

## Chapter One

### THE EARLY NOVELS

In the early novels appear most of the themes which are to concern Astley throughout her career. We see her sensitivity to the cruelties which human beings seem intent on inflicting upon one another, her awareness of social inequalities and her understanding of the predicament of the individual, especially the adolescent, who does not conform to social conventions. Her bent for satire comes into play as she exposes absurdities within authoritarian institutions, particularly in the educational system and in organized religion. Here are self-deluded characters, full of contradictions, all trying to achieve peace of mind, a condition which Astley suggests depends on personal and interpersonal development. The author's early work reveals her sensory response to landscape, her descriptive powers and her ability to project place. Naturally there are flaws in the novels. Her satire is sometimes heavy-handed and superficial and her central characters lack warmth. However, such faults are understandable in the work of a gifted writer who is struggling to establish her technique.

In *Girl With a Monkey* Astley expounds her theme of human cruelty in the account of the civil authorities' oppressive treatment of the protestors who challenge their methods, and, on an individual level, in Elsie's heartless treatment of Harry and Jon. The author affords many examples of the divisiveness caused by the centralist powers. There is the social gap which a superior education establishes between the schoolteacher, Elsie, and the roadworker, Harry, and there are the enmities which arise between educators because of the inflexible nature of the system. Elsie's experience at the public church service indicates the distance that exists between the clergy and the congregation. Again, her conviction that she must marry is shown to be caused by society's sexist attitude which makes a sharp distinction between men and women and which limits the opportunities of women to play an alternative role to that of wife. Harry is the first of Astley's

characters to have a unified consciousness, while with Elsie's self-containment the author begins her investigation into the importance of self-integration and a spiritually-directed self.

Gossip is the instrument of cruelty in *A Descant for Gossips*, while the gossipers' spite is the indicator of society's impaired spiritual values. Astley's first adolescent outsider is Vinny Lalor, an underprivileged girl who is unable to live up to the shallow standards of a materialistic society. The girl's inability to communicate with others contributes to her pathetic end. In this novel institutionalized religion is shown to promote little charity in its practitioners, and again education becomes a means of erecting barriers between people. The compassionate Moller demonstrates the 'androgynous' consciousness but fails to fulfil Astley's suggestion that each individual must become fully involved with life.

*The Well Dressed Explorer* takes up the theme of self-delusion as selfish George Brewster devastates other lives, all the while believing himself to be the worthiest of characters. His behaviour illustrates the author's idea that without integration, self-knowledge and spiritual direction the self becomes a destructive force. His sorties into the various institutionalized religions reveal their divisive nature, and his failure to find peace of mind within Catholicism demonstrates his inability to accept uncertainties, to acknowledge the indefinable, fluid process of existence. In this work Astley gives her definition of the integrated consciousness.

She deals with the dangers of irresponsibility in *The Slow Natives*. In this case she presents irresponsible parents whose permissiveness contributes to the failure of the adolescent, Keith, to achieve self-integration. The adults' boredom is seen to stem from a lack of spiritual direction and from the conditioning of a sexist society which expects women to conform to the role of housekeeper and mother. The novel discloses the divisiveness which excessive authority brings about in religious communities. Through Father Lingard and Miss Trumper the author again stresses the dangers of self-enclosure and the need for interaction of the self with others.

GIRL WITH A MONKEY

The title of Astley's first novel, *Girl With a Monkey*<sup>1</sup> points wryly to the self-delusion of those who believe that they can control events in an unpredictable world. Inhumanity is no stranger to the Queensland city of Townsville where police quell protesting workers with bullets, soldiers use and abandon women and husbands and wives betray one another. Even so, Elsie's exploitation of Harry and Jon stands out as a calculated act of human cruelty.

The author suggests that such cruelty is encouraged by power structures which resolve industrial dissension by force rather than by discussion, and she disputes the morality of an administration which allows union officials to misuse power by prolonging strikes in order to serve their own material interests. She questions, also, an education system which determines issues by the rigid authoritarian word rather than by fluid dialogue, and criticizes religious organizations which, by placing undue emphasis on sins of the flesh, breed guilt and repression.

Because her intellectual capacities are frustrated and her conception of sexuality is distorted, Elsie has small chance of developing an integrated personality in such a disruptive society.

Against such inhumanity Astley can only oppose the vitality, loyalty and forgiving generosity of Harry, who displays an integrated personality and a unified consciousness. Astley's challenge is ineffectual, however. Harry ends up a loser, with his potential for growth unrealized. With the lonely school teacher Elsie Ford, the author embarks on her enquiry into the dangers of solipsism and the psychic damage effected when the personality is unintegrated and destructive.

The plot of *Girl With a Monkey* is concerned with a twenty-two-year-old girl who, courted by the socially-acceptable, vacuous Jon, seeks a diversion in a relationship with a bright but crude

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1. T. Astley, *Girl With a Monkey*, Melbourne, 1977. All page numbers will be incorporated in the text.

roadworker, Harry. He becomes her monkey, the more primitive being who apes her speech and attitudes, and who becomes sincerely committed to her. The tensions of the novel concern Elsie's inability to control the emotional turmoil created when she decides she cannot marry him and secures a transfer to a southern school. As she organizes her affairs on her last day in Townsville<sup>2</sup> she dreads and yet is titillated by the possibility of an encounter with the potentially dangerous Harry. The climax, when he confronts her on the train, is dramatically satisfying, but the *dénouement* is contrived as, weeping, he runs along the platform to throw her a gift through the window.

The flamboyant background of yellow sunlight, blue sea, green palms and scarlet poinsettia throws into wretched relief the drabness of the small-town community, and this sense of urban aridity pervades the novel in which, however, despite the prosaic incidents of the day, there is an atmosphere of imminent menace. Astley's is a violent world and here where heat springs 'like an angry panther', (p. 45) social prejudices and the friction of human exchange are just as threatening.

As part of her campaign to subvert society's inherited certainties the author undermines traditional literary procedures by disrupting the chronological time scheme: the text begins at the end of the affair and the chapters dart back and forth to the months between May and August as Elsie reflects on the evolution of the relationship. The uncertainty of the girl's chance of future fulfilment is implied by the open ending. Astley challenges, also, the idea that the reader must identify with the central character. The reader's sympathy for Elsie is engaged as the story proceeds through her consciousness, but the omniscient narrator subtly undermines this by providing insights into Harry's reactions and by offering ironic asides on her behaviour. This transferral of sympathy to Harry becomes more significant when considered in the light of Astley's

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2. Astley says that this novel is based on her own last day as a teacher in Townsville. See C. Tolchard, 'Thea Astley, Novelist and Teacher', *Walkabout*, June, 1969, pp. 12-14.

statement that when she began to write she felt that only by concentrating on male characters would she be read in a sexist world.<sup>3</sup>

Now she presents Elsie's self as enclosed and rigid, an 'esoteric circle' (p. 49) like the centralized power structure. The girl revels in a morbid state:

... a self-containment that caused her not only to derive pleasure from the processes of her ego but to prefer them to the point of an almost unbalanced preoccupation. (p. 129)

Again undermining certainties the author discourages assessment of her protagonist as she reveals a distorted personality and a nature beset by contradictions. Elsie's sexuality is functioning as she enjoys physical contact with Harry, yet when she sees the sensual Roughley and the 'essential harlot rose within ... she hated herself'. (p. 90) However, made bitter by past rejections she represses her emotions out of fear:

... the resolve ... hardened ... that never again would she allow emotion to reduce her to a spineless receptivity. (p. 45)

Her personality is dominated by her intellect and she judges people by their intellectual accomplishments, becoming impatient with Harry's ignorance and scorning 'the trivia uttered by others'. (p. 49)

Unaware that it is through engagement with others that the self is delineated, Elsie remains a loner. She is alienated from her parents and the narrator throws no light on the ambiguous situation in which, after receiving their greetings telegram, she condemns them as monstrous parents

... who have instructed their child not to bother writing, who have awaited her departure with unconcealed impatience and irritation. (p. 25)

She admits that she needs people, that she must 'stock the [years] following with some company, however bankrupt'. (p. 14) It is natural to fear commitment but such a fear must be resolved. Elsie,

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3. J. Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, Ringwood, 1986, p. 57.

however, in her neurotic state of self-dependence on this last day deliberately cuts all her connections with the townspeople, determined to be an outsider, that there shall be 'no one whose shadow will touch [her] own'. (p. 1)

Elsie lacks purpose, dislikes her job, and the 'very emptiness of the future [gives] a sorrowful pleasure'. (p. 26) So sensitively attuned to both the spiritual and natural worlds that she experiences

... moments of crystalline perception when the flesh, divinely prompted, seems to melt into nothingness, leaving the mind nervously aware, apprehending ... (p. 83)

she nevertheless develops no kindness of spirit in what the narrator calls 'the shallow little valley that was her soul'. (pp. 137-38) Her discordant self becomes a despoiler, irresponsibly exploiting Harry and Jon.

Like the established powers, Elsie is determined to control, to 'play Harry skilfully' (p. 3) and this authoritative trait is stressed by imagery of enclosure, divisiveness and fixity as she is introduced 'in a stifling box of a room with her only possessions ramparted round her', (p. 2) and 'caught static in a complete island of twenty-four hours'. (p. 1) That her self-containment and alienation from others is a disease is suggested by images of decay, the 'necrotic tissue' (p. 5) of her carbuncular leg.

Elsie does not develop a unified consciousness because she represses her spontaneity and associativeness. This is particularly pathetic because she has a capacity for vigorous involvement in life, a potential indicated by images of fluidity as 'often vitality uncurbed sprang freshets in her eyes'. (p. 6) She responds sensitively to music and to poetry which seems to her 'like a swelling wave crescendo of green water', (p. 82) but her inhibitions cut off the flow and she is left in a 'green aquarium'. (p. 1)

It is in the water that she meets Harry who is as comfortable with himself as he is with his environment, his personality as well integrated as the pleasantly harmonious music he plays.

