

Cold Comfort from Stella Gibbons

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IN 1932 Stella Gibbons published her first novel: *Cold Comfort Farm*. According to Penguin Books, *Cold Comfort Farm* is "the comic classic of rural life;" and it "attracted considerable attention" when it was first published. As far as I can tell, however, almost no one subsequently has heard of Stella Gibbons or *Cold Comfort Farm*, the Penguin edition notwithstanding. Raymond Williams mentions the novel seriously, though briefly, in *The Country and the City*.¹ But critics who may know of Gibbons' "comic classic" are likely to regard it as only that. Gibbons provides a good laugh, a blessed relief from the gravity of Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence, whom she parodies so well. "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery" — this epigraph from Jane Austen graces the opening of *Cold Comfort Farm*, and holds true to the end. The book is meant to be funny, but beneath Gibbons' humour lie attitudes and assumptions which place her within the tradition that she satirizes. I propose in this paper to explain why Stella Gibbons' parody belongs in the traditional English literary canon; and to answer an interesting question that *Cold Comfort Farm* raises, namely, why is it a woman who parodies the earnest longings and intricate characterizations of Hardy and Lawrence?

Let me begin with a word about that tradition which Gibbons both mocks and honors — the English regional novel. The term is generally applied to the novels of George Eliot, located in the scenes of her youth, and to those of Thomas Hardy, whose fictional Wessex mirrors the Dorsetshire landscape. One can stretch the term to encompass Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, set in the

Yorkshire moors, and Lawrence's English novels, all of which occur in that troubled region of industrialism and agriculture, the Nottingham countryside. While these novels are generally set in England's rural past, the authors do not restrict themselves, either geographically or psychologically, to the country. There is always a tension between country and town that manifests itself in the contrast of *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*, for instance, or in the urban sophistication which in various guises attracts George Eliot's *Hetty Sorrel* and *Maggie Tulliver*, and Lawrence's *Paul Morel* and *Ursula Brangwen*. Although the city lures some of Hardy's characters, Hardy more frequently concerns himself with the changes within rural life — with the transition, for example, from a communal tenant farming network to an individualistic and disconnected agricultural life.

Hence, in the regional novel place matters, not only in and of itself, but in contrast to something alien, and generally urban. The regional novel came into being as England turned from agriculture to industry. It is a nostalgic response to that vast change, as well as a record of the uneasy transition. Curiously, and almost universally, it is the women characters of these regional novels who feel strongly the "ache of modernism." Catherine Earnshaw, *Hetty Sorrel*, *Maggie Tulliver*, *Eustacia*, *Tess*, *Sue Bridehead*, *Ursula* and *Gudrun*, even *Connie Chatterley* — they all want a kind of fulfillment that is an odd and sometimes painful mixture of rural and urban values. *Stella Gibbons'* protagonist, *Flora Poste*, is no exception, although the misery is absent. Only the slightest bit of sadness tinges *Flora's* last evening at *Cold Comfort Farm*.

Flora is a London girl who by various circumstances comes to live with relatives she has never met before — the *Starkadders* of *Cold Comfort Farm*, *Howling*, *Sussex*. And then the fun begins. The farm is a catchall of regionalist themes and images, motives, characterizations, and prose styles — all stood on their heads, turned inside

out, or blown out of proportion. There is Cousin Judith Starkadder, whose love for her son, Seth, rivals anything that Lawrence attributes to Gertrude Morel. When the oversexed Seth leaves the farm for a career in the "talkies," Judith drapes the two hundred photographs of him that hang in her room with black crêpe, and gives up living. Grief is her constant companion. Her husband, Amos, is a religious fanatic — in speech and character rather like Emily Brontë's Joseph, and in moral purpose reminiscent of George Eliot's Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris. Reuben, the other son, is in love with the land and eyes his father's fields with passionate possession. Elfine, the youngest of the Starkadders, is Hetty Sorrel inverted. She is in love with the local squire, Dick Hawk-Monitor, who is about to celebrate his twenty-first birthday in traditional gala country fashion. But instead of being plump and kittenish and willing to submit to anything the squire might suggest, Elfine is boyish and unkempt, almost aloof. She writes poetry, and roams the downs in order to be in touch with nature (and Dick Hawk-Monitor). In addition to this family core, there are Adam Lambsbreath, the ancient dumb hired hand, and Miriam, the hired girl, who conceives an illegitimate child yearly, as surely as the blossoms come in the spring. A nest of Starkadder cousins and their wives populate the farm and nearby village — sultry young men named Urk and Harkaway and Caraway, who harvest swedes and beets, dig wells, and hunt "water-voles." And finally there is Great Aunt Ada Doom, who descends from her room but twice a year to take account of all these Starkadders. Aunt Ada Doom saw "something nasty in the woodshed" when she was a little girl and hasn't been the same since.

