, as one of the children remarks, "enough like Son, and yet not too much like it". (p 39)

Keeping in mind this resemblance, I believe the reader is also meant to notice another name that is "enough like Son (Sung Li) and yet not too much like it", and that is Sukey (the wealthy invalid aunt). The readers are therefore given a tenuous relationship between the name Sukey, and Sung Li, or Christ. This relationship is underlined by Florence, an outsider, who at one point remarks, "What a pity that a name like Sukey belongs to anyone but [Jessica]. It is a look that puts her apart from any other people and yet on a level with them. I have never seen a face like hers." (p 82) The phrase "apart from other people and yet on a level with them" is unmistakably reminiscent of Christ. In this way, a most complex use of names is used to establish a thematic element in the book; Jessica as manifestation of Christ-like goodness, versus Anna as manifestation of primitive passion and malevolent power.

This use of names is an aspect of the way Compton-Burnett uses words in a reductive way. Every word counts, and many reverberate and count in many more ways than one.

Another important element of Compton-Burnett's technique is the structure of her novels. Again, precision is a key word. To say she constructs her novels with geometric precision is no exaggeration.

All the novels have a tight plot. Usually the plot is melodramatic, with a great deal of action, often including murder, seduction, listening at keyholes, and so on. This has been deplored by many critics who label the plots ludicrous and unbelievable.

Compton-Burnett's point is that such things are indeed believable, given human nature operating in a repressive environment, and allowing for the opportunity. And since her central interest is the nature of man, under the veneer of civilized society, melodrama is almost a logical by-product. In an article interview in Orion magazine in 1945, she gives a telling illustration: "Imagine a Winston Churchill, untaught and untrained and unadapted in the sense we mean, and then immured in an isolated life in a narrow community, and think what might have happened to his power, what would have happened to it." [1] Certainly extreme consequences are at least a possibility. In the same article, she is quoted as saying, "I believe it would go ill with many of us if we were faced by a strong temptation, and I suspect that with some of us it does go ill".[2] And this is reflected in her plots.

[1] Orion: A Miscellany, op. cit. p 45

[2] ibid p 49

There is another reason for (in her own word) "deedy" plots, and that is their structural significance. Plots provide a strong framework for dialogue, of which the books are largely composed; they are the scaffolding on which her themes are hung. In her obsession with form, she recalls Henry James, a strong defender of form as opposed to "literary emotions". In one of his letters, comparing Stevensen with Dostoievki (favourably), James expressed ideas about structure and form that are those Compton-Burnett uses in her novels.

> "Don't let anyone persuade you...that strenuous selection and comparison are not the very essence of art and that form is not substance to that degree that there is absolutely no substance without it. Form alone takes and holds and preserves, substance saves it from the welter of helpless verbiage that we swim in a sea of tastless tepid pudding, and that make one ashamed of an art capable of such degradation".[1]

Compton-Burnett herself put the same idea more simply. In reply to an interview question on plots, she said, "No, I don't know how I get them. I think something must happen in a book - or there is no book. It seems to me that a book must have a structure. It may be an old-fashioned view, but I am surprised by some of these modern books which have no structure at all, but are just a piece of life carved out. It isn't natural for me to write like that. I seem to want a bone foundation for them. The structure is in a sense the bone of the book."[1]

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[1] Lubbock, Percy, ed., Henry James Letters, Macmillan 1920. 11 p 245-6

How tightly the novels are structured can be seen by looking at some examples. Two Worlds and Their Ways is typical. The plot concerns two small children who are sent away to school, cheat, motivated by self-preservation, are expelled and sent back to horrified parents, who turn out to be little better themselves. The book is symmetrically divided into two worlds: the world of the old and the world of the young; school and family worlds; innocence and experience; Eden and post-lapsarian. The more the book is explored, the more duality emerges. The children's father has had two wives (with almost the same Christian names, incidentally), so that there is also a contrast of life and death, present and past. There is again, the contrast of servant and master, whose dividing line becomes blurred when it is discovered that the servant is actually the master's stepson. Blurring of the two worlds is ultimately the point of the book, when it becomes clear that parents are as guilty of wrongdoing as the children.

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[1] Michael Millgate "Interview with Miss Compton-Burnett, op. cit. p 109.

Neat patterns of three recur frequently. Charles Burkhart has noted a number of rhythmic triple patterns, among them, three governesses in Daughters and Sons, three marriages in Elders and Betters, three wives in A House and its Head.[1] Such rhythmic patterns are related to a tight, carefully worked out plot structure.

Symmetry becomes a geometry in some books. A plot like the one in Brothers and Sisters is so complex in its permutations that it is easier to diagram than to relate, with its six intersecting sets of brothers and sisters, some of whom are also uncles, aunts, cousins and husband and wife to one another, and who are also placed physically within and without the village of Moreton Edge, centred around the manor house. There is a point to this complicated structuring of the book of course. Compton-Burnett is delineating a graphic model of the theme of inbreeding on the human being; in other words what happens to a person in a society restricted physically, spatially, and numerically, and restricted also to limited experience. What happens turns out to be a physical and moral stunting in some individuals, an intensification of character traits in others, the development of a necessary self-preserving shell over the vulnerable, and in a very few characters, the ability to recognise truth.