In command of his healthy sexuality, he admits that 'her sex seemed to be the least important thing about her'. (p. 141) He is 'anxious to display emotion' (p. 62) and determined to develop his intellect, while his kindness and tolerance disclose his spirituality. Cultivating his talents, he plans his life with purpose.

In Harry is the seed of the 'androgynous' consciousness with which Astley becomes preoccupied as his aggression and assertiveness are seen to be integrated with a store of dormant sensitivity, his nature a 'a composite of the delicate and the crude'. (p. 31) Harry is linked with images of vigour, fluidity and growth: his earthiness is indicated by his occupation as drain-digger, he meets Elsie in the sea and his final gift to her is, significantly, fruit.

Through Elsie Astley criticizes the power structures which help to shape her. She is caustic about the contradictions within a hierarchical education system in which promotion is all-important to most of the teachers. As well, their teaching is frustrated by an unimaginative syllabus and inflexible time-tables. Consequently,

... the entire process of education became a holocaust to the headmaster, who in turn sacrificed it to the inspectorial system peopled by bizarrely ignorant men ... (p. 42)

She questions the wisdom of cultivating competitive sport to such an extent that it fosters rivalry and aggression and undermines the sense of comradeship. As a result the school becomes a battleground with children 'forming lifelong hatreds over an opposing team's neglect of rules'. (p. 91)

She sees the spiritual sterility of twentieth-century society reflected in the town's philistinism and acquisitiveness. She complains of this to Laura:

'No music, no books, the upper crust some small-time shopkeepers comparing cheque-butts and reading the papers avidly each day hoping to see their friends' downfall.' (p. 103)

In a divisive society social prestige is esteemed, and of the bank-clerk Jon she cynically observes:

... the fact that he had little brain or aptitude for his work seemed to militate not at all against his retaining the position, for in small towns the social standing of one's father and the school one went to were of far greater importance. (p. 14)

Such tainted attitudes are emphasized by images of disintegration as radios wail a 'sickly message' (p. 95) and she hears 'the taxi meter ticking on neurotically'. (p. 23)

The torments of scrupulosity and fear of Confession which cause Elsie to choose her own code of ethics prompt Astley's protest at the inflexibility and detachment of organized religion. The girl is repelled by the cold, unctuous religiosity of the Catholic clergymen at the outdoor assembly and by the stultified response it elicits from the crowd. Astley suggests that the organized church is enclosed and has no fluid interaction with the world. She presents what she sees as an unreal approach to worldly problems in a satirical scene where priests, divided from the people, perform like actors on a stage.

An ironic contradiction pertains when Christian communion and brotherhood is advocated by men who are unable to communicate with the congregation, and this is illustrated by the crackling amplifier which makes the bishop's words unintelligible. The deterioration of the churches' potency as a charitable force for good is underscored by images of debility, the bishop's nervous tic and, in a later scene on the island, the priest's 'sickly asceticism of feature'. (p. 114) Here, as the celebration of the Mass in the dancehall threatens to become jaded ritual, Elsie's musings on 'sweaty boys dancing with their girls' (p. 115) add a human dimension to the rite, implying that the churches' message will prove more effectual when spiritual and physical concerns are integrated.

Astley attacks the sexism of the controlling powers which stunts the maturation of women. Elsie's treatment of Harry owes much to the social *mores* which traditionally inhibit women's career opportunities and define her only alternative role as that of wife:

Lashed on like all members of her sex  
by the warnings of cosmeticians, the couturiers,  
the milliners, the retail stores, all of  
which sold the idea that not to achieve  
marriage was the greatest misfortune that  
could overtake a woman, she knew with  
the desperateness of one now entering her  
twenties that at all costs she must keep  
one man. Which one? (p. 103)

Among her acquaintances there is little evidence of marital felicity. Mrs Buttling sees nothing of her husband but his weekly cheque, Mrs Crozier fritters time in 'a happy martyrdom', (p. 35) and Joe Seaniger and his wife go their separate adulterous ways.

Elsie is aware of Harry's worth. She assures Laura:

'He's only a little more illiterate  
than the average primary school  
headmaster ... and with a great deal  
more humour and simplicity and anxiety  
to please.' (p. 103)

Her claim to non-conformity is a delusion. Pressured into making a choice she submits to the convention which determines her worth by her correlation with a man. She rejects Harry, keeps a tenuous hold on the socially superior Jon and flees from the conflict she is unable to control.

The author presents her characters impressionistically. She develops Elsie's inner life to some extent but without the imaginative insight needed to make her come alive, so that the girl distances the reader as thoroughly as she distances herself from life. Still, as a symbol of the prevailing attitude of self-interest and of intellectual values divorced from loving-kindness Elsie is a successful creation.

Harry is well-drawn, his ambivalent feelings toward Elsie credibly portrayed. His nice perception of decorum and his mature stance regarding the girl's sexuality contrast with Joe's promiscuity, and with his unexplored depths he is a foil for the unimaginative Jon.

In this novel Astley's style is already profusely metaphorical and allusive. Lyrical passages reveal her rapport with the natural world while her metaphors and similes add energy and clarity. The girl's cheerless detachment is accentuated by the lively communication of the Chinese women, 'their words bright hoops of sound bucketing and rolling in the lazy air', (p. 78) and bureaucratic excesses are seen as the imposition they are:

... the quarantine station on the cape  
spilt bungalows, outhouses and offices  
in profusion down the headland slope,  
like an untidy vine unpruned by  
government economies, flourishing  
recklessly. (p. 47)

Here are the religious and musical terminologies which are to become part of her trademark, as the 'drummer bent in votive gesture' (p. 115) and Elsie's words 'ceased their soft *arpeggio*'. (p. 61) The text reverberates with keyboard and orchestral music, and with fragments of songs which establish the era. Here, too, she begins to animate objects after the manner of Patrick White as 'a saxophone trapped in a private radio howled pitifully'. (p. 2)<sup>4</sup>

Forceful short sentences add tension: as Elsie's departure time approaches the words 'It was just seven forty-seven' (p. 135) suggest a ticking clock. However, there are some convoluted passages which jar:

She rebuffed him gently, preferring  
fantastic, impossible dreaming to  
having his shortcomings as spiritual  
lover or future hotelier brought home  
to her by being forced to relinquish  
what she was doing, and give him her  
whole attention instead of this  
simulacrum. (p. 50)

Astley has not yet mastered dialogue and although Harry's speech rhythms are authentically natural, Elsie's pronouncements are stilted and novelettish. Explaining her departure to Mrs Crozier she says:

'... now I have quite consciously  
created a narrow spiritual pit for  
him to dig desperately until he has

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4. See also L. Clancy, 'The Fiction of Thea Astley', *Meridian*, May, 1986, 5(1) pp. 43-52.

sweated out all his feeling for me.  
I did it cruelly, I suppose, and  
coldly certainly. And therefore  
I'm going.' (p. 40)

The author is daringly experimental with language and the bow toward Gerard Manley Hopkins, suggested by her use of 'windhover', (p. 115) indicates his influence. This is seen particularly in her choice of hyphenated words, such as 'frond-framed' (p. 110) and 'new-moist', (p. 116) which add such a restless edge to the prose.

Perhaps Astley is mirroring style with her protagonist's personality, but this novel has an inappropriate elevation which irritates. The Latin and French quotations are pretentious and the allusions are gratuitous. Also, despite her penetrating perception of society she does not probe issues deeply. Consequently her satire is predictable in that she dismisses contemptuously all of the town's middle-class citizens as superficial and materialistic, thus strengthening common prejudices instead of challenging them. Indeed, the tolerance and compassion she advocates are noticeably absent from this work, while the wit and black comedy which enliven her later fiction have not yet emerged.

*Girl With a Monkey* is sensitively written and the scenes which feature Elsie and Harry have a vitality which does much to offset its bleak tone. Yet it is not an emotionally moving novel. The characters are not fascinating enough to foster reader identification and Astley does nothing to encourage it with her descriptions, which often remind us of Patrick White, of their unprepossessing persons. Elsie's dress is described as being stale. Harry is flabby, the description of his face and expression curiously at odds with his generous nature, his

... nose coarse, wide-nostrilled  
above a thick mouth with projecting  
lower lip and eyes small, grey, and  
politely malicious. (p. 118)

However, the human capacity to inflict pain is amply demonstrated by Elsie's treatment of Harry, behaviour influenced by the conventions of the established powers which countenance the social stratification

caused by education. Harry accepts her as she is, but she will not accept him, and she fails to see that they may achieve happiness through the integration of their different qualities. Directed not by her spiritual but by her intellectual dimension, she is the embodiment of the lovelessness which accompanies self-absorption and the refusal to risk oneself emotionally in order to communicate with others, to establish 'a normal relationship - that of one human being to another'. (p. 81)

In her next novel the scope of human cruelty broadens as a group of townspeople and school children vindictively destroy the reputations of three people.

### A DESCANT FOR GOSSIPS

Unlike Elsie Ford who deliberately turns inward to the self, Vinny Lalor, the adolescent protagonist of *A Descant for Gossips*,<sup>1</sup> is an unwilling outsider who longs to interact with her peers. Astley's theme of human cruelty takes the form of scandalmongering in this novel as, in another small town, the gossiping members of an *élitist* group malign the characters of two school teachers, Robert Moller and Helen Striebel. At the same time the school children, indoctrinated by their elders' narrow-minded values, convince the sexually ignorant Vinny that she is pregnant, with the result that, terrified of the disgrace which will be her lot in this society, she commits suicide.