If the Poysers of Hall Farm, in *Adam Bede*, are the epitome of pastoral simplicity and harmony, then Gibbons' Starkadders are their antithesis. Meals at Cold Comfort Farm are eaten in moody silence, with Judith's eyes "straying towards Seth," and Reuben regarding his father's

apoplectic disposition with undisguised pleasure. But Gibbons' inversion of George Eliot's harmonious rural portrait is really only a comic exaggeration of Hardy's or Lawrence's emotionally-charged rural scenes. Her satire, in fact, encompasses a wide range of attitudes towards human relationships, towards nature, and towards the relation between humanity and the rest of the natural world. The distance between her parody and its serious counterparts shrinks as one moves from George Eliot to Hardy and Lawrence. The satire hits closer to home.

Landscape description is a staple of the regional novel; and Hardy, in particular, is noted for making nature live. The most famous instance, of course, is Egdon Heath, a character in its own right: but even on a much smaller scale, Hardy gives his readers the impression "that Nature has a quasi-human life."² He produces this effect by anthropomorphizing natural objects. George Eliot does something similar, though she does it less frequently than Hardy, when she calls the Poyser cows "acquaintances" or when she endows the sunshine with benevolence. Here, for example, is Hardy's description of the Hintock forest in *The Woodlanders*:

The plantations were always weird at this hour of eve — more spectral far than in the leafless season, when there were fewer masses and more minute lineality. The smooth surfaces of glossy plants came out like weak, lidless eyes; there were strange faces and figures from expiring lights that had somehow wandered into the canopied obscurity; while now and then low peeps of the sky between the trunks were like sheeted shapes, and on the tips of boughs sat faint cloven tongues.³

And here is what Stella Gibbons does with a similar description:

Amos looked at [Flora], as though seeing her for the first, or perhaps the second time. His huge body, rude as a wind-tortured thorn, was printed darkly against the thin mild flame of the declining winter sun that throbbed like a sallow lemon on the westering lip of Mockuncle Hill, and sent its pale, sharp rays into the kitchen through the open door. The brittle air, on which the fans of the trees were etched like aging skeletons, seemed thronged by the bright invisible ghosts of a

million dead summers. The cold beat in glassy waves against the eyelids of anybody who happened to be out in it. High up, a few chalky clouds doubtfully wavered in the pale sky that curved over against the rim of the Downs like a vast inverted *pot-de-chambre*. Huddled in the hollow, like an exhausted brute, the frosted roofs of Howling, crisp and purple as broccoli leaves, were like beasts about to spring.⁴

In part, this passage echoes Hardy; it is only slightly more farfetched. The "lip" of Mockuncle Hill, the skeletons and ghosts among the trees, match Hardy's spectral faces and figures, sheeted shapes and cloven tongues. And the inverted *pot-de-chambre* burlesques Hardy's tent-like sky at the opening of *The Return of the Native*. In the last sentence, Gibbons outdoes herself: the roofs of Howling "huddle," they are "like an exhausted brute," "like beasts about to spring," as well as being as "crisp and purple as broccoli leaves." Gibbons' passage is comic because the metaphors shoot off in all directions — there is no coherence; and often they are purposefully inept. A "sallow lemon" does not throb, nor do roofs resemble broccoli leaves — no matter how crisp and purple they are. But whether these metaphors are inept or not, whether they rely on human attributes or animal or vegetable ones, they, too, have the effect of bringing the landscape exuberantly to life. Some of Hardy's nature descriptions are particularly vulnerable to satire, but while Gibbons exaggerates and mocks her predecessors, she also supports the premise that motivated them. Nature is vigorously alive at Cold Comfort Farm; and the reader is likely to prefer the farm's natural outlandishness to the suave but bland pleasures of London which are presented in the novel.