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[1] Burkhart, op. cit. p 45-6

A complicated plot then, to Compton-Burnett is not ludicrously unreal, but functional.

An analysis of Elders and Betters will illustrate how a complex and yet very subtle symbolic structure can overlay, effectively, a basically melodramatic plot. To reiterate, the plot of Elders and Betters concerns two families, the family of Benjamin Donne, a widower with three sons and a daughter, Anna, and the family of his sister Jessica Calderon and her husband Thomas, with their four children. Sukey, who is the sister of Jessica and Benjamin, is a crochety, rich invalid living with Jessica. Sukey becomes fond of Anna, and to irritate Jessica, makes a will leaving everything to Anna. However, this is just a result of pique; she fully intends to leave her money to Jessica. As she dies, she asks Anna to destroy this second will. Anna doesn't; she burns the original instead. Jessica doesn't at all believe in the validity of the second will. She is positive that Anna has maneouvred the situation somehow, and she confronts Anna, at which, Anna accuses Jessica, in an outrageous attack, of among other things, casting a blight on her family and everyone around her. Jessica takes the hint that everyone would be better without her, and commits suicide. Anna is then free to marry Jessica's favourite son and claim all the money, which she does. To underline the fact that young ones are neither better nor worse than their elders (in other words that the title of the book is ironic), the book closes with a scene in which the two Calderon children exclude the youngest Donne son, who is a cripple, from their worship of Chung and Sung Li, leaving him to hobble off alone.

This kind of supreme moral pragmatism has shocked many critics, and it requires a close look at what is super-imposed over the bare bones of the plot - word meanings, echoes, symbols, and so on - to understand what points the book is making.

First, the question of what is good and what is evil arises. Jessica is meant to serve as a model for a good human being, in the established Christian sense, that is, exhibiting selflessness, and nobility. She is described, in fact, as a woman who "held the accepted faith and lived according to it." (p 40) There are a number of instances that establish Jessica's Christ-like role in her family circle. For example, there is an extremely funny scene in which the two families are all gathered at the dinner table, and a character remarks that they are thirteen in number. (p 91) According to superstition, the first to sit down will die shortly, and so they all stand, and stand, and stand, making uneasy jokes until finally Jessica sits down, the human sacrifice. The scene works marvellously on a comic level, but it is also intended as a parody of the Last Supper, with

Jessica as Jesus and Anna as Judas.

Jessica's suicide also has Christ-like parallels, for she intends the act as a sacrifice for the sake of her children, after Anna has convinced her that she is blighting them.

But moral good, total self-sacrificing Christ-like goodness isn't necessarily a worthy aim for a human being, or even a desirable one to Compton-Burnett. Jessica isn't a happy woman, or a particularly well loved one. In the thirteen at table scene, her family do not appreciate the gesture Jessica makes. On the contrary, her gesture makes them look cowardly and silly and unheroic. They resent Jessica for it, and her son remarks, "I am tired of cringing before nobility". (p 91).

Jessica has another "good" trait that irritates. She can discern goodness in others, and she can see all too clearly how others fail. For example she understands her husband's faults, and although she doesn't moralize, she is too honest to repress her feelings. The result is that her husband avoids her and prefers the company of his daughter, who adores him, in a blind, undemanding way. Jessica expects goodness, and those who can't come up to her standards feel uneasy and resentful.

This goodness works against herself too, because she suffers from the discrepancy between her attempt to live a decent life, and the fact that she personally is also a human being with faults. One of her faults is that she loves her son Terence more than all her other children. (All Compton-Burnett parents have favourite children, but Jessica is the only one who feels guilty). She worries that her two youngest children must sense this and suffer, and they do, but not so much because they are not preferred, as from the strain of having so much demanding guilt-ridden goodness around them.

Jessica is not a prig;her goodness is never hypocritical, but it is a strain to live with. Terence remarks at one point "Oh for easy ordinary people who are fair to themselves and so to others", (p 74) and a sad and funny prayer Julius makes expresses the same idea: "Oh great and good and powerful god Chung...grant that I may grow up into an absolutely normal man". (p 97) Compton-Burnett's own opinion of Jessica's goodness is probably contained in Jessica's husband's words:

> "Most things that are good or called good, are founded on that [unselfishness]", said Thomas. "And those things are very good indeed, too good to be possible. It comes of a foundation that must break down... a person who can really be called an unselfish person, has no place in life." (p 78)

Goodness by itself isn't enough. Self-love, a healthy degree of ego and tolerance are vital for survival in Compton-Burnett's canon. Jessica is a person on the edge of breakdown, because she is attempting to live without ego.