The *élitist* circle is composed of both men and women. These are women conditioned by the centralist powers to cultivate their sense of dependence and to evaluate their own worth by their husbands' professional standing. The signifier of affluence is indolence and this breeds boredom and a taste for calumny.

Astley's challenge to the structures of control takes the form of the refusal of Vinny and the teachers to bow to the dictates of the dominating group. Vinny fights the school children who conduct a smear campaign against the teachers; because of a consciousness which might well be seen as 'androgynous', Moller rejects the group's aggressive, competitive values and Helen refuses to join in its snobbish social activities.

Astley chooses a protagonist who is at an age when the personality is developing and guidance is most needed. She demonstrates the impossibility of Vinny's achieving self-knowledge or personality integration when she is kept in sexual ignorance, not only by her overworked mother but by the educational authorities and by publishing institutions which delete crucial information from so-called 'medical' books. Plain and shabby, she is excluded from the fellowship of her peers who are moulded by a system which places undue value on external appearances and possessions.

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1. T. Astley, *A Descant for Gossips*, St Lucia, 1983, All page numbers will be incorporated in the text.

Against the malice of the *élitist* group the author opposes the spiritually-directed love and friendship which link the girl and the teachers. Yet, in this case, because of flaws in the natures of those who oppose it, the challenge to small town solidarity is seen to fail.

This grim novel is a longer, more venturesome work in which again Astley writes of the school-teaching life she knows. The Queensland setting broadens to incorporate Brisbane settings with Gungee,<sup>2</sup> the centre of a summer's psychic violence. The perspective widens too as the omniscient narrator presents a double-stranded story through the consciousness of not one, but three, outsiders. The title suggests that by their behaviour the central characters render a descant for the principal voice of conformist values in the township.

There is no uncertainty regarding the author's stance as, continuing her examination of the causes of human cruelty and the absence of charity, she condemns the destructive power of scandalmongers. As well as pursuing her central theme, Astley considers here the debilitating effects of loneliness, the vulnerability of human beings to chance, and the eroding effects of transience on human emotions.

Astley's tone is caustic and her mode ironic as events escalate to the central irony, the destruction of Vinny in circumstances generated by the only friendly overtures ever afforded her. Fourteen-year-old Vinny Lalor is the first of Astley's troubled adolescents, and the novel follows events as the middle-aged school teachers, the widowed Helen Striebel and Robert Moller, who has a terminally ill wife, recognize the girl's sensitivity and loneliness and take her for a holiday week-end to Brisbane. Here the grateful Vinny buys a cheap gift for her idol, Helen. Later at a school dance Moller presses Vinny's classmate Tommy Peters into dancing with her, and delightedly she responds to his interest and goodnight kiss. Sexually ignorant, she believes she is pregnant when Tommy's bragging leads to her persecution by the school children. Hounded toward breakdown the girl turns to Helen for help, but the teacher, not understanding her problem and distraught that public exposure of her affair with Moller has instigated her transfer from the town, fails her. Chance is an element of what Astley sees as the mystery and fluidity of existence, and now chance leads to Helen's premature departure. Abandoned like her gift, Vinny kills herself.

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2. The fictional Gungee is patterned on Pomona where Astley taught for a year. See G. Kinross Smith, 'Thea Astley', *Kunapipi*, 4/1, 1982, pp. 20-37.

Told chronologically, Vinny's story develops logically from Helen's 'setting up the first piece in a dangerous montage'. (p. 23) Yet there is an imbalance in the novel due to a mishandling of the sub-plot in that although the fates of the three central characters are interdependent, the teachers' love-story is disruptive and it becomes an effort to recall Vinny's progression. This seems not so much a deliberately subversive disruption by the author as her inability to establish Vinny as the dominating character. Although the girl's life ends melodramatically, the teachers' fate is left open-ended as, like Elsie, Helen boards a train out of town, leaving problems unsolved.

Astley treats her central characters sympathetically and they are more keenly observed and more interesting than those of her first novel. She evokes realistically the hurts and perplexities of the alienated adolescent. Just as centralist governments marginalize minority groups, so the central group of her peers marginalizes Vinny. She craves conformity, longing to share herself through integration with others, and her wretchedness is due to her being forced unwillingly into rigid enclosure:

... she closed her personality into its  
narrow little room where year after  
friendless year it learnt to perfect  
the art of self-containment. (p. 4)

Yet Astley suggests that despite the necessity for communication with others there is also the need to protect the essential 'I', and Vinny's need is made evident when Tommy, conditioned by society to repress his tenderness, betrays her trust by boasting of his conquest:

It was the raping of privacy, the shattering  
of personal stillness into lacinated  
fragments of the intruded self that shocked  
Vinny most. (p. 209)

Rejected by her school fellows, she refuses the consolation of family integration, cynically dismissing the real, if undiscerning, interest of family members as obligatory kindness. After the disastrous party 'she felt cut off from Royce almost entirely and certainly from her mother'. (p. 51) It is this absence of communication, caused in part by the division between generations, which compounds her sexual ignorance and her despair: 'It was not

being able to discuss it that made it so dreadful'. (p. 223)

Her chance of achieving self-integration is doomed because her personality is already distorted by the fear of sexuality which she displays in her terrified reaction to the adolescent animality at the pool. It is, however, her disproportionate emotionalism which undoes her. When Helen's interest boosts the self-esteem which continual rejection has diminished, and when Tommy accepts her as she is, she is at last able to accept and respect herself. However, as she plays acolyte to Helen's goddess the teacher sees the girl's emotional intensity as potentially dangerous. It is. Protecting Helen and Moller from the school children's spite, Vinny, in a passionate rage, confronts her persecutors with their own indiscretions, thereby inviting reprisal. Isolation and anguish at what she sees as her betrayal by Tommy and Helen present to her a world in which she is powerless. Feeling no bond with a God who seems to favour her social betters, she finds no spiritual comfort. So the pressures build up to fragment her psyche and incite the self-destruction which she sees as her revenge on that world.

Her fellow-victim, Moller, is a likeable character and a significant one in that he has an integrated consciousness which alienates him from Gungee's *élite*, particularly from the men who resent those who refuse to conform to the male stereotype. Moller is strong and assertive, yet they

... could never forgive ... his amusement  
at their monetary competitiveness, his  
preference for music and books to racing  
and football. (p. 101)

A sensual man, he is drawn through loneliness to Helen, and finds physical fulfilment with her. He is emotionally volatile, moved to tears by their rapport, and his teaching indicates that the intellectual facet of his personality is well-developed. He shows responsible concern for his wife and he is a communicator, even 'bothers to talk trivia with Findlay', (p. 80) while his spiritually-directed compassion toward all is obvious. Moller's personality, then, would seem to be well-integrated, yet he is 'unquiet'. (p. 129)

This is apparently due to his inability to accept the uncertainties of existence, his need to be in control of his life, and his fear of transience. Astley stresses the need for involvement with life but Moller is not prepared to risk himself in communion with another. Both teachers display this hesitance:

... behind this surface confidence was a repressed fear of consequences of the act, ... of the ultimate feeling each would take away from the relationship if it ended. (p. 167)

Discussing their relationship he tells Helen, 'There's the mind to learn and the emotions', (p. 127) then he laments the limitations of time, daunted by the thought of what he might not achieve. This unwillingness to become fully involved in life is evident in his ambivalent reaction to Helen's unhesitating compliance in his plan for a weekend together, so that he questions his own sincerity in asking her,

... wondering if he were really the sort of person who hated ever crossing his mountains. (p. 107)

Helen sees his attitude toward their affair as neurotic, yet both teachers display a fatalistic lassitude, a willingness to be victims. It is ironic that it is his commitment to his wife which is made irrelevant by time: she will die in three months.

Moller is not a sharply defined character. He despises the pretentious citizens of Gungee yet he accepts their social invitations, and sensitive as he is, he chooses a sleazy hotel lounge in which to discuss with Helen their decision to become lovers. Here it is difficult to know whether Astley is once again subverting certainties by displaying contradictions, or whether she is applying a too heavily contriving hand to the action.

Moller's lover, Helen, is a vital character with verve enough to rebuff the hypocritical Talbots. She is considered an outsider because, like Moller, she refuses to accept the traditional gender role, and has 'a self-sufficiency that precluded the need to swap knitting patterns and sponge recipes'. (p. 19) She uses her talents as a conscientious teacher and Vinny attests to her sense of responsibility: 'She always used to do what she said'. (p. 254)

Although she avoids the gossipers she communicates comfortably with the unassuming workers in the town. She discloses an integrated self. Her intellect is cultivated, and the physical satisfaction she achieves with Moller revitalizes her emotions. Her charity toward Vinny indicates her spiritual kindness. However, the hostile public reaction to her love affair shatters her, and her personality disintegrates into emotional turmoil and a hopelessness of the spirit. In this state her sensitivity to Vinny's troubles is blunted, communication is suspended, and she becomes for the girl a destructive force. Astley's account of Helen's psychic disintegration, however, is unsound and unacceptable and the teacher's betrayal of the girl is entirely uncharacteristic. Having thoughtfully arranged for Moller to give Vinny the sex education book, it is incredible that, recognizing the significance of the girl's gift as she does, she would discard it in her hotel room.

Astley attacks the social *élite*, representing as it does the centralized power system, condemning its divisiveness as a promulgator of cruelty. Moller draws up 'a whole feudal socio-economic system for Gungee' (p. 73) where the *élitist* group is

... very conscious of the social gap ...  
 always fearful of some dreadful  
 familiarity following upon a lowering  
 of the barrier. (p. 28)

Astley is acutely observant of the manners of this society in which the members of the ruling clique delude themselves with an assumption of superiority. Parents pass on the worship of material things to their children whose contempt for Vinny's shabbiness helps warp her personality, generating a 'universal spleen [which] engaged her whole being with bitterness'. (p. 2) In undermining this social *status quo* the author reveals the underside of the self-righteous *élite* whose duplicity, racism and adultery is concealed behind masks of respectability.

