

"The Innocent Traveller": Vision and Form in  
Ethel Wilson's Fiction

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## Abstract

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This thesis explores a major segment of Ethel Wilson's fiction, emphasizing the vision of human interdependence that is reflected in her double emphasis on the individual and on society. The approach is primarily formal, but Wilson's autobiographical novel, The Innocent Traveller, requires a brief biographical commentary.

Love, in the sense of loving kindness, is fundamental to Wilson's vision in her fiction. It is her religious and mystical way of seeing the world, human and non-human alike. Her fiction reveals her undaunted optimism, compassion, and humour as she listens to the diverse voices of humanity. Life, she believes, "is a difficult country, and our home."<sup>1</sup>

A detailed analysis of Hetty Dorval, "Lilly's Story," and Swamp Angel, Wilson's three major fictions, is used to establish the unity and continuity of her work. Her strongly autobiographical novel is examined briefly for more isolated insights. Chapter Two examines character and quest, or narrative structure; and Chapter Three, metaphor and setting. My fourth chapter, building on earlier analysis, shows how craft and vision come together in Wilson's sophisticated and ironic technique.

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<sup>1</sup> Ethel Wilson, Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961), epigraph.

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## Chapter I

" ' No Man is an Island ' "

Wilson everywhere echoes the sentiments of John Donne:

"No man is an Island... I am involved in Mankind."<sup>1</sup> Donne's epigram is particularly prominent in two of her novels, Hetty Dorval and Swamp Angel. This thematic preoccupation is at the core of Wilson's vision. For her, the human condition is supportable if it is responsible, socially and individually; her vision of human interdependence is reflected in her double emphasis on the individual and on society. This central concern necessarily involves Wilson in an examination of the perplexing nature of truth and of reality itself.

Desmond Pacey points out that within the structures of Wilsonian morality, characters move within extremes: innocence and experience, love and loneliness, faith and fear, harmony and disunity, time and eternity. The symmetry of her characters is Blakean: fragile yet powerful, good yet potentially evil, isolated yet involved. Her landscapes reflect and symbolize the human duality.<sup>2</sup> Moral responsibility and experiential polarity underline the structure of Wilson's fiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Ethel Wilson, Hetty Dorval (1947; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), epigraph. Further references to the novel are in the text as HD.

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Pacey, Ethel Wilson (New York: Twayne, 1967) p. 178.

A brief outline of Ethel Wilson's life helps us to understand certain elements of her fiction with its prevailing themes and idiosyncracies. She was born in 1888, in a small town in South Africa, to English parents. Her father, Robert Bryant, was a Wesleyan Methodist minister who Mary McAlpine describes as "the brightest and warmest light in Ethel's early life... a laughing man."<sup>3</sup> Her pious mother died when Ethel was eighteen months old, and Robert returned to Great Britain to live with a half-sister, close to relatives who were to model, half a century later, for the characters in The Innocent Traveller. Ethel remembers this period of her life "as being intensely happy and filled with books, laughter, dogs... and gentle discipline."<sup>4</sup> Orphaned at nine, she was sent to live in Vancouver although her education was later completed in England in a school for the daughters of Methodist ministers. This Protestant and Puritan environment helps to explain her sense of duty and responsibility. Her biographer calls her "an Edwardian child raised by Victorians."<sup>5</sup>

In an autobiographical essay, Wilson describes her education and her discovery of Donne:

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<sup>3</sup> Mary McAlpine, "Ethel Wilson as I Knew Her," The Ethel Wilson Symposium (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 7

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

With no thought of becoming a writer, I left school to enter life as I found it to be, which included earning a living. Following a hard-working and happy schooling in a Spartan boarding school my education became unorthodox, eclectic, spotty, and ceaselessly interesting. The joys of a little learning are very great. My own discovery of John Donne, almost before he had again entered the recognized Re-Establishment, dazzled me.<sup>6</sup>

Earning a living meant teaching in Vancouver elementary schools for thirteen years. Wilson did not begin to write until 1937 when she contributed a story to The New Statesman. In the same essay, she notes that even at this date (at the age of forty-nine), she did not contemplate a future in writing. Yet something from the experiences which she called unorthodox, eclectic, and ceaselessly interesting was striving to find expression:

In my childhood we had stood, in Vancouver, on a sort of subsoil of a culture which, as the forests came down, had been vaguely prepared by our forbears in the haste of building and earning. They had arrived at the water's edge with their violins and pianos, some books, some pictures, ideas, undoubted aspirations, opinions - or nothing whatever. Many had memories, no money and a dubious future.<sup>7</sup>

Suddenly it became "imperative" for her that she should write. After the war, she published Hetty Dorval. In the next

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<sup>6</sup> Ethel Wilson, "A Cat Among Falcons," in Masks of Fiction, ed. A.J.M. Smith (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

fourteen years she wrote a small but fine body of fiction consisting of five novels and a collection of short stories. She died quietly in 1980; her husband had died many years earlier.

She had married Wallace Wilson, a distinguished physician in 1920. McAlpine, who knew the writer for thirty years, is warm in her praise of Wilson's husband and their relationship: "They were complete to each other... he was gentle, sometimes boisterous in his sense of fun, a friend - as she was - to children, a keen fly fisherman, a reader of biography, history, books on wild life and world politics."<sup>8</sup> McAlpine states that the Wilsons were close to one another. It would seem that Wilson's happy marriage provided her with her fictional model for enduring relationships and family love.