Traditional goodness, then, is an ambivalent quality, at best. What of evil?

In the Orion interview previously quoted, Compton-Burnett notes, "I think that life makes great demands on people's characters and gives them, and especially used to give them, great opportunity to serve their own ends by the sacrifice of other people. Such ill-doing may meet with little retribution, indeed, be hardly recognised and I cannot feel surprised if people yield to it."[1] She says, in the same article, about a critic, "[He] wanted wickedness to be punished, but my point is that it is not punished, and that it is why it is natural to be guilty of it."[2]

This is not a justification of Anna, but it gives us a way of approaching the horror of the things she does, and her ultimate triumph. For while Anna is surrounded by images of superstition, primitive passion and Satanism, she is still a natural, human figure, and there are mitigating factors in her actions.

[1] Orion, op. cit. p 23

[2] ibid p 25

Firstly, her chief motive is not sheer nastiness or even greed for money, but her passion for Terence. Anna is a very sexual woman, and her desire for Terence is really beyond control. Since Terence and Jessica are an unusually close mother and son and Jessica would never allow Anna to take her son from her, Anna has a slightly more human motive than greed to account for her cruelty to Jessica.

Secondly, Anna does not really instigate many of the terrible things she does. Things happen by chance, as for example, the coincidence of being present when Sukey dies, and of happening to have possession of both wills at the time. Again, it is really Jessica who puts the idea into Anna's mind by leading the conversation. These are cases of temptation and fall, and no doubt the biblical parallel is intentional. Anna as tempted Eve is more, rather than less human.

Thirdly, Anna is not amoral, in the sense of being non-moral, or having no sense of right and wrong. She is always well aware of the evil of what she is doing. This is evident in her transference of her own qualities to Jessica, in the accusation scene. The scene is worth looking at in detail, in terms of Compton-Burnett's technique - the telling word, ambivalence, echoing phrase - as well as in terms of good and evil. This confrontation takes place after Anna has been left the money. Jessica decides that it is impossible for Sukey to have left money to Anna and naively determines to accuse Anna of duplicity so that she will admit what she has done.

To begin with, once Jessica has Anna alone in Sukey's room, Jessica tosses aside all her hypocritical nonsense about not wanting to enter the room in which the death has occurred, accuses her of not telling the truth, and demands the exact words of Sukey before her death.

Anna is disconcerted because Jessica sees through her, and is shaken enough to remark, "It must be ghastly to have such seething depths within one." which amounts to an admission of Jessica's perspicuity and Anna's guilt. But Jessica takes her remark at face value, and is diverted: "I wonder if other people see me like that."

Naturally, Anna seizes the weak point that Jessica has herself suggested and jumps on the offensive. Jessica suggests, in innocence, the points of attack. "Do I affect my family? The children?" she asks. "Would they be happier without me?" It is a temptation thrown in Anna's path, and she falls with particularly horrible maliciousness. Every line of attach is suggested by Jessica herself. When Jessica asks "Does my husband feel that I cast this baleful influence?", using "baleful" in the sense of melancholy and oppressive, Anna jumps on the word and twists it - "And what a word; baleful! It shows that you know the exact essence of your spell", using baleful in the sense of evil.

To instigate evil is one thing. To succumb to temptation is another, perhaps lesser evil. To Anna's credit also is the fact that she hesitates before the final step. When Jessica tells Anna that she [Jessica] will "make any sacrifice... that will give her family freedom", Anna drops back and diverts the conversation. But Jessica once more hints that she knows Anna's depths "that are better left undisturbed", and Anna is roused and angered, and urges Jessica towards death.

It is noteworthy that many of Anna's accusations of Jessica really apply to herself. This implies she is well aware of what she is, and what she is doing, morally. Two examples of this ambiguity are her labelling of Jessica, "this sinister, creeping force that poisens their lives", and "some dark angel, honestly and unselfishly serving the cause of evil." This last passage is meant to be interpreted as Jessica's smothering her family in guilt, but can also be read as Jessica, in this very scene, with good intentions serving the cause of evil, which is Anna. So by transference of her own qualities to Jessica, Anna reveals that she has a strong moral sense, even if she chooses to ignore it.

The same understanding of her own evil deeds applies to later words to her family. "Aunt Jessica gave me strangest sense of guilt", she says, meaning it as an insult, and implying to the reader the opposite. Again, describing the scene to her family, she says "I almost returned to the beliefs of infancy and credited the tales of satanic powers", referring on the surface to Jessica's powers, but of course meaning her own unearthly satanic good luck.