Indicating her contempt for this group the author merely limns in these characters as stereotypes who display various features of inhumanity. It is interesting to observe here that she defends

her use of the 'oversketch' as 'not only permissible but often necessary'.<sup>3</sup> Obviously the use of stereotypes suits her policy of subverting certainties, since caricature as a process of intentional exaggeration does invite the deconstruction of methods of representation.<sup>4</sup>

Astley's satire, however, is far too censorious. Perhaps as a comparatively new writer she is uncertain of her strengths as a satirist and so uses a bludgeon rather than a rapier. Her values are humane, but the reader must question satire which verges on scorn and which lacks depth because, again, she shows no compassion for the misguided. Eventually she becomes misanthropic as she berates the good-natured dance patrons, finding even 'their pleasure offensive'. (p.186). She extends this vitriolic satire to the drinkers in the Brisbane hotel lounge which becomes a surrealistic, cacophonous hell for despoilers:

And all the time, out here in the large  
smoke-hung room, the bawdy utterance  
burst among the red faces pressed  
together and flung them apart with the  
bomb of obscenity into explosions of  
laughter. Quiet and systematic  
character-felling went on at tables  
for two, which stood among the jig-  
sawed pieces of personality like  
fortresses of virtue, stone-hurling  
turrets. (p. 77)

Again, as she did in *Girl With a Monkey*, she criticizes the way in which education is used to evaluate worth and create divisions. Helen asks the Talbots,

'Why keep your tight little  
university minds in a tight,  
sacred little university circle?' (p. 164)

The teachers enclose themselves in their own 'desperate circle of self-concentration', (p. 14) a circle divided by its own petty hates, and have minimal communication with the townspeople. Their discontent is largely due to a restrictive and authoritarian system which, in the case of Helen and Moller, exercises its power to control and divide lives.

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3. T. Astley, 'Writing in North Queensland', *LINQ*, Vol.9, No. 1, 1981, p.7.  
4. B. Edwards, 'Tricks of the Imagination: Australian Fiction of the 1980s', in *Landfall*, XXXIX, No. 2, pp. 213-23.

Astley links this hierarchical institution with another as 'the lesson ... passed slowly as a church service', (p. 223) and again she demonstrates that charity within organized religion is deteriorating. Moller watches

... the rival streams on a Sunday flowing implacably towards their version of Christ revealed one day in seven, leaving six for primitive tribal taboos and ostracisms, for scandalizing and detraction, for the too rare act of charitable restraint. (p. 73)

Astley uses Christian imagery ironically to throw into relief the malice of the Gungee *élite*. Their party gathering assumes the overtones of a Black Mass, the desecrated hosts the sandwiches like

... communion breads ... like tribal tokens of an infinite ill-will towards others outside the group. The crowd blessed themselves and ate the flesh of their victims with such overt smacking of scandalous lips it was really intolerable. (p. 95)

Vinny becomes aware of women's position in the centralized power system:

At one place after another the same scene repeated itself ... a woman shaking a mop ... and a man lounging back in his chair and shouting an order. (p. 21)

Her father is the first of the absent husbands and fathers found throughout Astley's fiction and his defection is seen as responsible for Mrs. Lalor's limitations, her personality warped by emotional and economic deprivation, her drudgery corroding her understanding of Vinny's problems. The author's view of married life remains bleak. In Gungee gossip is the principal dialogue in marriages which are arenas for manipulation and exploitation by both husbands and wives, rather than loving partnerships.

In this work Astley's style, although poetic and allusive, is much more relaxed. Her dialogue is still awkward: Moller is occasionally witty, 'We have been thrown to the Christians', (p. 158) but often disconcertingly pompous, 'How it would salivate over this conversation!' (p. 42) She depicts violence in a series of

stabbing phrases:

He jabbed the air with his cigarette and,  
about to torture Moller, burnt the flank  
of the blue afternoon ... (p. 96)

and fluidly evokes serenity:

... they investigated the possibilities of  
silence together and on its quiet plains  
they mustered the flocks of their  
gentleness. (p. 42)

Again Astley's knowledge of music is called into play as classical and contemporary melodies form a musical background to the action. She uses musical imagery effectively, especially in the brilliant penultimate chapter where the movement from one gossiping couple to another can be seen as 'a set of symphonic variations on the one delicious theme'. (p. 135) She shows that music's integrating powers can be subverted as the Talbots use it not as a barrier-breaking art-form but 'as a dividing line between themselves and the hicks'. (p. 26) Ironically, when Helen, on discovering this, no longer discusses music with them, she, too, negates its value as a means of communication.<sup>5</sup> Even more ironically, Astley herself uses music as an evaluator of character, endorsing music lovers like Helen and Moller and associating unendorsed characters with inferior musical tastes.

Like music, language can be used destructively. Vinny discovers that words are weapons, and certainly in Gungee they assume sinister roles as the Talbots and the Rankins flagellate their victims with their careful grammar. Helen says of Alec's contention that precise speech bestows authority:

'It's a new form of pretentiousness  
that can hide all sorts of mental  
bankruptcy. The bray.' (p. 165)

The author handles literary allusions with more facility here. Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'carrion comfort' (p. 246) echoes the protagonists' despair, while the allusion to Brennan's 'O desolate eves' (p. 7) is particularly apt in that he gave voice to a disintegrating consciousness at a time when the world seemed healthily stable.

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5. See J. F. Burrows, 'Writer and Reader', *Southerly*, No. 4, 1963, p.279.

Although Astley has not yet attained maturity as a writer, *A Descant for Gossips* is a novel of consequence, revealing her concern for the freedom, rights and dignity of the individual in society, while in her questioning of the politics of affluence she indicates the contradictions within the dominant ideology. The behaviour of her central characters subverts the prevailing moral values of the established powers by revealing the private hypocrisies of those self-deluded righteous ones who publicly uphold these values.

With the scandalmongers the author emphasizes the evil potential of language used as a weapon of cruelty. The healing power of fellowship and communication is displayed in the loving integration of the teachers and Vinny, while the girl's suicide is evidence of the destructiveness engendered when the unintegrated self becomes enclosed and divided from others. The charity of Moller who exercises both his assertive and caring qualities accentuates the deficiencies of the clique members, both male and female, in whom these characteristics are not integrated. Yet Astley's idea that each human being must become fully involved in life is borne out by the depleted lives of Helen and Moller who refuse to risk themselves in full committal to each other. In that it offers no solutions to the problems it confronts, *A Descant for Gossips* is a troubling and pessimistic work.

Astley leaves the world of schoolteaching for that of journalism in her next work, *The Well Dressed Explorer*. She also shifts her focus from a small town to take in several country, urban and overseas settings.

THE WELL DRESSED EXPLORER

George Brewster, the self-deluded anti-hero of *The Well Dressed Explorer*<sup>1</sup> would never understand Vinny Lalor's problem of low self-esteem. Astley charts a new vision of the self through this protagonist who demonstrates the cruelty and destruction wrought by one who is not only careless of the welfare of others but who deludes himself with the conviction that he is an excellent fellow. At the same time George's conversion to Catholicism allows Astley to continue in more depth the investigation of Catholic *mores* which she began in *Girl With a Monkey*.

Now she challenges unprincipled politicians and powerful newspaper owners, those members of the controlling group who manipulate facts and influence the public in order to advance their own interests. This is, once again, a world which is antagonistic to the development of the integrated self.

Against the self-interest which permeates the novel Astley is able to oppose only the selflessness which Reardon displays in his compassionate treatment of Nancy, his erring wife. George's wife, Alice, is forgiving, but in its excessiveness her toleration is shown to be foolish and destructive. Here also, in the character of Mrs Timbrell-West, Astley sets down what must be seen as her blueprint for the 'androgynous' consciousness.

In order to develop these themes she turns her spotlight on one central figure, George Brewster, the perfunctory explorer who surveys life without ever throwing off coat and tie for long enough to make discoveries, or to become thoroughly involved in it. 'What will You do, God, when I die?' asks Rilke in the epigraph, a question worthy of this consummate egotist.

Now the wit which is one of the author's chief strengths emerges as she records one life, introducing George at thirteen and ending the novel with his death at fifty-seven. The story traces chronologically

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1. T. Astley, *The Well Dressed Explorer*, Melbourne, 1977. All page numbers are incorporated in the text.

his adolescent love-affair with Nita,<sup>2</sup> his career as a philandering journalist, his marriage to Alice and his discovery of Catholicism. Strangely attractive to women, George cannot comprehend his selfishness or the psychological disintegration he inflicts during his sorties into the emotional lives of others, and it is not until his final hours that he fathoms to some extent the depths of his egotism.

Astley's emerging interest in the past and in social concerns was evident in *A Descant for Gossips* when Helen recalled Gympie's goldmining days and Andrew Petrie's dray-run to Brisbane, and when Ruth made a disparaging remark about a 'blackfellow'. Now her social background widens to include two world wars, Theodore's financial machinations in Queensland, the Melbourne Centenary celebrations of 1934 and the stirrings of the Beat Generation. George ranges from the fictitious town of Condamine<sup>3</sup> in Queensland to Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne in Australia, and in Europe he trips from Sussex to London and Paris. Astley, recalling the wonder of electric light, crystal sets and politicians who place empire first, accurately captures time and place in an atmosphere far less menacing than that of her preceding novels.

She conveys her ambivalent stance toward George through an omniscient narrator whose sardonic comments distance him from the reader and influence evaluation of his character. This acerbity is tempered by a grudgingly amused tolerance which moderates the satire. Tolerance deepens into pity and reluctant admiration as, it seems, the narrator recognizes the human lot in the plight and optimism of the aging George.