Hetty Dorval is a paradigm of Wilson's fiction. Its themes and its metaphors recur with variations in all her work. This first novella reveals the substance of her vision and her fascination with paradox. Hetty Dorval (1947) is the portrait of an isolate, seen through the eyes of an adolescent who begins with admiration and ends with very mixed feelings. Hetty is an egocentric but alluring adventuress, incapable of love, who walks away from her actions with no regard for their

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<sup>8</sup> McAlpine, "Ethel Wilson as I Knew Her," p. 9.

consequences. Her intrusion into the innocence of young Frances Burnaby involves an ethical confrontation that is a recurring element of Wilson's fiction. Frankie is initially attracted to Hetty, but ends by exposing and confronting her. Taken together, Frankie and Hetty embody Wilson's fictional vision.

Wilson's moral view concentrates on the interdependence of humanity. Our response to life, as Wilson interprets it, must be a recognition of and an accommodation to our individual and social responsibilities. Recognizing and achieving the proper balance between individual needs and social obligations is the nub of her fiction and the nerve center that often malfunctions in her characters.

Wilson illustrates her life view of the human community from family perspectives, and some extensions of them. Her fictional family is often a microcosm of society. In her admirable families, the mother is the source of power, the loving theorist, and the daughter is the articulator, the executrice.

The novella oscillates between two opposed journeys toward freedom and security: the successful journey of the Burnaby family - Father, Mother, and Frances - and the failed journey of the Dorval family, Hetty and her mother. Mr. and Mrs. Burnaby represent a small minority of Wilson's people who achieve "the perfection of love" (HD 61):



Compassion for others regardless of who or what they are, self-possession, integrity, and acceptance characterize this small minority who have learned love's proper response. Mr. and Mrs. Burnaby have forbidden the twelve-year old Frankie to have any further communication with Hetty in an attempt to protect her from this "woman of no reputation" (HD 33). Yet it is Mrs. Burnaby's compassion that recognizes and assuages Hetty's desperate fear of exposure on board ship. It is as common for Wilson's loving characters to extend themselves in the face of need as it is for her isolates, such as Hetty, to recoil.

The success of the Burnaby family love is already a fact when the novel begins. Wilson chooses not to develop the early struggles toward perfect love. Two characters from a later novel, Maggie Lloyd and Nell Severance from Swamp Angel, have also experienced this perfection of love. In both cases this perfect love is an achieved reality for the fictional characters whose beginnings Wilson again chooses not to explore. All three experiences share a common, paradoxical character: loss and endurance. The enduring quality of perfect love withstands the loss of the beloved, and endures. In Hetty Dorval, Mrs. Burnaby's love survives the loss of her husband. In Swamp Angel, Maggie's experience of love's perfection survives the loss of her first husband and her only daughter. Nell Severance's special love survives

her Philip's demise and the willing surrender of her beloved revolver. Losing yet preserving are the subtle paradoxes that keep these characters free and secure.

Wilson, especially in Swamp Angel, does imply that some texture of this perfect love is both spiritual and sensual. Barbara Wild correctly maintains that Wilson's early training, with its Victorian character, precluded any real examination of the erotic idiom.<sup>9</sup> The general treatment of love in Hetty Dorval and Swamp Angel supports Wild's argument. The love between Mr. and Mrs. Burnaby is characterized by duty, mutual trust and commitment, fidelity and consideration. In Swamp Angel, the love shared by Nell and Philip Severance is characterized by romance and passion; the novel's central thrust, however, presents Maggie Lloyd's story, and Maggie's strongest passions are psychic and spiritual rather than erotic.

The Burnabys and the Dorvals have traditional goals: freedom and security. Differences emerge because each family employs different means. The Dorval family demonstrates the failure of love. The Burnaby family establishes sharing centers, "cocoons" as Barbara Wild describes them.<sup>10</sup> A sense of freedom evolves when each family member performs dutifully

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<sup>9</sup> Barbara Wild, "Piety, Propriety, and the Shaping of the Writer," The Ethel Wilson Symposium (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

and loyally. A sense of security emerges from cooperative effort. For Wilson's successful questors, freedom and security require change, sacrifice and growth.

Hetty also seeks freedom and security. Neither the reader nor Mrs. Burnaby doubts Hetty's urgent pleas for security on board ship: " ' I want security, ' her voice trembled a little, ' I want it badly ' " (HD 52). In her very permanent need of security, Hetty ironically seizes the finites: money and titles. The sight of the wild geese sparks her yearning for freedom: " ' And I seemed to be up there with them where I'd really love to be ' " (HD 16). Hetty longs for real freedom, but she snatches its shadow, licence. She seeks immediate and personal benefits from her misconceptions of security and freedom which are really (as Wilson demonstrates) indulgence, egoism, and passivity.

The Dorval family is a foil for the Burnaby family; Hetty is a foil for Frankie, or an alter ego that Frankie must confront.<sup>11</sup> The novel itself is a study of the fine line between freedom and licence. Marriages, for example, are often difficult or even disastrous in Wilson's fiction, yet the institution symbolizes security and love. Marriage for Hetty remains a source of self-gratification.

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<sup>11</sup> Donna E. Smyth, "Strong Women in the Web: Women's Work and Community in Ethel Wilson's Fiction," The Ethel Wilson Symposium (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 90.

The Dorval family is the first in a recurring pattern of Wilson's unsuccessful families, characterized by deception and false values. Hetty grows up believing she is an orphan. Her mother, Mrs. Broom, maintains this deception in an effort to protect Hetty from the knowledge of her illegitimacy and low social rank. This deception isolates Hetty who selfishly seeks her own survival. She never sees herself as part of any group; she is always alone, always the isolate. Values such as trust and friendship and love remain unassimilated in her character, growth is denied her. Yet her beauty, charm, and sensuality continue to attract and fascinate Frankie, who finds her, at the novel's end, "hard to hate." Their relationship suggests the Jungian archetypes of persona and shadow. This concept will be discussed more fully in Chapter Two, below.