The intention of this lengthy textural analysis of an important scene in Elders and Betters has been to relate aspects of Compton-Burnett's technique, specifically ambiguous word meanings, and echoes, to the themes of power, family and morality which emerge in this passage. Yet her technique is not as obvious and laboured as this analysis might tend to imply. Rather, theme and technique are subtly, consummately interwoven. Nathalia Ginsburg, in a subjective appreciation of Ivy Compton-Burnett puts it very well:

> "I could never see any poetry in these novels, yet I felt that it must be there, since it was possible to breathe and drink in them without air or water, and in living there, one felt a deep, consoling, liberating happiness; and then I realised that the presence of poetry was there like the presence of nature. Totally invisible, totally involuntary, not offered to anyone, not destined for anyone, poetry was there like the boundless, gloomy sky that opened up behind those evil, lonely actions. Thus a hardworking instrument had been transformed, miraculously, into something in which all comers could recognise their own destiny and their own face." [1]

Eccentric, individual these novels may be, but not in any limiting sense. Her reductive technique serves as an effective vehicle for the most profound of concerns.

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[1] Ginsburg, Natalia Never Must You Ask Me, London, Michael Joseph, 1973. Translated from the Italian Mai Devi Domandarmi, 1970, Aldo Garzantior Editore sas, "La Grande Signoriana"

CHAPTER FIVE

A CONSIDERATION OF FAMILY, POWER, MORALITY AND TECHNIQUE IN MANSERVANT AND MAIDSERVANT

"And the complexity recoils upon itself" (p 79)

Manservant and Maidservant was Ivy Compton-Burnett's personal favourite, among her novels, and it has remained the most popular among her readers, judging by criteria of sales and critical reception. [1] The reasons are no doubt related to the fact that Manservant and Maidservant is (in my opinion) the wittiest, brightest and richest in characterisation of the novels. But as well as its comic inventiveness, this novel also contains a complex illustration of the themes of family, power and morality that so interested Compton-Burnett. An analysis of this novel may serve to illustrate and particularize broad themes discussed earlier.

[1] Elizabeth Sprigge, in The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett, Victor Gollancz, 1973, writes (p 122) "In England, Manservant and Maidservant sold best of all her novels and it had an excellent reception in the States." Miss Sprigge goes on to quote from several favourable reviews.

Charles Burkhart, in I. Compton-Burnett, Gollancz, 1965, also comments on public preference for this novel: "Only Manservant and Maidservant...has approached the status of best seller". (p 14)

Manservant and Maidservant revolves around Horace Lamb, a man who appears at first to be one of the worst of Compton-Burnett's tyrants. He is particularly dislikable because firstly, his tortures are directed mainly at his young, helpless children, secondly, because he is clever, and uses his considerable intelligence in negative, mean ways, and thirdly, because he seems to be a man without human warmth or feeling. He dislikes his wife, whom he married solely for her money, ignores his brother, is exasperated by his children and fears only his butler.

His only discernable passion is an obsession with money. Saving money is the point of Horace Lamb's life and all his energies are spent on this aim. That his family are cold, shabby and underfed means nothing - they still, in his opinion, cost too much to maintain. Not that Horace is a poor man. He is relatively well off, a fact which emerges when he hides the details of his will from his family, because the will shows he has more money than he claims. Money is an obsession rather than a physical need.

Horace is an intelligent man, yet his is a cold and literal intelligence, without sensitivity or subtlety. As are most of Compton-Burnett's power figures, he is clever without being wise. He perceives what is on the surface, but he is not intuitive. Typically, Horace rarely understands or cares for jokes. For example, when his brother Mortimer, laughing about the fact that the breakfast room is filled with smoke, teases, "Well, ham is supposed to be smoked", Horace, ever literal, replies, "How do you mean? Supposed to be? Is it not smoked?" (p 8)

What motivates Horace Lamb? What makes him act the way he does?

Underneath his dour, forbidding exterior, Lamb is an archtypal Compton-Burnett power figure - a man of potentially great capabilities trapped in a confined environment. Like a hypothetical Winston Churchill, as Compton-Burnett posited in her interview in Orion,[1] he is "untaught and untrammelled and unadapted in the sense that we mean and then immured in an isolated life in a narrow community". His powers seek the only outlet they can find. Horace is a man of prodigious mental energy who subjects himself to a too rigid control, except in "moods of nervous abandonment" (p 5) when his natural frustration breaks loose and is wreaked upon those weaker than himself.

His frenzied desire to retain and control money thus becomes recognizably a transmutation of his desire for rigid (and futile) self control.

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[1] "A Conversation Between I. Compton-Burnett and M. Jordain" op. cit. p 22.

Saving money becomes Horace's sole creative effort - an outlet for frustrated energy. At the same time, it is a source of guilt, which leads to further frustration:

> "Horace held that saving the money, or rather preventing its being spent, was equivalent to earning it, and he pursued its course with a furtive discomfiture that clouded his life, though it could not subdue his nature." (p 11).