In *A Descant for Gossips* the outcast Vinny succeeds in engaging the reader's sympathy, but it is difficult to remain patient with the high-living George who is outstanding only in his selfish immaturity. Astley analyses him so carefully, however, because he is the antithesis of all her notions of personal integration.

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2. This affair has its germ in Astley's short story, 'Cubby', which appeared in *Coast to Coast*, 1959/60, pp. 6-11.
  3. Condamine is modelled on Warwick, the small town to which Astley's school was evacuated in 1942. See Kinross Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

Candid enough about his bodily defects, he is oblivious to his psychical faults. Yet, whether subconsciously or not he is determined to keep his inner self hidden. Having discovered early the advantages of role-playing, he becomes ever more adept, projecting himself as a 'desperate adventurer', (p. 34) a 'Don Juan', (p. 179) until he is a master of self-delusion who rationalizes his misdeeds and continually misinterprets and over-rates his significance in relationships. Irresponsible and insensitive, he remains forever adolescent.

He has many male acquaintances, yet never establishes satisfying associations:

Perhaps, he reflected, he would never hit it off with his own sex. Nor, frankly, did it seem to be an ability worth working at. (p. 43)

Even in his marriage he is concerned primarily with self-gratification, and his unfaithfulness is prompted by his constant demand for new interests, affairs which are frustrating and shallow. In his dying moments he becomes aware of his alienation from others as he dreams that he is enclosed in lemon light by blue glass walls, which, in his last second, melt away and let him through to Alice.

Astley's fiction suggests that one aspect of self-integration is the development of the individual's talents. George dissipates his talents. He has no driving purpose and remains tentative, 'a fearful man'. (p. 130) Exploring the byways of journalism he realizes that

... his craving to achieve a work of some permanence was being dissipated in gaudy utterances no one would remember. (p. 59)

His personality is maladjusted and dominated by his emotions. For George, women are the embodiment of romantic ideas, Nita the wonder of childhood, Alice a secondhand Nita and Nancy the heroine of his unwritten novel. With no spiritual kindness he is a destructive force and ruthless with his victims, leaving Enid 'stooped against pain', (p. 36) while Sadie's frustration haunts her for years. His final vicious verbal thrust annihilates Marie. He leaves Nancy with 'frantic gaping wounds of pride and self-esteem', (p. 168) and brutally cuts off Rachel. He delivers Alice a pitiless, unnecessary blow with his confession of adultery.

Why do these women need George? It is a fault of the novel that Astley never establishes the power with which he attracts and holds them. As Hilbery sees it, 'Any intelligent sort of female must find him an excruciating bore'. (p. 165) Despite a few persuasive ways his magnetism invites scepticism. Propinquity generates Nita's infatuation, but she is a popular girl and not given to loyalty, so that her determination to marry him is implausible. Marie's original interest is credible, the determination of a plain woman to attract a philanderer, less so her susceptibility to the 'creeping disease called love'. (p. 129) Alice is a local belle who surely does not need George to take her away from the farm, and he never evinces the qualities which would account for 'the idolatry which endured, augmenting itself', (p. 98) for the rest of her life.

When Nita abandons him George's emotionalism, casting about for objectives, alights on Catholicism, and he begins his 'journeys into spirituality'. (p. 75) His introduction to the spiritual mystique of Sydney's St. Mary's Cathedral overwhelms him, and now 'clerical collars thrilled him almost as much as plunging necklines'. (p. 105) George is always 'haring after intellectuality rather than spirituality', (p. 23) and now he decides that he must have an intellectual vindication of Catholicism. He does not achieve it. His God is an emotional projection of his need for certainty, but unable to recognize the value of honest religious doubt, he cannot accept the mystery and uncertainty of religious faith. His Catholicism becomes yet another role to play and a convenient excuse for hard-hearted abandonments. Eventually God eludes him and his religious life disintegrates into *ennui* and despair. Religious imagery captures the hollow nature and empty ritualism of his kind of Catholicism as he hypocritically entertains the Reardons, contriving their attendance at 'the *missa solemnis* of the suburbs - Sunday dinner'. (p. 157)

George's insubstantiality reflects the instability of modern society. Astley probes its causes. In the microcosmic world of the novel, George attends a political meeting at Stanthorpe where, conditioned by the established powers to settle differences with aggression, the members of rival parties abandon discussion and brawl in the street. In the larger world she demonstrates the absurdity of this procedure by citing 'the agonies of ... hundreds of thousands of homeless Europeans' (p. 192) during World War Two.

The centralist power system divides, and in Condamine there are divisions between the landed gentry and the workers, while self-interest precludes any sense of communal responsibility. As the sub-editor says,

'This is a country where every man has an economic obligation to look out for himself.' (p. 47)

George's lifelong selfishness and ability to rationalize owe much to his experience on newspapers whose *élitist* owners are strangers to idealism and demand their reporters' political loyalty in exchange for economic security. This materialistic society seems a logical outcome for Australia, given the methods used by her founding fathers. Of the Melbourne Centenary celebrations the narrator remarks wickedly:

School children received a medal on a patriotic ribbon. The medal depicted Batman and Fawcner defrauding the natives in a pleasantly social way. As if to perpetuate this, retailers all over Melbourne carried on similar defraudation. (p. 110)

We would expect that religion would provide a powerful and positive integrating force in the personality of George and in the society itself. However Astley, in her examination of institutionalized religion, shows what she sees as its ineffectuality and hypocrisy. Interestingly, to illustrate the opposition between rigid enclosure and fluid integration in the religious world, the author contrasts two Catholic priests. The ascetic Father Beckett controls his emotions and approaches 'his statements, his friendships, even his God circumspectly', (p. 250) and visiting George on the night before his death the priest offers only faltering platitudes. Astley associates him with images of debility:

Thin strands of yellowish grey hair clung to his skull and drooped down his weary forehead. (p. 82)

On the other hand Father O'Neil displays spontaneity and associativeness:

He liked people, drunk or sober, discovering manifestations of the godhead in sinner or saint. (p. 121)

He is linked with images of vigour:

A crop of wiry hair sprang up from O'Neil's sloping skull. He was ... powerfully built with wrestler's shoulders. (p. 122)

Within organized religion congregations are divided, and in their search for God the Brewsters suffer many disappointments:

But it was not ... disappointment with the Divine. Usually some trifling difference with a minister, a question of parochial politics ... and a violent, hateful, losing battle against class consciousness and snobberies rounded them up and set them seeking lusher pastures. (p. 11)

Astley presents the group which they eventually join, 'God's Travellers', as an example of true Christianity. These are

... simple people of an exhilarating practicality in their goodness; they gave in preference to receiving ... (p.23)

Not so Christian is the treatment of women in this society. In the newspaper world women's opinions are not considered, and George believes his comment about Marie, 'She's a brilliant woman. Mind like a man', (p. 147) is complimentary. Marie is bitter about 'women's work':

'We all know that the truly feminine woman finds only joy in those repetitive back-breaking chores. They fulfil her. You men have been telling us that for centuries and so it must be right.' (p. 123)

When Alice tends the drunken George the narrator's dry remark is all too true of the era:

When male pride is reduced to frail sickly flesh, the female senses her only moment of equation, or power. (p. 102)

This sense of self-subjugation is pervasive, and even the tough Marie, determined as she is to dismantle sexist barriers, invites humiliation from George and from the literary editor with his impersonal sexual demands. It is left to the shy Miss Trumper, who is to re-appear with far less independence in *The Slow Natives*, to refuse to shore up the masculinity of George and the other reporters. Shared victimization does not guarantee support as Mrs Duckworth's contempt for Alice indicates. However, Astley is aware of women's capacity for exploitation

and hypocrisy and turns a satirical eye on Mrs Duckworth, Nita and the society hostess Hope who exudes 'the professional warmth that is nothing but coldness'. (p. 148) Nevertheless, always aware of the difficulties of perception, the author delights in exposing the underside of situations. Here she executes a subtle deconstruction of 'masculine' control, demonstrating that women are just as capable of wielding power. George's mother 'gave pithy directives' which he 'obeyed as smartly as a soldier'. (p. 23) He leaps like a fish on the line Nita holds. His daughter, Jeannie, curtails his extra-marital operations and rejects his authority entirely, and Alice is in control, totally and with relish, of the strange scene in which the jealous George questions her about Santry. In the same way Sally, erstwhile passive victim of her husband's sadism, becomes the aggressor as she literally crushes George's face under her foot when he rebuffs her sexual overtures.

Conditioned to regard girls as 'stupid', (p. 15) he settles happily into his role of paterfamilias at home and as a senior executive in the competitive institution of newspaper publishing. Astley presents George's consciousness as the anti-deal, the antithesis of what she is proposing as the integrated consciousness which can stand out against the destructive society which she depicts in all her novels.

A significant description of the desirable 'androgynous' consciousness comes, ironically, from George's description of Mrs Timbrell-West, the first time in the novels that this is so clearly spelt out:

'She was self-reliant ... She had split with her husband early in life, and he contributed nothing. She battled for herself and her children, and gave them a splendid education. Her hospitality was generous to a fault ... She ... married again, is very happy and remarkably successful in a social sense. She could cope with any situation - or almost any. Two or three occasions aside ... she was always kind and helpful ... (p. 212)

Mrs Timbrell-West is an elusive, mysterious figure who remains almost entirely outside the action, and one wonders why Astley creates her at

all unless it is to symbolize the unified consciousness.