Second only to her emphasis on loving interdependence, and linked to it, is Wilson's concern for Fate, coincidence, and Providence. The subtle variations of voice and the structuring of human experience are vehicles for Wilson's moral vision. The length and breadth of impermanence in Wilson's fictive world exists within the larger world of timelessness. Providence, which she links to "the higher flights of coincidence," acts as an ordering principle in the finite world. Fate, that forces individuals from their particular designs into the care of the unknown, is subject

to Providential rescue. Halдар Gunnarsen's fateful accident, "all on account of six inches of mud," destroys his dream, but Providence reconstructs it with a capable but unfamiliar stranger, Maggie Lloyd.<sup>12</sup> Generally beneficent, Providence participates in human design, not dominating it, but directing it to higher levels of consciousness and inspiration.

In Wilson's fiction, the smallest detail and the most important occurrence support the above claims. Topaz's long life is bound by fate and necessity and a measure of free will. Grannie's fond memories of Mr. Otis Skinner, the famous actor, cast the die favourably for Rose when, years later, the young great-granddaughter seeks permission to attend a play at the Opera House. The rapacious white seagulls, although "devilishly indifferent," fly westward in their "ordained" evening flight.<sup>13</sup> Frankie and her friends' coincidental meeting with Hetty in the French restaurant compels her to come to terms with herself and with Hetty's self-indulgence. Lilly's accidental perception of the town's verdict on Eleanor forces her to new stages of her development; Yow's reappearance precipitates her final flight to Toronto

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<sup>12</sup> Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel (1954; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1962), p. 72. Further references to the novel are in the text as SA.

<sup>13</sup> Ethel Wilson, The Innocent Traveller (1949; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), pp. 260-276. Further references to the novel are in the text as IT.

and her eventual freedom.<sup>14</sup> Nell's fall, her "one false step," allows her to stage-manage Hilda's wedding. Halidar's terrible accident is balanced by Maggie's fortuitous arrival. Life is difficult but supportable.

Wilson's vision is based on love, in the sense of loving-kindness, a word favoured by Australian novelist Patrick White. Love is her religious and mystical way of seeing the world, human and non-human alike. She is an optimist who feels we are capable of compassion and acceptance in the face of human inadequacy. Her perception of transcendence within the commonplace is an aspect of this religious vision. Creation is intertwined: all humans and all creatures are joined because they share in and reflect that transcendence. They are also joined in pain and in struggle. Life, Wilson believes "... is a difficult country, and our home."<sup>15</sup>

A detailed analysis of Hetty Dorval, "Lilly's Story," and Swamp Angel, Wilson's three major fictions, will be used to establish the unity and continuity of her work. The Innocent Traveller, an episodic and strongly autobiographical fiction, is examined briefly for more isolated insights.

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<sup>14</sup> Ethel Wilson, "Lilly's Story, Equations of Love (1952; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 195, 143. Further references to the novel are in the text as EL.

<sup>15</sup> Ethel Wilson, Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961), epigraph.

Chapter Two will examine character and quest, or narrative structure; and Chapter Three, metaphor and setting. My fourth chapter, building on earlier analysis, will show how craft and vision come together in Wilson's sophisticated and ironic technique.

## Chapter II

### Women Questors and Wilson's Feminism

Wilson gives a feminist slant to the quest myth, one of the oldest patterns in literature. The typical structure of her fiction involves a quest, and her typical protagonists are female. "Tuesday and Wednesday" (Equations of Love) is atypical in having a static structure, and The Innocent Traveller affords a number of miniature quests within a vast panorama of women's lives, spread over one hundred years and two continents.

Feminism is not easy to define because of changing cultural perspectives. For example, in 1912, the Webster dictionary defined feminism without women: "feminism is a condition of men who become hypersensitive, too imaginative, and lacking in the traits supposed to be masculine." By contrast, in 1982, the Heritage dictionary defines feminism as "a doctrine that advocates or demands for women the same rights granted to men, as in social, political, or economic status."

In calling Wilson a feminist, I have taken a simpler definition. Her fiction affords, as Patricia Morley says of Margaret Laurence, a woman's-eye view of the world, an awareness of what it means to be a woman in a particular



time at a particular place.<sup>1</sup> Her protagonists, typically women, provide sensitive and subtle profiles of the stratified lives of women in England from 1840-1900, and of the dimensions of women's lives in provincial Canada from 1900-1940.

Wilson consciously chooses to focus on an idealistic vision of humanity. Her typical questors are strong, self-determining women who struggle to gain and to keep their independence. Like Frances Burnaby, these sensitive and intelligent women meet challenges and overcome them. They are also determined survivors like Lilly and Matron, passionately committed to self-determined goals. At their most mature, they are strong and capable individuals who, like Nell Severance, fiercely believe and consistently uphold the validity of the "Other." All of Wilson's questors are women concerned with change who explore the genuine meaning of freedom. These women are responsible and socially conscious human beings.

Wilson is not a naive writer. She is fully aware of all aspects of human complexity in a male-oriented society. She depicts selfish women like Hetty, petty and jealous women like Vera Gunnarsen (SA), and lazy

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Morley, "Margaret Laurence: Feminist, Nationalist and Matriarch of Canadian Letters," Laurentian Review, 15, 2 (February, 1982), p. 24.

self-deceivers like Myrt Johnson.<sup>2</sup> Her characters' experiences, inescapably female, include traditional problems of women: the passivity and financial anxiety of Victoria May Tritt (EL), the insecurity of Hilda Severance (SA), and the self-destructive neurosis of Vera Gunnarsen (SA). Unlike Alice Munro's secular vision that is, at times, claustrophobic, Wilson's religious vision is optimistic and idealistic.

The Innocent Traveller is Wilson's longest and, as David Stouck suggests, "her most time consuming project."<sup>3</sup> The companionable world of the episodic novel is autobiographical; the dramatis personae are Wilson's own relatives, members of her mother's family.<sup>4</sup> Deftly manipulating time and voice, Wilson covers the century of Topaz Edgeworth's life (1840-1940), framing it with historical and cultural perspective, embellishing it with sensitivity and humour.