In other ways also, Horace exemplifies Compton-Burnett's ideas of what gives a person power. His position as head of the family, in the first place, enables him legitimately to (as A. Etzioni defined power) [1] "overcome part of the resistance, to introduce changes in the face of opposition;" in other words, he can force the members of his family, to a large extent, to do his will simply because as head of the family he must be obeyed, and he can do this legitimately, by assuming the rationale that what he is doing is for the family's own good. While most members of family, realise, for example, that his stinginess with food derives from his obsession with saving money, Horace can, and does, pretend that he is simply avoiding waste, and so can put a pious front on what is in fact an exercise of cruel power. Mortimer, in a bitter mood, voices what Horace is doing; "It must be wonderful to have power, and use it with moderation and cruelty. We can so seldom be admired and self-indulgent at the same time". (p 12)

[1] Etzioni, A., op. cit. p 314

Another aspect of the power Horace exerts is his undeniable presence. His meanness, his coldness, might indicate that Horace is a small, shabby man, but on the contrary, Compton-Burnett has with considerable skill created a character of such complexity and emotional intensity, that his pivotal position in the household derives, believably, as much from his force of personality as from his power. Bullivant and his brother Mortimer, who know all his faults, nevertheless love him. His children, at his "conversion" to kind father, are only too joyfully ready to adore him. Horace dominates every scene in which he is present.

Horace's journey towards humanity in the course of the novel is not so much a realization of the warped emphasis of his life, as a coming to terms with himself. For Horace ends up a family power wielder as he began, though softened and with greater self-knowledge. This is his inescapable nature, and Compton-Burnett is making the point that the instinctive nature of man can be controlled, but never altered.

> "You must face the truth, Horace. You are not so much the master of your own fate, and we are none of us the masters of our feelings. Your life must be adapted to your nature, possible for you to live." (p 112)

as his wife Charlotte says, in a comment universally applicable. Indeed, as the book title suggests, we are all man and maidservants of our fate, emotions and nature.

In Horace's fate Compton-Burnett conveys her belief that power is desired by, and is necessary to, his family as well as to Horace. When Horace lies near death at the climax of the novel, new realisations emerge. Though Charlotte and Mortimer had planned to marry, they now understand that even with Horace dead they never would marry; indeed could live only for Horace's memory. His browbeaten children also realise their love for and need of their powerful father. The simple truth is that the victim often gains something by his victimization, and so Horace's family are horror-stricken at the thought of his death:

> "The impossible might be upon them; he who moulded lives might pass from life. They stood aloof and unaware of each other. They did not feel that the head of the house was to die, that the husband and father was to die, that the friend of a lifetime was to die. Horace was to die, Horace who might drive others to their death, but was himself immune from danger. They knew they had imagined him weeping for themselves, weeping in remorse and grief. The trial, the bondage, the safety of their lives would be gone. They would be free, unprotected, dependent on themselves. The helpless

> *lives they had defended, would be their own responsibility, their own burden.*" (p 227) (emphasis, mine)

The achievement of this realisation is accomplished in *Manservant and Maidservant* by a complex series of reverberating and echoing parallels of situation and character, particularly those relating to Horace and his servants.

The servants in the novel are among the most delightful and fully realised of any of Compton-Burnett's creations, each quite different and individual, from Mrs. Seldon, given to loud solo hymn singing, to Miriam, the doltish orphan maid who cherishes a dream of being called "Rose" or "Lily", to above all, pompous, officious and efficient Bullivant, who in effect runs the house.

Bullivant's role, has, however, been misread. The American edition of *Manservant and Maidservant* was retitled *Bullivant and the Lambs*,[1] a title which implies that the main interest lies in Bullivant's Jeeves-like manipulations of the Lamb family. Mary McCarthy similarly sees Bullivant as playing the perfect servant role:

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[1] Knopf, 1948

> "The butler, Bullivant, a highly intelligent man whom Horace inherited from his father, is one of those accidents that happen in families; that is, he is a normal being, with no visible defects".[1]

Falling prey to this common misinterpretation of Bullivant's role and character, F.R. Karl writes, "In his dealings with Miss Buchanan... Bullivant displays tact and discretion",[2] a comment which could hardly be more wrong, since Bullivant both gives away her secret illiteracy and maliciously torments and teases her, under the cover of not knowing this secret.

It is true that Bullivant is a devoted and excellent servant. But he shares his master's flaw, which is the basic flaw of humanity, a basic repressed savage instinct. Bullivant calls this his "imp":

> "There is something in me, Miss Buchanan, that runs away with me at times," said Bullivant, in a tone of self-abasement. "There seems to be an imp lurking within, that renders my actions at variance with myself. I have been led into predicaments by it all through my life." (p 241)

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[1] McCarthy, Mary, "The Inventions of I. Compton-Burnett", op. cit. p 118

[2] Karl, F.R., A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel, Thomas and Hudson, 1963, p 215.