No other character exhibits any vestige of this ideal consciousness, although there are ambiguous possibilities in Alice who demonstrates also the impossibility of penetrating another person's inner world. The absence of information regarding her life before she meets George illustrates Astley's concept of existence as indefinable. Alice's past remains mysterious and the reader is left wondering whether the confession of her sexual adventures is merely an imaginative punishment for George or whether Alice of the angelic cream and gold imagery is a wickedly satirical portrait. Again, we are told that Alice is 'well -balanced', (p. 101) so that it is ironic and contradictory that, in this case, her integrated personality becomes a destructive force:

Alice's love for George was a kind  
of insanity ... for in a way that  
very toleration ruined him. (p. 212)

Astley uses a greater variety of characters in this novel than in her earlier works, and these not only provide a credible social context but, with their contrasting and parallel traits, further define George's limitations. Of the assorted range of reporters Hilbery is the most fully developed as a perceptive assessor of George's motives, and his well-determined moral code provides a foil for George's irresponsibility. Peter Reardon in his forgiving concern for Nancy is as selfless as George is self-absorbed, while the bullying Duckworth projects another form of selfishness, cold-blooded and disinterested:

... he ... had acquired ... the dispassionate  
approach to self, the selfishness that  
investigates without an emotional flicker  
the brand of a tobacco, the label of a  
wine, the body of a woman, betraying no  
subjectivity at all. (p. 95)

One of an unlikeable lot of female characters, Nita exudes a carnal warmth, but her lack of worthy features detracts from the

characterization. Sadie Klein makes her first appearance as the male-dependent female. More complex is the shrewd and salty Marie who achieves a paradoxical vitality in the positive nature of her cold realism and its effect on George. Many other characters represent those met incidentally in the course of a lifetime. Even so, the introduction of Nancy's lost child as George's death-bed nurse strains the bounds of chance and adds a touch of awesome improbability.

Astley's satire is less scornful here yet often patronizing. The small-town cultural groups and Sydney party-goers who talk throughout the Bach are disdainfully dismissed, while the bogus intelligentsia really arouses her ire:

There were broadcasting personalities whose empty skulls made wonderfully resonant sound-boxes for their fruity voices ... Booming documentarians were well under way, holding out to each other trays of stale ideas and munching loudly. (p. 239)

Her style is over-mannered but confident, with only a rare lapse into self-consciousness. If the irony verges sometimes on flippancy, this is in keeping with George's glibness and throws into sharper relief his emotionalism and earnest self-interest. The vigorous prose is both informal and poetical and is developing even more that agitation which becomes a distinctive feature of much of her later work.

The dialogue, which ranges from earthy colloquialisms to the banalities of the pseudo-art-critic, is completely convincing and is well-balanced with descriptive passages. Here dangerous natural energy mirrors the tortures of adolescent infatuation:

Wind bent the tree's agony against unpainted pickets where George ... pulled up abruptly ... Sea writhed in pain along foreshore; wind battered papers and leaves; leaves scratched his bare ankles. (p. 17)

Delicately-painted impressionistic effects succeed, 'Sallow dunes. Dun cliffs. Smearred shapes of windy trees ...', (p. 9) and heavy-handed scene-paintings fail:

Scene - beach scimitar. Time - moment of shells and salt and foreign weeds strung out along rocks ... Backstage left, a boy moves across, his face concealed from the reader, for the moment, as he skims smooth grey pebbles and chucks driftwood into the lemonade-green water. (p. 14)

Astley's figurative language is imaginative and utilitarian. Alert for the salient features of even minor characters, the author has the man-stalker, Mrs Duckworth, line up her quarry as she plies her cigarette holder:

Down its length as if through the sights of a gun, she would fix her aim at a man and concentrate the bullets of both eyes. (p. 94)

A metaphor links architectural unloveliness with the inertia caused by a depressed economy as 'a slattern group of shops lounged around the corner pub'. (p. 61) However, the occasional verbal fumble produces an odd mixture of images. She describes a scene where a crowd crosses a bridge:

The monster was silent for the main part.  
And gradually the city's glimmering flower  
received its swarm of bees. (p. 113)

Again, there is a sense of over-reaching in the depiction of the skirmishing of George and Nancy as 'creating a Bayeux tapestry of secret lusts', (p. 151) and in the application of the majestic direction '*andante maestoso*' (p. 71) to the inglorious duet of Nita and George.

Language is shown to be a manipulative tool with the reporter's maxim:

'The public must be startled into belief - not disbelief and criticism'. (p. 33)

The politician's 'automatic words' (p. 50) make it a mystification and Rush uses language as a weapon against George,

... nailing him to the door with the  
bullets of three dirty stories. (p.239)

Again, language defines personality as Marie's witticisms transcend her plain appearance, and George's ornate style signifies his romanticism, and it loses all magic in foolish exchanges when George is

... battered by gossip, enervated by  
shovelling words into pits of silence  
like a navy. (p. 97)

In *The Well Dressed Explorer* Astley uses the ambiguities and contradictions within her characters to stress both the difficulties of perception and her rejection of complacent certainties. With a small-town political meeting she confronts a centralist government capable of withholding facts which may topple it from power, and she slates the cant of power-hungry politicians. With George's employers, the newspaper owners, she demonstrates not only the perfidy of powerful people who influence public opinion through the selective reportage of facts, but also the powerlessness of women in the journalistic world. With the Brewsters' search for God she exposes the divisiveness within institutionalized religion.

George's treatment of women illustrates the cruelty caused by a selfish man who is blind to the rights of others and whose self-delusion prohibits charity in that he will not assume responsibility for his misdeeds. His cruelty is only one aspect of the prevailing heartlessness which is seen also in Nita's unscrupulous behaviour, in the Duckworths' gossip, in Lippman's venom and in the sadism of Sally and her husband.

Astley implicitly endorses the values of generosity, compassion and self-development by their very absence in the unfulfilled lives of her characters. George's eventual despair demonstrates that self-indulgent egotism is far removed from self-realization because it isolates the self by alienating others. His interaction with other people and his interest in religion are seen to be motivated by self-interest, with the result that he forms no real bonds with either his fellows or his God. His spiritual poverty is exacerbated by his inability to accept uncertainties, his lack of purpose, his fear of becoming truly involved with life and by the shallow emotionalism which distorts his personality and prevents the development of spiritual depth.

Astley's depiction of Mrs Timbrell-West illustrates her conviction that only through the universal development of such an integrated consciousness may human misery be alleviated.

*The Well Dressed Explorer* is a witty, unflinching inspection of a ridiculous and self-deluding human being in a society where self-interest holds sway. However, the cerebral nature of the work creates a distancing effect which makes it difficult to engage fully with the characters or to care deeply about their lot, so that, for all its exposition of sensuality, the novel lacks warmth.

Next, in *The Slow Natives*, Astley takes a satirical look at the cruelty generated by the betrayals of bored suburbanites, by the absence of authority within the family and by the inflexible discipline within religious institutions.

THE SLOW NATIVES

For all George Brewster's fascination with religion his spiritual dimension is sadly undeveloped, and now with *The Slow Natives*<sup>1</sup> Astley looks at other lives which have lost direction in a society which has lost God.

She challenges the established powers condonation of a permissive society in which parental authority is undermined, proposing that although the domination of the young by their parents is not a good in itself authority used intelligently is necessary in the adolescent's progression to adulthood and self-integration. In investigating degrees of authority she challenges, also, those hierarchical institutions in which the pursuit of spirituality precludes compassion.

She presents three microcosms, that of a nuclear family, a group of priests and a community of nuns. In the family the challenge comes too late for the adolescent, although we are left with the hope that some good will ensue. While the challenge fails at the presbytery one priest finds a way out of despair. At the convent, through the efforts of Sister Beatrice who exemplifies the unified consciousness, the challenge succeeds in dismantling barriers and effecting integration.

The author concentrates on a collection of characters who are afflicted with spiritual malaise, and who, trailing behind those who complacently accept established certainties, give sardonic meaning to the title and one of the epigraphs:

'What is the black stuff between  
elephants' toes?'

'Slow natives!'

As in *A Descant for Gossips* the focus is on adolescent anguish and on the adultery and spiteful gossip which initiate much of the misery in young lives. Again it is the adults' self-preoccupation which blinds them to the destructive effects of their behaviour. Serious as these issues are, the novel is full of wit and rich in scenes of black comedy.

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1. T. Astley, *The Slow Natives*, Melbourne, 1966. All page numbers will be incorporated in the text.

Set in Queensland, the locale consists of Brisbane, the Condamine of *The Well Dressed Explorer* and a garish coastal resort, fitting backgrounds for the superficiality, insularity and artificiality of modern society. At the same time the claustrophobic backgrounds of presbytery and convent convey institutional constriction. The novel is structured chronologically, and Astley handles deftly the strong narrative line as she directs attention from one group to another. The various strands are integrated through Bernard's involvement with members of each group. The novel is open-ended, although the melodramatic final scene foresees the resolution of the Leversons' problems.

The plot centres on fourteen-year-old Keith who, equating lack of discipline with lack of love, and embittered by his mother's adultery, runs away from home. He meets Chookie, a seventeen-year-old underdog on the run from Condamine after a sexual misadventure. When the boys crash a stolen car, Chookie is killed and Keith loses a leg. The authorial stance is sternly critical of the adulterous behaviour of Iris and Gerald and of the Leversons' liberalism as once more Astley uses a witty, omniscient narrator who condemns or endorses the characters by the tone of her asides. Other characters' opinions reinforce these inferences and add further dimensions to the characterization.

The novel is set in the 1960's when society's disintegrating values see the breakdown of the modern family. Permissiveness is modish and Bernard Leverson is too weak to protest when his wife, Iris, follows the fashion. The author criticizes the social conditioning which condemns women to domesticity and a sub-culture in which their lives are diminished. She suggests that such social conventions contribute to unimaginative marriages which deteriorate into mere 'stamina parties'. (p. 103) The Leversons' marriage has become 'a cocoon of habit and monthly payments, (p. 33) with Bernard and Iris 'as separate as paper dolls'. (p. 180) On the other hand Chookie's home is a battleground, with his parents 'goin' hammer and tongs' (p. 169) and just as divided as the Leversons.