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<sup>2</sup> Ethel Wilson, "Tuesday and Wednesday," Equations of Love (1952; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 14. Further references to the novel appear in the text as EL.

<sup>3</sup> David Stouck, "The Ethel Wilson Papers," The Ethel Wilson Symposium (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> See Wild, "Piety, Propriety, and the Shaping of the Writer," Symposium, p. 27, "for the influence of a writer's childhood and family background" in The Innocent Traveller.

Desmond Pacey describes the novel as a saga, a chronicle, and a travelogue.<sup>5</sup>

It is all of these, but it is first and foremost a composite portrait of women in the West affording a panorama of types and experiences. Some half dozen women and, most importantly, the narrator herself, together suggest the development in women's lives over a century, beginning roughly in the middle of the 1800's. Two devices permit unity with flexibility. The first is Topaz's long life; the second is built into the voice of the modern narrator who, ranging freely over a century of family history, is both compassionate and omniscient. The female narrator's freedom and maturity is at the opposite extreme from the dependence which was culturally enforced on most women as the saga begins. Seen in this light, The Innocent Traveller is an unorthodox quest novel. Its composite portrait of women's lives foreshadows all of Wilson's subsequent heroines.

On the surface, the story is Topaz Edgeworth's story. Sustained by a tough innocence, Topaz is gay, enthusiastic, bumptious, and irreverent. She ages, but does not change. Education and seven years of unrequited love highlight her first twenty-five years. The next quarter

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<sup>5</sup> Pacey, Ethel Wilson, p. 63.

century is marked by her abiding loyalties and disregard for convention, as when she lies on her back enjoying the Sistine Chapel.

Change dominates the next quarter century. She moves to Vancouver, British Columbia. She buys her intractable English "walking" bicycle, joins clubs, but avoids the responsibility of office, and fails in her attempt to sleep outdoors at the family cottage.

Loss and achievement govern the last quarter century. Topaz loses her beloved guardians: first the saintly Annie, then, the dutiful Rachel. She recovers and buys her own apartment, proudly declares her colonialism, and triumphantly visits the Queen at Buckingham Palace. She loses her drawers, and finds walking delightful without them. In death she is unafraid, even impatient: "What an adventure, to be sure" (IT, 275). A great-great nephew pronounces her celibate life ephemeral (IT, 104). "Ephemeral for a century," says Helen Sonthoff, sagely.<sup>6</sup> "Invincible," says the narrator of little Topaz Edgeworth, grande-dame (IT, 271).

The Innocent Traveller is a cultural portrait of three generations of women (1840-1940). Many are stereotypical, conditioned by society to lives of self-sacrifice,

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<sup>6</sup> Helen Sonthoff, "Companion in a Difficult Country," The Ethel Wilson Symposium (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 100.

ministration to the needs of others, and dependence upon men.<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Edgeworth, Topaz's mother, is a typical "domestic angel" of the Victorian period. She is fertile, submissive, and dependent. To most men of that period, she would appear as "an image of happy and fulfilled motherhood... the doting, self-abnegating mother," one of the nineteenth-century female stereotypes historian Janet Murray describes.<sup>8</sup> "Mother sat gracious, fatigued, heavy behind the majestic crinoline with the last and fatal child" (IT, 1).

Mrs. Edgeworth dies the night of the dinner party giving birth to her ninth child. As chatelaine, she is sorely missed; as the narrator dryly observes, she "was badly needed to administer her own funeral" (IT, 8). Her journey was common among privileged women of her time. Home was her sphere; submissiveness and empathetic concern for the needs of others her virtues. Her reward was to be immediately replaced thus proving the indispensable nature of her role.

The second Mrs. Edgeworth, is the deceased's ~~stately~~ sister, Jane. Beyond Mr. Edgeworth's "personal preference and delight was his need of a house partner who would maintain the standards by which he wished his children

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<sup>7</sup> Janet Murray, Strong Minded Women and Other Lost Voices of 19th Century England (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

to grow up," and who could run his pleasant home smoothly and easily (IT 11). Jane is such a fine companion and domestic manager that, soon after her installation, the children call her "Mother." Her immediate success as surrogate, another common but limited female role of the period, is strong proof of women's importance and adaptability; mothers are disposable when stepmothers are accessible.

Annie, the eldest, becomes the ideal Victorian woman and mother. This second generation "domestic angel" moves nearer to the twentieth century concept of woman.<sup>9</sup> Her fervent Christianity proclaims her no longer the slave of man but the servant of God. Her mission, the nineteenth century socio-cultural ideal, is nothing less than the regeneration of mankind.<sup>10</sup> With her Bible, her Prayer book, her Hymn book, and her Religion book, Annie's "spiritual life was all pervading" (IT 208). The saintly Annie is admired, respected, loved, and obeyed by her family and members of the household. For example, no one but Annie can mollify and control the formidable cook, Yow (IT 170). Even in Annie's feeble old age, she remains for her daughter

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<sup>9</sup> Murray, Strong Minded Women, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Lewis, Woman's Mission (1839), in Murray, Strong Minded Women, p. 21.

and servant "the admired and titular head of the house" (IT 161). For late Victorian women, religion dignified or sublimated the emotional and sexual energy on which Victorian culture frowned.

Mary Edgeworth, the middle daughter, is a self-sacrificing martyr. The narrator dryly describes her brief existence: "Out she went to India, poor Mary, to marry a missionary. Glory surrounded the absent Mary who soon bore two little spinsters in the heat and died" (IT 5). So attached has Mary's life been to school, Chapel, relatives, and home that she exists only as a member of the Edgeworth family. Mr. Edgeworth's "good girl Mary" becomes, in short order, Mrs. Edward Shaw. Mary the individual does not exist.