This instinctive behaviour breaks through Bullivant's most civilized veneer when he is provoked. One of his most cherished principles is the sacred nature of womanhood, which demands masculine protection. But this goes by the board very soon, when Miss Buchanan, whose secret of illiteracy he knows, laughs at his pompous manner of speaking, thus puncturing his dignity. Immediately he venomously asks her to read from a wine list and questions her about her (non-existent) schooldays. Like Horace, Bullivant loses control of himself and betrays the instinctive side of his nature, which is usually held in check. As Miss Buchanan puts it, "all lives have their weaker side". (p 164).

An even more apposite parallel with Horace is the footman, George, who on the face of it, seems to be unregenerately evil. He delights in the disgrace of the Lamb children, steals from the youngest child, from the dinner table and from the family stores, has no respect for Bullivant and little for anyone else, and finally ends by attempting to kill Horace.

But George is ultimately seen as not much worse than anyone else. His stealing is not an isolated deed in the novel. Horace, after all, claims all Charlotte's money (without telling her) after their marriage, and his withholding of proper food and clothing from his family might well be construed as a form of stealing from them. Stealing is seen as almost a natural result of deprivation: Horace's children also steal food.

George is a workhouse orphan, without natural affection because "he was brought up without it" (p 191), a situation which exempts him in some respects from the expectations of conventional behaviour. Horace's children were also brought up without the natural affection of their father, and their childish dreams of doing away with Horace are seen as not evil, but practically inevitable.

George, of course, is by no means an admirable figure, but his chief sin is his bullying of those weaker than himself (Avery and Miriam) rather than theft, or his immature attempt to kill Horace. The real cause of his trouble is, like Horace, an inability to come to terms with himself.

What George must come to realise is that he is a servant, a social inferior, and that he must not expect anything better of the world than the role that his society imposes on him. As one character claims George "does not know the truth about himself and his destiny." (p 192)

This is a hard, even shocking, fact for the reader as well as George to accept, and may lead to the belief that Compton-Burnett is fostering a feudal conception of society.

In fact, Compton-Burnett is not being snobbish. George is characterized as not really intrinsically inferior in most respects. He is amusing, perceptive and enterprising, and given to puncturing some of society's shallowed beliefs in true Compton-Burnett fashion. "Surely there is no sense in labour for its own sake?" (p 149), says George, disconcerting Bullivant, whose belief in the value of work is his way of life, but amusing the reader, who can see George's point.

Compton-Burnett uses her frequent technique of echoing words, in this case the words fair and equal, throughout this novel, to illustrate her point; man must accept his nature and destiny, however unsuitable or unjust.

On Christmas day, the smallest son Avery happily notes that all the children have been given books and similar presents. This, to him, is fair. Horace, however, tries to explain that the presents are equal, not fair; that the concepts are different:

> "Everything happens to be equal", said his father. "But fair is not the word. It would have been fair for you to have nothing. No one is obliged to give a present to anyone."
>
> "They are at Christmas".
>
> "No, they do it out of kindness and to celebrate the Day. And it would have been fair for some of you to have better things than others."
>
> "No that would not be fair"
>
> "Yes it would. People can do as they like about giving presents".
>
> ... "It is quite beyond him", said Horace, looking at

> Mortimer. "Children will think they are entitled to things." (p 82)

George is like Avery - he believes, innocently, that it is fair that he should be treated equally, as a human being. But fair treatment of George is not equal treatment. It is fair, in the sense of just, or legitimate, that he should be treated as an inferior, according to the rules of the society he inhabits.

Although Avery claims not to understand the distinction between equal and fair, he demonstrates an instinctive knowledge when he gives out his chocolates to his brothers and sisters, giving the best to his favourite sister Sarah. No one questions his right to do this, or considers it unfair. It is fair, just, right, for him to treat his siblings unequally, because they are unequal.

To Compton-Burnett, the truth is that people are unequal, and this gives them the right to unequal treatment. This is the reason Horace (as most of her powerful tyrants) retains at bottom the respect and devotion of his family. Horace is greater in powers and status than those around him; it is therefore fair (legitimate) that he should have extraordinary privileges. And George has fewer rights and privileges because of his lesser power position. This must also be seen as fair, though his opportunities are not equal.

When Jasper and Marcus believe that they have allowed their father to die, they wail in guilt, "It is not fair that he should die and we should not". (p 173) Were rewards and punishments doled out equally, this might be true. But life is not fair, in the sense of equitable, to all.

Another set of echoing images in this carefully constructed novel, which strengthens character deliniation and reinforces theme,is fire and warmth, which is constantly juxtaposed with images of ice and cold.

The novel begins and ends with the same scene: the dining room fire is smoking, due presumably, to some obstruction. But during the course of the novel, as Horace gains knowledge of himself, the meaning of this incident alters.

In the first scene, the ominously smoking fire evokes Horace's smoldering nature acting as a damper on the natural warmth that should, ideally, be within the family home. The smoke is attributed to a jackdaw in the chimney (a legendary thieving bird, reminiscent of George, another thieving "bird", who is about to make his first entrance, and also Horace, the family "obstruction" stealing warmth and comfort.)