Hardy makes nature "quasi-human" in an attempt to bridge the gap between human society and the natural world. But Lawrence, after him, takes another tack; he emphasizes whatever in man is natural and non-human, thereby forging a link between humanity and the rest of the natural world. In a late essay, Lawrence describes the individual as "a deep pool, or tarn, in the mountains,

fed from beneath by unseen springs.”⁵ These unseen springs represent man’s impersonal connection to the whole of nature — a connection which resides in man’s unconsciousness and his animal instincts. Often Lawrence’s characters are sexually aroused with the advent of spring; and the love between Paul Morel and Miriam Leivers, for example, grows out of “their common feeling for something in Nature.”⁶ Lawrence depicts man’s unconscious responses to the world around him; and Gibbons finds this achievement a particularly ripe field for satire. Early in the novel, Adam, the hired hand, is sent by Judith to fetch Flora Poste from the railway station. By the time he travels between the farm and the station, however, Adam has forgotten “what he was going there for:”

From the stubborn interwoven strata of his subconscious, thought seeped up into his dim consciousness; as an impalpable emanation, a crepuscular addition, from the unsleeping life in the restless trees and fields surrounding him. The country for miles, under the blanket of the dark which brought no peace, was in its annual tortured ferment of spring growth; worm jarred with worm and seed with seed. Frond leapt on root and hare on hare. . . . It seemed chaotic but it was more methodically arranged than you might think. But Adam’s deafness and blindness came from within, as well as without, earthly calm seeped up from his subconscious and met descending calm in his conscious. (p. 45)

What Lawrence took pains to represent Gibbons dismisses with a sweep of her pen. There is an interesting contradiction in this description of Adam, however, which both makes for comedy and points to the serious foundation of Gibbons’ satire. Darkness brings no peace to the country, she says, because of the annual spring intoxication; and yet the earth’s calm joins Adam’s own insentience to produce his muddled state of unconsciousness. Nature seems chaotic, but it is “more methodically arranged” than one might think. Much of Gibbons’ humor works not only by parody, but also by encompassing a wide range of attitudes at once, and spilling them all, contradictory or not, before the reader. George Eliot’s characters find a benevolent order in nature which consoles and supports

them. Hardy's find themselves uneasily in-between being consoled by the workings of the natural world and being frightened by them. In Hardy's novels, chaos begins to outstrip natural order. And Lawrence's characters, who fight society's mechanism in the manner of their creator, often embrace nature's chaotic fluidity. Gibbons, of course, mixes this spectrum of attitudes in her comic description of Adam, but her jumbled account of nature leads one to ask whether she, in fact, finds any integrity or peace in the English countryside.

Flora Poste's time at Cold Comfort Farm is spent "tidying up" the chaotic affairs of her rural relatives. She manages to create order only by separating and dispersing these ebullient and temperamental Starkadders. But her last night there, after everyone has flown off for Paris or driven off in Ford vans, is a truly nostalgic rendering of merry old agricultural England, worthy of placement beside Eliot's, Hardy's or Lawrence's reminiscences:

With the retreating noise of [the] engine the last invader of the farm's quietude was gone . . . It was the loveliest hour of the English year: seven o'clock on Midsummer Night. . . .

The shadows grew slowly longer. A cold, fresh smell came up out of the grass and fell from the trees. The birds began their sleep song.

The sun had almost disappeared behind the black tracteries of the may-hedge on the far side of the field. Such of his rays as struck through the branches were still, heavy, and of the softest gold.

The air cooled slowly. Flowers shut before Flora's very eyes, but gave out fragrance still. Now there were more shadows than light. The last blackbird that always flies chattering across a summer evening's quiet came dashing down the meadow and vanished in the may-hedge.

The country-side was falling asleep. Flora drew her coat round her, and looked up into the darkening vault of the sky. (pp. 223, 231)

Gibbons' satire gives way at the very end of her novel to nostalgia and romance. Flora, too, flies off, with a more sophisticated country cousin whom she promises to marry, to London. But the peace of this last evening at Cold Comfort Farm soothes her. Both she and the reader

appreciate how rare a quality such rural quietude is in the modern world.

Throughout her stay in the country, Flora has been Gibbons' fictional counterpart. She laughs in disbelief at her relatives on Cold Comfort Farm, as Gibbons laughs at her predecessors in the rural novel. The disbelief and satire are prominent, but underneath lies a respect for the country's virtues — the same respect that inspired Eliot and Hardy and Lawrence. But why, one asks, should these two women — Stella Gibbons and her protagonist — be inclined to satire at all? The answer to that question can be found, I think, within the regional novel itself, and within the history of the novel as a whole in England.