Disenchanted with life, the gentle music examiner, Bernard, is absorbed in his discontent. Astley suggests that the unintegrated self is a destructive force and shows that Bernard's failure as

a father is due to his distorted personality, the facets of which he is barely exercising. On the intellectual plane, he does not develop his talents, leaving his musical compositions unfinished. His sexuality is dormant and he tells Iris:

'You know ... after twenty years of marriage you feel as if you're the one sex.' (p. 22)

He is emotionally apathetic, admitting that he just does not care sufficiently for his family, and he has no faith in God. Bernard is not a communicator. He distances himself from his boring social circle and avoids domestic contention by escaping to his study in a home which is divided within itself, merely 'a set of interlocking boxes'. (p. 104) So his unintegrated personality produces its own kind of havoc, alienating Iris, driving Keith to rebellion and failing the other slow natives. As a confidant he is ineffectual: he is unable to comfort Sister Matthew and Miss Trumper, while Lingard finds him 'still a stranger'. (p. 69) The absence of psychic integration also results in an eroded morale. Always ready to give in rather than instigate a crisis, he is irresponsible in his failure to discipline Keith and in his acceptance of Iris's affair with Gerald.

However, Astley's view of the self as a fluid process, subject to experience and capable of change, is borne out by Bernard. His distress at Keith's behaviour eventually promotes tolerance and fellow-feeling, so that although he cannot solve Sister Matthew's problems he can appreciate them:

... charity ... grows slowly until it involves the whole being and he could only regard her through the increased understanding of his own unhappiness. (p. 78)

Keith's escapade provides a catharsis as Bernard realizes that 'the original ache, the one from which all others had stemmed', (p. 182) is caused by his physical and emotional estrangement from Iris, and he becomes aware of the damage they have done in denying Keith discipline. Finding Keith alive Bernard finds God, 'absorbing [Him] in great doses', (p. 184) and with 'a trace of the old love' (p. 182) for Iris, decides that the family must be reconciled. He feels also that the evidence of what he thinks of as his miracle may help Lingard and Sister Matthew to resolve their problems.

The author indicates her disapproval by painting a shallow portrait of Iris, who deludes herself that she will find satisfaction and what she thinks of as romance in a sexual liaison with Gerald. Yet Iris is shown to have unrealized potential for growth:

I am not as shallow as I seem,  
Iris would have prayed or  
exhorted anyone to believe. (p. 104)

Relegated to her small-scale domestic role she is unable to achieve maturation so that, waking each day dissatisfied, she fritters her creative talents in flower-arranging and contrived activities. Astley questions the wisdom of a society which in its veneration of youth discards women like Iris who belong to the 'forty-five plus group nobody wants', (p. 175) excluding them from the labour force and compounding their boredom.

The author makes it clear however, that Iris's irresponsibility is caused by self-absorption and that her personality has developed no spiritual dimension:

... Iris believed in the marital symbols  
of comfort ... but those hidden things,  
the genuine tenderness that survived the  
solitariness when the last guest was gone  
... then did she believe in love? (pp. 40-41)

Eventually Bernard's indictment of her adultery as the cause of the boy's flight reduces her to self-disgust, and Keith's accident jolts her out of her self-absorption.

With Keith, Astley presents the destructive consequences of an absence of discipline. The parents love Keith and he loves them but the generation gap prevents the expression of that love. With typical adolescent ambivalence Keith resents Iris's possessiveness yet craves discipline:

... what I need ... is a strong hand. I could  
respect that. I'm tired ... of all this  
pals-with-the-parents crap ... (p. 15)

His anti-social behaviour is his protest against his parents' failure to protest.

Astley provides a credible example of adolescent role confusion in Keith. She illustrates the psychic distortion caused by Iris's determination to force him prematurely into adulthood, as he 'appalled them finally with his sudden monstrous unchildishness'. (p. 169) The author uses images of lost childhood to define his sense of deprivation: the beach blooms with 'lollipop umbrellas' as he surfs on 'the bosomy swell'. (p. 114) Like Vinny, Keith has no chance of achieving an integrated personality because he is denied guidance. His parents do not discuss sexuality with him so that for all his show of sophistication he is immature. When he stumbles upon the lecherous Coady and Miss Lumley he is shocked, and when, soon after, Varga gossips maliciously about the adultery of Iris and Gerald, he is shattered.

Keith's warped self becomes destructive and he punishes his parents with his waywardness until eventually the pressure of maintaining his brazen role is too much and he runs away. His unlikely friendship with Chookie marks the start of Keith's growth to maturity. As he learns to accept and communicate with the youth the barriers between middle-class and working-class, between educated and unschooled, topple, and Keith begins to grow in spiritual kindness.

'We're just the same. Two of a kind', (p. 145) Chookie assures him, and certainly both are victims of misused authority. However, whereas Keith is a victim of middle-class indulgence, the homely, audacious seventeen-year-old Chookie, only one of the many in the working-class Mumberson family, suffers from too little attention. Astley overcolours with sentimentality this portrait of an amiable outsider and so weakens a character who so tellingly contrasts with Keith.

In this work the author's criticism of power structures centres on clerical authoritarianism, as she demonstrates the way in which religious organizations tend to become objective and indifferent to human needs.<sup>2</sup> She exposes the underside of such institutions,

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2. *The Slow Natives* has many parallels with Thomas Keneally's *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*. Monsignor Connolly's inflexible moral theology and sexist attitudes are at one with the convictions of Monsignor Nolan, while the questioning outsider priests, Lingard and Maitland, share similar theological perplexities.

drawing attention to the tensions erupting through the surfaces of the apparently calm worlds of presbytery and convent.

All the certainties of the Irish-orientated Catholic church, its divisive bigotry and its aggressive priests who cow the laity with threats of punishment, are embodied in Monsignor Connolly. He is an ironically-observed character whose deadly-pale appearance matches his spiritual sterility while his nature, 'stubborn as a mule', (p. 73) reflects his rigid stance. Unlike his questioning curate, the 'Mons' with his 'pontifical veneer of authority' (p. 61) is a dogmatic man. He patronizes his women parishioners mercilessly, but they are a match for him:

'Tell me now, girls', he pleaded once, 'tell me now, why is it a woman shouldn't drink or smoke?'

'Please, Monsignor,' some wilful suffragette smart alec had said from the side of the room, 'it reduces us to the level of men.'

He'd kept quiet for a long time after that. (p. 73)

Connolly is loud, however, in his condemnation of Lingard's drinking and his inflexible attitudes allow no show of charity or guidance. Yet the narrator calls him 'a good old man'. (p. 73) Perhaps his chief failing is the lack of imagination which binds him into his black and white morality.

With Lingard Astley proposes that spirituality must be integrated with practical charity, just as psychic health demands that the self be integrated with the community. His despair stems from the interior discord of 'a priest with his vocation askew'. (p. 63) Lingard's personality, also is askew. The demands of the priesthood insist on the repression of his sexuality, and he bewails his emotionless state:

'If I could care enough ... to be emotional, to cry out against or to God.' (p. 64)

Moreover his personality is dominated by a form of spirituality which is more intellectual than practical. Consequently he is neither able to comfort Sister Matthew nor help his parishioners:

Who had he become but the confessor with the automatic replies? (p. 63)

Lingard, however has the potential for developing a unified consciousness. His intellectualism is relieved by caring qualities and he is seen gardening and nurturing animals. As well, he will have no part in 'aggressive pietism', (p. 61) and is tolerant of those with other beliefs:

One day in the Sanatorium ...  
 a tract-bearing enthusiast had  
 insisted on praying aloud over  
 him for his conversion to a more  
 acceptable faith, and he had  
 joined his voice with the other  
 man's, for reasons of the most  
 exquisite charity. (p. 60)

Ironically, it is a Protestant's confession which releases him from his stasis. When he answers Miss Trumper's cry for help, offers her practical charity and reassures her of his continuing interest, he forgets himself:

God help her, he prayed ... And his own  
 automatic appeal registered within his  
 prayer-dry soul and gave him a pleasure  
 he had not now had for years. He smiled. (p. 158)

In discovering concern for his fellows, Lingard takes a step on the way to re-discovering God.

The other member of the presbytery community, Father Lake, is a simple, genial man, and Astley uses an absence of details to pique our interest in the flaw which is to widen so disastrously for him in *A Boatload of Home Folk*.

At the neighbouring convent, another institution in which charity is sacrificed for a spurious spirituality, the young Sister Matthew is also experiencing a crisis. While Keith's personality is distorted by the want of discipline, the nuns' characters are warped by an excess of authority. Its hierarchical, divisive nature has turned the convent into a wasteland of asceticism in which each nun is self-enclosed and alienated from the others. Religion assumes aggressive overtones:

The Cross had come not to bring peace  
 but the sword; looked like, but  
 was never held as, the religious  
 dagger it really was. (p. 135)

Astley's concept of harmonious integration has no place here where even the days are divided by 'the guillotine stroke of the hour',

(p. 55) and where the established powers demand female submissiveness as they exert control with a tyranny of time-tables and bells.

Throughout this writer's fiction the code of control of hierarchical power structures and the concept of existence as a composition which can be mastered are constantly associated with a state of rigidity. Now the convent's chilly rigidity is personified by the autocratic Mother St. Jude of the 'frozen grey eyes' (p. 53) and set jaw. She offers the young Sister Matthew no guidance during her crisis and takes refuge in prayer. It is only when Sister Beatrice confronts her with the counterfeit nature of her spirituality that her shell disintegrates and she allows her repressed emotions and caring qualities to flow out.