In the last scene, the fire is again smoking, to the consternation of Bullivant, who "jumps back as if a tiger had sprung at him " (p 243) fearing, perhaps, a symbolic return of the old, fire-breathing Horace. But it is "a mild outbreak. Doubtless some vagary of the wind". (p 243) Horace is now tempered by self-knowledge, and though his nature is basically unchanged, and vagaries of "smoking" are to be expected from time to time, the family need no longer fear Horace as they did.

This circuitous journey to self-realization is accompanied throughout by changing images of fire.

Fire, firstly, or the lack of it, is one of the issues of contention in the household. Coals cost money, and Horace would rather see his family freeze than lavish coals. So he stints, causing either extreme discomfort (his children literally sit around watching water freeze in a saucer), or else causing surreptitious application of coals to the fire, a kind of thievery which brings out everyone's worst nature. When Bullivant builds up the fire at one point, and Horace demands to know who did it, there is a comic flurry as everyone hastens to blame everyone else, to the moral detriment of them all:

> "You informed against your aunt, dear boy", said Mortimer.
>
> "And she informed against Bullivant. He comes out better than any of you."
>
> "Oh, he was going to blame it all on George, a helpless orphan from the workhouse", said Horace.
>
> "There is not much to choose between us." (p 17)

The house is an emotionally cold one, for Horace appears to care for no one, least of all his children, whom he sees as objects of personal frustration. That he regards his children as adversaries emerges in this truly poisonous exchange with Marcus, age eleven, which is fairly typical of his relations with his children:"

> "You can wait to speak to your father, until he speaks to you."
>
> "But suppose there was something we had to say to you?"
>
> "Then say it", said Horace, sending his voice to a higher note. "Say it, say it, say it. I am not preventing you. I await your pleasure. What is the important communication. I am all attention. I am all ears. Say it, say it."
>
> Marcus did not obey.
>
> "So it did not exist", said Horace.
>
> "No," muttered Marcus, his eyes filling with tears.
>
> Horace felt that an argument ended in his favour, when his opponent wept, and as he always pursued one to this point, had no experience of defeat in words." (p 33)

Though cold, Horace is a type of fire himself in the family structure - the ominously smoking kind, full of the possibility of uncontrollable danger. He is, in fact, seen by the smallest child as a devil figure:

> "Is father gone now?" said Avery. "I don't want him to come here. He is always in all the places. I don't want him to come where I sleep. I don't like to think that he might look at me in the night." (p 55)

What Horace ignores is that cold engenders cold, that danger breeds danger. There are four progressive attempts on his life, ranging from the children sticking pins in a wax effigy and throwing it, significantly, on the fire, to the almost inadvertent hesitation of his sons in telling him of a damaged bridge, to a real manipulation of the damaged bridge situation by George, and finally to an almost fatal bout of pneumonia (a "cold" disease) caused by his own stinginess with coal and emotional exhaustion, a giving up, which is a form of suicide.

With Horace at the point of death, he becomes finally linked to fire rather than cold. The chill in the house becomes associated with the cold fear of living without Horace:

> "The cold held, bound the earth, could not break. Fires through the house were piled and deep. Fear of cold had become a different thing; suffering from cold belonged to a past that was distant, strange, fraught almost with guilt." (p 225)

Horace's family realised that he is their epicentre, their stability and source of emotional life; the family's fire. And after his recovery, his deeply-hidden natural warmth is acknowledged in the love he feels and shows for Mortimer, Bullivant and his children.

The fire image is used in other ways also. A favourite technique of Compton-Burnett is to turn traditionally accepted maxims inside out, to reveal new meanings and patterns. There are several common phrases relating to fire which are used throughout the novel to reinforce and emphasise her themes.

Mortimer, for example, is banished from "hearth and home" (p 143) when his planned elopement with Charlotte becomes known. The platitude is an ironic mockery in the Lamb home, for as Bullivant remarks, "the first [hearth, or fire] has hardly been our strong point, sir."

Another mentioned proverb is "where there is smoke there is fire", which related, not only literally, to the opening scene, but to the pervasive rumours about the Lambs that flood the neighbourhood.

"There must be some flame behind as much smoke as that", (p 149) says George, perceptive and speaking out of line as always.

Used also is the phrase "playing with fire" (p 103) of which Magdalen Doubleday accuses her mother, who is infatuated with Horace. Magdalen is accusing her mother of causing potential harm, but when Horace is seen as the embodiment of fire, the phrase takes on additional meaning. Playing with fire is in fact what most characters do - Horace by warping and depriving his family, Mortimer and Charlotte by surreptitiously planning to run away, and the children and George by plotting murder and theft.

Horace's transformation to acknowledged emotional centre of the family might lead one to suspect that no real moral standards apply; that Horace's earlier cruelty to his family is forgotten.