Mary is a common victim of Victorian culture. Another missionary wife, Annie Besant, describes her experience as a common fact of the time: "My complete ignorance of all that marriage meant was as profound as though I had been a child of four, and my knowledge of life was nil."<sup>11</sup> Young missionaries like Mary, sped into marriage and shipped off to foreign lands, did finally establish the identity of their common stereotypes by persistently dying young, often in childbirth, frequently of incurable diseases.

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<sup>11</sup> Annie Besant, Decision to Marry (1866), in Murray, Strong Minded Women, p. 112.

A deserted wife who becomes Topaz's head mistress is a Blue Stocking, a woman of sensibility, a freethinker. Emily Porter is a strong independent woman. When she is deserted, Emily determines to fend for herself, disregarding the traditional role of dependence upon men.

Her character offers an interesting split; endowed with a high degree of intelligence, she nevertheless retains her naiveté vis à vis the world. Ironically, she is the dream of Victorian motherhood, yet she finds her husband's advances repugnant, raised as she was in a society that encouraged worldly ignorance in women. To her father she is romantic and poetic; to her husband, abnormal and imperfect. On the one hand, Emily Porter is the victim of Victorian society that denies her sexuality and cripples her sexual development. On the other hand, she is a survivor of that society, a relatively rare, self-determined, independent Victorian woman.

Topaz is the typical eccentric aunt, a spinster, who does not escape what Janet Murray describes as the life-long infantilization of unmarried life at home.<sup>12</sup> This "warbling bird" is entertaining, but neither pretty nor fashionable (IT 45). Sheltered and coddled, yet expected to

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<sup>12</sup> Murray, Strong Minded Women, p. 81.



care for family members, at forty-five Topaz is "the astonished and inexperienced young mistress of her father's orderly household" (IT 76). At seventy-five Topaz is homeless, following the death of Aunt Rachel, her surrogate mother. Even in her venerable age, Topaz is forever a member of the family: " ' A hundred years... me, the youngest ' " (IT 275).

Topaz is also a rarity in the Victorian period. She is a "disgracefully natural," irascible individual in a society of stereotypes. Donna E. Smyth reminds us that Topaz innocently pursues life while most spinsters flee from it.<sup>13</sup>

Topaz's innocence represents a naiveté which Victorian society bred in middle-class women. Her concept of freedom as freedom from responsibility reveals her childishness. Topaz is charmingly loquacious, trivial, dependent. Her innocence is seen in her enduring enthusiasm for life. But Topaz is also a victim.

Innocence, in this sense, involves loss. The world changes but Topaz does not change. There is no ground for growth in her sheltered and pampered life. We are reminded, ruefully, that given the opportunity, she would have been

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<sup>13</sup> Smyth, "Strong Women in the Web," p. 93.

capable of maturity. She acted as an adult in three crucial moments of her life: knowingly, she withdraws from Mr. Sandback's party; wisely, she defends Mrs. Coffin from vicious gossip, and generously, she keeps secret Annie's last message for Rachel.

Topaz's innocence is a paradox and another aspect of Wilson's vision. On one level her innocence is detrimental to herself and others. She lacks an "awareness of the human relations which compose the fabric of living" (IT, 255). She is a victim of her innocence; she has missed a deeper level of human contact that Annie and Rachel have enjoyed. Ignorance of sex, another facet of her innocence, makes her blind to ordinary attitudes like modesty. She feels justified spying on the young men swimming naked on Bembow Island (IT, 181). Late in her life, this innocence is full of guile. She enjoys keeping the inexperienced Miss Umplethwaite at her mercy. On another level her innocence is beneficial. She is free of pettiness and malicious gossip. In fact, Rachel remarks: " ' You are one of the few people who think no evil ' " (IT, 157). Her innocence then is a double-edged sword, provoking her goodness, but perpetuating her childhood. It is also a mark of Wilson's genius and her fascination with paradox.

Rachel, another spinster, is Annie's dutiful maiden

daughter. Bound in perpetual filial duty, she is nevertheless fulfilled, without so much as a happy love affair (IT, 91). Not wanting children of her own, Rachel elects not to marry and remains the typical self-sacrificing daughter. When her mother grows feeble with age, Rachel becomes and remains "the man of the house" (IT, 158). Forever her mother's loving servant, Rachel is also much more. To her Aunt Topaz, she is a surrogate mother. To her brother Andrew, she is a caretaker. To her niece Rose, she is a guardian. The work fulfills her sense of order and her fierce integrity. Her surrogate family also rewards her with their confidence and affection. Rachel is the ideal Victorian old maid, an old maid "ab obo [from the beginning]." Rachel is, in the phrase of historian William Rathbone Greg, "made for charitable uses."<sup>14</sup>

Rose, Annie's great grand-daughter, is a typical twentieth century woman. For Topaz, Rose is the surviving symbol of Annie and Rachel, but she is also a romantic. The shifting values of society are comically apparent in the reading material of the house. Annie reads Missionary Magazine; Topaz, the newspaper; Rachel, Adam Bede; and Rose, Poppy, a romance about a beautiful girl "plagued by

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<sup>14</sup> William Rathbone Greg, "Why Women are Redundant" (1862), in Murray, Strong Minded Women, p. 51.

dangerous love" in dark and sensual Africa.

Rose's new car affords her mobility, yet she continues to seek security in the conventional manner. Rose chooses the traditional role of marriage and children.