I mentioned earlier that it is the women of these regional novels who feel the tension between country and city, between a nearly outmoded way of life and modern progress. The men, more often than not, are satisfied, uninclined to rebel or even to aspire. Consider the Brangwen women in Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. They are unsatisfied by blood-intimacy with nature — the force that keeps their men emotionally and physically tied to Marsh Farm. These women aspire to something "beyond" the life of the farm — something which can be only vaguely defined in terms of social class, power, and knowledge. Part of this dissatisfaction and aspiration can be explained, in Lawrence's time particularly, by the women's movement. The push for political rights opened the way for a redefinition of a woman's place, in general. But the Brangwen women's search for fulfillment can be explained along more traditional lines as well. In the recent past, at any rate, women have been not only the center of the family and home, but the repository of culture and civilization. Thus, they are taught to aspire when they are taught drawing or music or dance. Women have been the carriers of culture, if not the creators of it — though at the time that Lawrence is writing they are demanding to be allowed to be creators as well. All these demands,

however, issue from a relatively secure backdrop — from the home, where women “move about with surety.” They have a freedom and a psychological space from which to aspire — a freedom and space that their husbands, by virtue of their traditional position in society, can never possess. While Lawrence’s men farm or mine coal, his women think about the differences between their husbands and the vicar. Why does the vicar have power over her husband, as her husband has power over the cattle, the Brangwen women ask themselves. And they conclude that it is “a question of knowledge.”

However accurate Lawrence’s portrait may be, however indebted it is to both the traditional social matrix and the social ferment of the time, it is, nevertheless, not the norm. The stereotyping of men’s and women’s roles from the time of Brontë to Lawrence, and before, has always placed women firmly within the home and within their bodies. Only men are allowed the luxury of knowledge and mental activity, and the power in society that accompanies these. Recall, for example, Hardy’s comments about Tess’s unwanted pregnancy and the “cloud of moral hobgoblins” which Tess fancies surrounds her:

It was [the moral hobgoblins] that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she. Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedge, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence. But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly.⁷

The statement is meant to elicit the reader’s sympathy for Tess, who has worked herself into a troubled psychological state, but it also embodies a general attitude towards women, namely, that by nature, they are meant to be content with their physical role. Child-bearing is natural for women, and the word “natural” carried as much force for Hardy as it does in popular advertising today.

Now what has all this to do with Stella Gibbons and her female protagonist? Neither Gibbons nor Flora Poste is content with a merely physical female role which is in harmony with the natural world. Nor do they merely aspire to a life of mental activity. They have it. Flora descends on her country cousins with good humor and some dismay, and then cleverly orders their lives, in much the same way a novelist orders reality. She is the equal — unlike Lawrence's or Hardy's women — of any man in the novel. And her equality makes the comedy of *Cold Comfort Farm* possible. "Where women are on the road to an equal footing with men," says George Meredith, "there . . . pure comedy flourishes."⁸ He also notes, however, that "comedy is an exhibition of women's battle with men, and that of men with them; and as the two, however divergent, both look on one object, namely, life, the gradual similarity of their impressions must bring them to some resemblance."⁹ Meredith's last remark helps explain the motivation for Gibbons' satire, as well as Gibbons' underlying similarity to the novelists she parodies.

While Flora Poste is in Sussex, she meets an intellectual acquaintance from London — a Mr. Mybug, who has come to the country to write a biography of Branwell Brontë. Mr. Mybug theorizes that Charlotte, Emily and Anne were the drunkards, who passed off their brother's brilliant novels as their own. "No woman could have written *Wuthering Heights*," he tells Flora, "It's male stuff" (p. 102). This anecdote sets up the terms of Stella Gibbons' battle with men. For while women were restricted, in fiction and in reality, to their physical being, they were as little expected to have passions as they were to have ideas. One can insinuate that Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is "male stuff" only because the ego of the author inhabits the pages of that novel as fully as it does most novels written by men — and because until not very long ago, and in Gibbons' time surely, passion in literature was assumed to be the realm of men. Lawrence's women yearn,

and sometimes manage, to assert themselves, not only in the home but in society. Hardy's women, however, generally only yearn. Sue Bridehead is the one exception, and she stands as an example of the disasters that befall intellectual or clever women. In the end, she renounces the mental life and takes refuge in a stereotypical weakness of women: religion. But in *Cold Comfort Farm*, Flora Poste is in command, without malice and without a loss of femininity. Flora is her author's retaliation; she wages Stella Gibbons's comic battle with her male predecessors.

NOTES

- ¹See chapter 21, "Surviving Countrymen," of Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- ²John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 257.
- ³Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), pp. 307-08.
- ⁴Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 85-86. Subsequent references will be included in the text.
- ⁵D. H. Lawrence, ". . . Love Was Once a Little Boy," *Phoenix II* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 452.
- ⁶D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (New York: The Modern Library, 1962), p. 148.
- ⁷Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 72.
- ⁸George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 32.
- ⁹Meredith, p. 15.