It is this interpretation of Compton-Burnett's novels which has led to critical evaluations of an amoral world view, a world in which the law of the jungle, rather than the laws of civilised society are seen to apply. F.R. Karl's judgement is typical of this frequently encountered view of Compton-Burnett's moral position:

> "The morality of Miss Compton-Burnett's work involves material values - how does one sustain himself in what amounts to a predatory jungle? The family is not a reservoir of sympathy and feeling, but a miniature of the larger world in which self-interest is the sole motivation. A person survives in the family group through conniving and competing. Frequently the forces are divided; the children on one side, the parents or adults on another. Neither side is restricted to gentleman's weapons. Nagging is raised to an art, and each side dogs the other, looking for an advantage, trying to thrust in a verbal dagger. For in the destruction of the other person, whether actual or figurative, the individual gains his own life." [1]

and

> "Social morality is attached to self-gain, both material and psychological." [2]

In this linking of morality solely with self-gain and survival, several points are over-looked. Firstly, evil actions are recognised and acknowledged as evil by almost everyone, secondly, a relative moral scale exists; self-interest is not man's sole motivation and aim, and thirdly, it is a gross oversimplification to see Compton-Burnett's world as a war of two opposing, hostile, equally amoral camps, each one seeking the others' destruction, in the interests of self-preservation.

[1] Karl, F.R. op. cit. p 202

[2] Karl, F.R. ibid. p 203

The Lamb household is not a loveless battleground. Horace Lamb, indeed, terrorises his family, but this is more because of psychological irritations which goad him beyond reason than a genuine desire to wreak evil. In a conversation with his wife, Horace remarks, "Civilized life consists in supressing our instincts;" to which Charlotte replies, "Or does all life consist in fulfilling them," (p 38) which expresses Horace's dilemma. He cannot contain his natural instincts; the nervous frustrations caused by his confined life make him take out his anger on those weaker than himself. His motives are thus more complex than mere self-gain. It should be remembered too that he feels compunction and guilt also, shown, for example, by his giving cake to the children after a particularly hostile attack on them.

Neither is Jasper and Mortimer's near "murder" of their father based on amoral self-preservation. Rather than a premeditated evil deed, it is more a childish hesitation to warn him until too late, followed by immense self-reproach.

These are the most morally reprehensible episodes in the book, and they are seen as such, but there are many examples of goodness, generosity and love which bely the idea of "family jungle with no moral standard". There is, for example, the kindness and civilized generosity of Mortimer to his social and mental inferiors, such as Miss Buchanan, and the love of the children for each other, for their mother, and indeed even for their father. Far from being amoral, a moral standard exists strongly in this novel.

It is significant also to realise that Horace is not the only moral ill-doer in the novel.

Speaking of his sons' momentary willingness to see him die at the damaged bridge, Horace says:

> "It is no good to take the stand that this is the natural result of the past. Of anything you like in the past. It was something in the nature of the boys, whom we have seen as innocent and helpless. Who was the helpless one? They or I?" (p 177)

These are valid questions. Partly, the boys attempt to do away with their father is due to the wrongs he has done them, partly it is due to childish immaturity, but partly, it is due to the basic nature of man, which can be savage at times, as it can at other times be moral.

As Mortimer puts it, semi-facetiously, "How wicked everyone is. There does not seem to be a single exception." (p 111)

But Mortimer himself stands as evidence that a relative moral scale exists. He is not a morally perfect man: he plans to run away with Horace's wife ostensibly out of concern for the children, but also in part, from a half-acknowledged desire for revenge on Horace, to whom he has been financially dependent and subservient all his life. Yet Mortimer shows in dozens of incidents, a kindness, consideration and generosity along with intelligence and self-awareness, that does much to establish him as a kind of moral standard in the novel.

Horace himself recognises this. In his path to self-knowledge, the turning point comes when he realises that he values and needs Mortimer more than either of them realised. His fury at Mortimer's and Charlotte's intended elopement came, not from the danger of losing Charlotte, or the personal humiliation, but from the transfer of the love which Horace believed Mortimer had for him, to Charlotte. And this is the greatest recognition of Mortimer's worth.

Along with the humour, the pathos and the wit, Manservant and Maidservant contains a dramatization of Compton-Burnett's statement about man and his world. Family life, indeed life in any civilized society, can be extraordinarily difficult both for victim and for power figures, who in turn are victims of their own natures. At the same time, a relative moral standard, along with the joys of love, humour and the exercise of intelligence, exists to prevent life becoming meaningless. Living consists in coming to terms with man's contradictory baser and moral natures:

> "We all act inconsistent with our natures at times," said Cook.
>
> "Or the natures themselves are inconsistent," said Miss Buchanan.
>
> "A profound remark", said Bullivant. (p 153)

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[1] These dates do not include a collected, limited edition of the novels published 1925 to 1971, in nineteen volumes, by Gollancz, 1972.

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