This novel's few male characters are also Victorian stereotypes. John Edgeworth and John Sandback are both elegant dilettantes: mirrors of convention. Mr. Edgeworth is the typical upper-class Victorian patriarch. He is insensitive, "removed from the bitterrealities of life" (IT 40). He also has a strong sense of family responsibilities. His second wife must be capable of performing the three common Victorian wifely tasks: tasks of decorum, housework, and ministration to the needs of others.<sup>15</sup> He also looks upon women as comfort-givers: "Father never buttoned his own boot. Godlike he extended a foot and his boot was put on and fastened by a reverent son, or daughter, or Emma, or Nurse, or Cook, or sometimes by mother" (IT 5). Lacking a sense of humour, Father sees nothing comical about proposing to two elderly women on the same day, at the age of ninety (IT 43).

The Innocent Traveller relates the journeys of Victorian upper- and middle-class women in a patriarchal society. The women are generally restricted to the

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<sup>15</sup> Janet Murray, Strong Minded Women, p. 74.

confinement of home and, for the most part, economically dependent upon men. Piety and propriety are of great importance. The womanly virtues, Murray tells us, are often merely inversions of male self-images: self-sacrifice, submissiveness, service to others, and asexuality.<sup>16</sup> Written in the comic genre, The Innocent Traveller is a composite portrait of women who have been limited by their society. The single exception, noted above, lies in the female narrative voice.

This novel reveals two subtle effects of male domination that continue to plague modern women: naiveté and a lack of self confidence. While the idea persists that women should be protected from the harsher realities of life, they continue to find themselves in difficult and important situations for which they are completely unprepared. The Innocent Traveller testifies to the slowness of cultural change.

The novel also discloses characteristics of women ironically ignored by Victorian men and often grudgingly acknowledged by twentieth century men. Women are not the docile creatures men wish them to be. On the contrary, The Innocent Traveller celebrates strong, enduring, and competent women who continue to redefine and outgrow roles

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

specifically made to subjugate them. Wilson's work as a whole represents a similar celebration.

Hetty Dorval is Wilson's shortest and most controversial work. She has called it, whimsically, her "illegitimate child."<sup>17</sup> It is her only novel without a written manuscript, a beautifully controlled narrative that firmly established its author as a serious writer.<sup>18</sup> Hetty, the novel's anti-heroine, is a beautiful woman of "no reputation," an amoral adventuress bent on self-indulgence and bound to human collisions. Her story is presented by Frances Burnaby, a limited first-person narrator, who chronologically relates her encounters with Hetty.

Frankie Burnaby relates five such encounters, beginning when she is twelve. Hetty, who continually isolates herself from the responsibility of people, rents a bungalow outside Lytton, British Columbia, near the Burnaby ranch. Frankie and Hetty meet by chance out riding. Back in Hetty's bungalow, which is supervised by a mysterious Mrs. Broom, Hetty swears Frankie to secrecy about their meeting. Discovering their daughter's secret, aware of the town gossip and afraid for her, Frankie's parents forbid her further visits to Hetty.

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<sup>17</sup> Stouck, "The Ethel Wilson Papers," p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Their second encounter is relatively uneventful. From a distance, Frankie recognizes Hetty in a department store selecting pearls for herself. Hetty's continuing preoccupation with luxury does not escape Frankie's attention. Frankie, now a discerning young adult, decides not to approach her.

The death of Frankie's childhood friend precipitates her schooling abroad. On board ship Frankie and her mother encounter Hetty who begs them not to expose her past to the man she intends to marry. In England where Frankie and Hetty next meet, her two friends succumb to Hetty's blandishments, just as Frankie had done six years ago. Frankie feels obligated to protect Richard and Molly. By writing to Richard and exposing Hetty as an adventuress, she risks losing his friendship and good will.

In their final confrontation, Frankie warns Hetty that Richard's wife must double as mother to his young sister Molly. She also threatens to expose her cruel exploits in Shanghai to Richard. Frankie's argument provokes Mrs. Broom into revealing to both women her identity as Hetty's mother. Hetty responds by brutally abandoning her mother, spends the night with Frankie, and departs with her latest male conquest. The novel concludes ironically with Hetty departing for Dollfuss, Austria, in the summer of 1939. Frankie is left

mature but shaken, overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events.<sup>19</sup>

Wilson's sense of class is subtle yet strong. The meeting and ultimate clash of Frankie and Hetty represent two different social classes. Hetty, without knowing it, comes from a working-class mother. Like members of that class she is impelled by necessity. Ironically she has grown up with a middle-class myth. Frankie, on the other hand, is of a monied middle-class. She is impelled to action by the ideals which Wilson shares with Donne: ideals of community, responsibility, integrity, love, and duty. Frankie's actions are freely chosen, Hetty's actions in many senses are not.

The final confrontation has many ironies. Frankie, sure of the rightness of her position, and her ability to outface Hetty, inadvertently causes deep suffering to Mrs. Broom. Wilson shows Frankie to be selfish and myopic in her thoughtlessness. In her self-righteousness, she has isolated herself. But a mature Frankie later censures this thoughtless moment: "Like a fool I was so sorry for her [Hetty] that I spoke to Mrs. Broom. Like a fool indeed" (HD 83). The irony of Hetty's desertion promptly diffuses

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<sup>19</sup> Beverley Mitchell, "The Right Word in the Right Place: Literary Techniques in the Fiction of Ethel Wilson," The Ethel Wilson Symposium (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 75.



Frankie's denunciation of Mrs. Broom. She who had previously dismissed the care and devotion of Mrs. Broom as something her parents paid for, now dismisses with equal ease the care and devotion of her mother.

When Mrs. Broom revealed her identity, Frankie's first reaction was to blame her for Hetty's selfishness. Only later with Hetty in her apartment does Frankie realize the real meaning of Donne's epigram. On this occasion, in her acceptance of another's pain, Frankie emerges as one of Wilson's true questors who leaves her protected class and walks into the world where she is vulnerable.