The reactivation of the Superior's emotions comes almost too late for Sister Matthew. With this latter character Astley demonstrates the psychic havoc caused by the individual's attempt to evade involvement in life, and, again subverting certainties, she shows that instead of providing safety, convent life can be psychically destructive. Sister Matthew flees there to escape a grief 'which had fragmented her spirit'. (p. 58) Now she is like a caged bird, assuming a rigid detachment which excludes any kind of fluid associativeness. Bernard notices

... the carved turn of the head under  
black folds, and the folds themselves,  
a still music, the flow or the rapture  
of it stilled. (p. 49)

Her talent is distorted as she plays the piano 'with mathematical accuracy' (p. 77) and without feeling. Divided from life's flow, unable to communicate with the other nuns, finding God deaf to her prayers, she is enclosed in the outsider's supposed self-sufficiency.

Astley suggests that it is necessary to preserve the essential 'I'. Now, unable to achieve self-integration, and too long denied recognition of her individuality, Sister Matthew becomes obsessed with the need for Bernard's approval. His comment on the absence of emotion in her playing causes an eruption of long-repressed feelings and an outburst of pianistic emotionalism, which, in turn, leads to an 'interior crumbling'. (p. 58) In this unintegrated state she becomes

destructive and writes a defamatory letter about Bernard to Connolly. Eventually she breaks out of her enclosure and rushes to Bernard's home to ask forgiveness. He forgives her, but her problem remains unsolved:

This is death, Sister Matthew thought,  
to have confessed and been absolved  
and feel no relief. (p. 144)

The author provides no resolution. The nun is left to choose either involvement in secular life or a more integrated life inside the convent, where there is now more chance of her receiving compassionate guidance.

Astley continues to question the low priority given to guidance in educational systems, both religious and secular. She shows that Mother St. Jude, as well as withholding her support for the young nun for too long, rejects the insolent but gifted pupil, Eva, instead of counselling her. For his part Keith complains that at his school philandering teachers are 'imperilling the morals of susceptible teenagers'. (p. 99)

In these institutions academic accomplishments are deemed superior to manual skills, and the damaging effects of this attitude are evident in Chookie. With 'sixty per cent brightness', (p. 84) he becomes the victim of an aggressive nun who seems to regard physical punishment as the compelling force in the learning process. Later, in secondary school, if Brother Bernard had given the sexually curious boy some sexual education instead of punishment Chookie may have avoided the encounter with Miss Trumper. Again, no attempt is made to discover the boy's skills, and because he has little academic talent, Brother Leopold applauds his defiant decision to leave school. Chookie is denied cultural nourishment by parents and teachers who assume that working-class children are destined for mediocrity. Ironically, the boy later displays a musical creativity which persists despite his father's attempts to discourage it. It is his treatment by people who should be his mentors which pushes Chookie into his anti-social behaviour and his role as an outsider.

The prevailing despair of the novel's world mirrors the spiritual disintegration of society and to support her idea that the formation of an integrated consciousness must help reinforce crumbling values Astley creates the vigorous sister Beatrice. This pragmatic, imperfect nun, caricatured a little as the good-sport-footballer, is the warmest character in the novel, her vitality evident in her 'warm moist hand'. (p. 46) Implicit in this characterization is the suggestion that only the truly human can be truly Christian. She possesses forceful traits, is assertive and 'frightened of no one'. (p. 51) She displays also the caring characteristics of nurturance and understanding and acts 'like a woman' (p. 137) in comforting the Superior. Also, overcoming her aversion to Sister Matthew, she helps her with practical compassion. Sister Beatrice, both strong and gentle, has a unified consciousness and is seen to be a force for good in a community where hollow spirituality rules out charity. Originally alienated from Mother St. Jude and Sister Matthew Sister Beatrice reaches out to both, giving rise to the hope that the other nuns will draw together in compassionate fellowship.

In her claustrophobic home across from the convent Miss Trumper is also in need of comfort. Sexual education may be inadequate in this society but no mercy is shown to those found breaking the rules. The delectable Miss Trumper of *The Well Dressed Explorer* is now a neurotic spinster whose life has been spoiled by a wartime affair. Unable to bear the shame of an illegitimate child she has an abortion, and unable to forgive herself, wallows in guilt. Her outdated hair style indicates the period when her life acquired a stasis as complete as that of the cherished photographs of her young self. She exists in her own enclosed world, taking no risks with life, wanting only to be safe. The shocked Bernard sees her sitting-room as a museum, its wallpaper 'barred like a cage'. (p. 91) When the sexuality which she has suppressed for years erupts, it does so with destructive results for Chookie.

The tutor, Varga, also has a destructive effect on the young. In order to stress the importance of intelligent parental authority which generates respect, Astley introduces the homosexual Varga. Bernard is bewildered by the current permissiveness, but Varga encourages it, heaping attention on Keith and Tommy in the hope of seducing them.

His malicious undermining of the boys' respect for their parents eventually arouses their hatred. This precipitates Keith's flight from Varga's beach shack and Tommy's decision not to tell the tutor when he sights the fugitive, both vital factors in the catastrophe.

In this work Astley's prose is again figurative and impressionistic, at times portentous, particularly in the passages dealing with Sister Matthew. Recurring words and phrases such as 'medieval', 'Inquisition' and 'plaster saints' stress the harsh sterility of the religious institutions, while witty wordplay accuses Iris, the fashionable defector, of buying herself 'unfrockery of a frivolous kind'. (p. 22) A simile points to Bernard's irresponsibility when, throwing off marital illusions, his 'soul hops about like a ticket-of-leave man. (p. 33) The rigidity of controlling structures is compared with the inflexible nature of Mosaic law as the drunken Lingard sees his outraged superior 'glaring down like Moses from the top of the verandah'. (p. 71)

Classical music, jazz, blues, rock and liturgical chants form a melodious background, and Astley again appraises people by their appreciation of music. Miss Trumper's life is as abridged as the edition of the musical classics which she favours, the indiscriminating Miss Lumley is tone-deaf and Varga the *poseur* plays showy tea-room music. The author by now is more skilful in using cultural allusions to give resonance to the novel's content. Here, for example, Lingard's reference to Simeon Stylites', (p. 132) the ascetic who spent thirty years on top of a pillar, ironically illustrates the way in which excessive spirituality is able to detach people from the practicalities of living.

'You talk funny', (p. 148) Chookie says of Keith, underscoring the way in which language can be used to divide the uneducated and the educated. Astley reveals the ironic incongruity between content and form in Conolly's pronouncements:

There was a dogmatic assurance in his no-nonsense Irish brogue that was the speech of medium of poetry and fantasy and every delicious deviation or tricky reapplication of the truth. (p. 72)

The satire loses some of its pungency by being too often ill-tempered. The author berates the denizens of suburbia as they substitute culture-sampling for deeper levels of living, and predictably jibes at the plastic era and at avaricious television sponsors. It is tempting to speculate on what commercial travellers and small-town dwellers have done to deserve the Astley wrath as she savages the two salesmen in the hotel dining room which is

... filled up with crustaceans -  
varnished hard-jawed mums and  
small-bit farmers all coated with  
the same malty staleness that made  
disgust palpable. (p. 68)

Yet this grim world has its comic aspect and the author directs her appreciation of the ridiculous into scenes of black farce, such as Iris cutting Keith out of his tight pants and Coady coupling uncomfortably with Miss Lumley in the laundry

... where he pressed her somewhat  
harshly against the gleaming corner  
of the chrome tubs, accepting her  
agony as ecstasy. (p. 18)

Astley uses the Levenson family, the trio of priests, and the convent to demonstrate the enclosed system created by the ruling clique and the divisiveness generated by hierarchical structures. She shows that social circumstances in the form of permissiveness, the want of guidance and the generation gap instigate the anti-social behaviour of the adolescents, Keith and Chookie, and she opposes the Levenson's lax discipline with the intelligent use of authority in a home

... where there were limitations  
imposed, where language was minded  
before children, reading matter  
vetted, and soft drinks the only  
ones offering. (p. 169)

Bernard discovers the value of marital toleration and the power of parental love, and Father Lingard discovers that spiritual despair is alleviated by compassionate association with others. At the convent her integrated consciousness helps Sister Beatrice to convince the Superior that nuns are individuals, and that in the solving of human problems prayer must be accompanied by practical charity.

In exposing the conflicts and contradictions within recognizable lives Astley again suggests that no assuagement of human suffering can

be effected without the linking of each human being in a consciousness of common humanity. Only then can the individual give the lie to the despair which is spiritual suicide.

It can be seen, then, that the early novels set out to define Astley's theme of the absence of compassion and spiritual direction in human affairs. They deal principally with the exploration of the self and its interaction with others, and with a consideration of Catholicism. However, other themes are touched upon.

In *Girl With a Monkey* Elsie's inability to control the events which she has instigated illustrates the author's concept of the indefinable, uncontrollable nature of existence. As well, the contradictions within the girl's nature which dissuade the reader from making inflexible judgements subtly uphold Astley's refusal to entertain long-accepted certainties.

The *élitist* group and the social stratification in Gungee demonstrate, in *A Descant for Gossips*, the enclosed, hierarchical aspects of centralized power structures and the harsh treatment these authorities mete out to those who disregard the rules, in this case Vinny, Moller and Helen.

The dangers of excessive emotionalism are evident in George's attitude toward Catholicism in *The Well Dressed Explorer*, while Alice's unexplained past indicates the difficulties of perception and the impenetrability of the inner worlds of other people.

*The Slow Natives* warns of the way in which the inflexibility of hierarchical religious communities leads to an absence of practical charity in their dealings with the problems of individual members of the group.

The author's preoccupation with Catholicism continues in *A Boat Load of Home Folk*. This novel which, for reasons which I have discussed earlier, will be omitted from consideration in this thesis, marks the end of her early period. With her next work, Astley attains full stature as an accomplished, serious and significant writer.