At this point, Frankie and Hetty in some sense switch places, as the vulnerable Frankie cries out for privacy and seclusion. Ironically, she rejects her own ideals of community and responsibility. She pleads with Hetty to leave her alone and keep out of her life forever (HD 91). Wilson implies that these ideals are limited by individual tolerance, maturity and strength. Frankie rejects Hetty, just as Hetty has all her life rejected those who intrude upon her existence: " 'I have come as far away from people as I can, and yet they go on being tiresome. They make scenes and complicate life terribly. I don't want to have my life complicated and I can't bear scenes ' " (HD 38).

Hetty acts consistently and feels no guilt or responsibility. Frankie notices with some amazement that Hetty is not in the least distraught when she appears at her apartment. In fact, Frankie sees that Hetty has remembered to bring her gloves. That she has violated the bond of parental love means little or nothing to her. She tells Frankie that she has decided to leave with Jules Stern for Austria because a life with Richard would entail responsibility. This static quality in her character is a feature of Wilson's narrative structure. Similiar characters include Vera (SA); Mort and Myrt (EL); and Topaz (IT).

Hetty's destination and her fate are ironic. She, who has taken great pains to find a place free of responsibility, will find in Austria of 1939, both the quintessence of human indifference and the inevitable interdependence of which Donne writes. The private menace of Hetty as an individual runs parallel to the public menace of war. Austria is thus a menace for Hetty's very life.

Frankie feels guilt and responsibility and, unlike Hetty, does grow. The omniscient voice, the means of judgment, implies that Frankie, who recognizes Hetty's destructive tendencies, shares some responsibility for the suffering of Mrs. Broom: "(Mrs. Broom, to what a bleak morning you awoke all alone)" (HD, 92). We suspect that Frankie will suffer guilt in this connection. She envies

Hetty her responsibility, but she is condemned, like all true questors, to responsibility.

Hetty is Frankie's alter-ego. As Donna E. Smyth maintains, Frankie believes that she must confront Hetty and defeat her.<sup>20</sup> Desmond Pacey has suggested that their confrontation is the traditional conflict between good and evil.<sup>21</sup> Frankie is victorious because she has thwarted Hetty's desire to marry Richard, yet Hetty remains, in many respects, undefeated. She chooses the easiest way out of a situation, a choice consistent with her behaviour. It is Mrs. Broom and Frankie who are overwrought at the end of the novella.

Hetty is also Frankie's Shadow, in the Jungian sense. Hetty is Frankie's beautiful, potent, dangerous sensuality that Frankie, to be whole, must recognize as part of her being. Wilson presents this confrontation by means of two conflicting Victorian stereotypes: Frankie is the pure and asexual woman caught up in her religious mission; Hetty is the sensual stereotype of the "fallen woman." As Janet Murray notes: "In the final third of the nineteenth century, as women were making political and economic gains,

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<sup>20</sup> Smyth, "Strong Women in the Web," p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> Pacey, Ethel Wilson, p. 154.

conservative sentiment turned from extolling their selfless, missionary love to damning them for unfeminine moral licence of all sorts."<sup>22</sup> Ironically, for many Victorians, the stereotype of the "fallen woman" symbolized a demand for greater freedom. Coming to terms with what Hetty represents is a kind of liberation for Frankie. We are speaking, here, of struggle, not of simplistic "defeat."

Frankie's confrontation with Hetty is therefore imperative. In a real sense, Hetty has invaded Frankie's guarded world. Frankie's attraction to Hetty's beauty and charm began when she was twelve: "I had come under a very fancy kind of spell, near to infatuation" (HD, 21).<sup>23</sup> Hetty's spell continues for seven years. Her dominance is clearly illustrated when Frankie and she sleep together. The coquette soon takes up most of the bed. Frankie's retaliation is a comic depiction of the fight with the unaccepted part of one's psyche which Carl Jung calls the Shadow: "[I] gave her an almighty smack on her round silken bottom" (HD, 89). Angry and frustrated, Frankie gives the bed to Hetty and spends the night sleeping in a chair. When Hetty does leave the apartment, Frankie's declaration of victory

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<sup>22</sup> Murray, Strong Minded Women, p. 40.

is ironically levelled by her continuing fascination with Hetty: "Although I had fought her and driven her off, and would fight her again if I had to and defeat her, she was hard to hate as I looked at her" (HD, 92). Frankie's recognition of Hetty's sensuality and Frankie's inability to dismiss it are growing steps in her relatively slight advance as a still youthful questor.

Although Wilson suggests that Frankie's parents are totally fulfilled, it is the spiritual quality of their love that is emphasized in the novella. Frankie, at twenty, remains sexually repressed. Her wholeness, in Jungian terms, will obviously have to incorporate some of the sensuality which her antagonist embodies.

The conflict between asexuality and sexuality, often presented in Wilson's fiction as the conflict between duty and desire, is (Barbara Wild tells us) a significant problem for the writer.<sup>23</sup> W. H. New also reminds us that Wilson is an Edwardian child raised on Victorian ethics.<sup>24</sup> Her treatment of sex, therefore, is always reticent.

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<sup>23</sup> Wild, "Piety, Propriety, and the Shaping of the Writer," p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> W. H. New, "Critical Notes on Ethel Wilson: for a Concluding Panel," The Ethel Wilson Symposium (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 142.

"Lilly's Story" is the second novella in The Equations of Love. The working-class characters give the novella a broad base of appeal.<sup>25</sup> The voice, here, is omniscient, with occasional authorial comment. The novella originally bore three separate titles, David Stouck tells us: "Pilgrimage of a White Lady-Friend," "The Equations of Love," and "The Female Apprentice."<sup>26</sup> Lilly is a woman of unflagging energy whose passionate drive is respectability for her daughter.

Lilly's story is essentially her ardent struggle for middle-class respectability and security. Deserted by her parents, Lilly spends some time in a foster home before trouble initiates one of her many flights. In her early teens, she is seduced by and flees from Yow, the Hastings' cook from The Innocent Traveller. Throughout, Yow is her fear and her past from whom she finally escapes. In Nanaimo she bears an illegitimate daughter, Eleanor. In her next flight, using her permanent alias, Mrs. Walter Hughes, Lilly works as a maid for an upper-class family on Vancouver Island. Despairing of Eleanor's chances for respectability with the Butlers, Lilly flees to a hospital in the Fraser Valley and works there as a housekeeper. Eleanor eventually marries a lawyer. Lilly is about to relax when Yow

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<sup>25</sup> Stouck, "The Ethel Wilson Papers," p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

accidentally reappears, posing a formidable threat. She makes her final flight alone to Toronto where she works as a chambermaid. Her triumph occurs when she meets a lonely widower and marries into middle-class society. Assisted by an elegant wig and quietly tasteful clothes, Lilly becomes Mrs. Lilian Sprockett.

The politics of class, W.H. New tells us, are an important aspect of Wilson's work.<sup>27</sup> She is distinctly atypical of most Canadian writers. Robert MacDougall has commented in "The Dodo and the Cruising Auk" on the absence of class in Canadian fiction.<sup>28</sup> Class is most important in "Lilly's Story" which involves a determined and passionate effort by Lilly Waller to move from the despised working-class in which she finds herself and her daughter to the promised-land of middle-class respectability.

Lilly is an attractive and unusual character who obviously has her reader's sympathy and her author's blessing.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> New, "Critical Notes on Ethel Wilson," p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> Robert L. MacDougall, "The Dodo and the Cruising Auk," in Contexts of Canadian Criticism, ed. Elias Wolf Mandel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 217.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. New, "Critical Notes on Ethel Wilson: for a Concluding Panel," p. 43, where he argues that Lilly is taking advantage of Mr. Sprockett.

As a strong figure she compares interestingly with Maggie Lloyd. Although Maggie and Lilly cope with different obstacles, both women are unwavering in their struggle toward self-determination. Chameleon-like, Lilly avoids direct confrontation by fleeing from it and by adapting to each new, chosen location. Like Hetty, Lilly is amoral, save for her fierce concern for her daughter. Like all Wilson's dominant female protagonists, Lilly is a stubborn survivor. Her motto and her integrity, when circumstances permit, is a variation on Maggie's independence: "A girl's gotta live, hasn't she?" (EL, 169).

Lilly's journey toward respectability involves four connected stages: rejection of difficult beginnings, parthenogenesis, a definite quest, and myth making.

Her beginnings are difficult and lonely. By the time Lilly is ten, she has been neglected and then abandoned, first by her mother and then by her father. She has also been detained by the police for her part in a book-making operation. Lying easily, she escapes from the police who haunt her dreams for the rest of her life. For several months she boards with a woman who teaches her order, some forms of obedience, but nothing of honesty (EL, 151). Before her thirteenth birthday Lilly has become a truant and a runaway.



Her adolescence is no less burdensome. Before working at a Chinese restaurant in Vancouver, Lilly wanders aimlessly. Her passion for things, and Yow's passion for Lilly, result in her seduction and his arrest for the theft of a trousseau and Topaz Edgeworth's English bicycle. Lilly flees from the police and from Yow who becomes her life-long enemy. In Nanaimo Lilly enjoys one year of comparative security, living common-law with a Welshman who keeps his marital status secret. With him, she is compliant but indifferent.

Her pregnancy brings about the first changes in Lilly, as she plots and plans for the child. She undergoes a gradual rebirth, a parthenogenesis, that begins in her late teens and finishes in her fifties. The physical changes alter what Wilson calls her "spiritual chemistry" (EL, 164). A radical dissatisfaction with her entire life leads her to see the Welshman as nothing more than a kennel that she, "a worthless bitch," will soon vacate. Her chance encounter with two pretty, young socialites transforms her vague desire for respectability into an urgent passion. Lilly creates a new identity for herself that separates her from an undesirable past.

The first major step in Lilly's rebirth is her invention of Mrs. Walter Hughes and the demise of Lilly Waller. In this new persona, Lilly is the young widow

of Walter Hughes and the devoted mother of Baby.

Walter Hughes assists both Lilly and her daughter. For Lilly he becomes a mythical friend, a protector, and an emotional outlet for her romanticism. For Baby he is a legitimate, if mythical, father. Walter Hughes is Lilly's chosen means of defence for Eleanor: "My kid's gotta right to have a chance..." (EL, 169).

Calling her daughter Eleanor is the second step in Lilly's transformation. She has taken the name from one of the two "superior beings" at the grocery store. It has a double function. For Baby the name is status, in Lilly's eyes. For Lilly the name is a reminder of the security, freedom, and recognition she passionately seeks for Eleanor. For twenty years Eleanor's name survives. Then a lovely irony occurs. Lilly triumphs when Eleanor marries a promising young lawyer. However, Paul insists on calling Eleanor Nora.

Lilly's rebirth is complete with two final changes in her mid-fifties. She submits to the expertise of the Toronto stylist. Lilly buys a wig, destroys her old clothes, and purchases a small and simple but fashionable wardrobe. J. B. Sprockett, a recent and desolate widower, finds Lilly "a deer in the city," and proposes to her on their second date (EL, 267). Pleased and happy, Lilly anticipates the changes marriage will bring to her isolated existence. Mr. Sprockett gives Lilly his name and unexpected joy when

he calls Lilly Lilian. Marriage will help Lilly join the human community that she avoided sacrificially for almost thirty-five years. In time she will invite Eleanor and Matron to visit her. Protected in this new identity, she even contemplates city walks without fear. Lilly's marvelous adaptability will facilitate these changes. She will exchange her thirty-five years of competence and her firm intention of making Mr. Sprockett happy, for the security and freedom he offers her.<sup>30</sup>

Lilly's lies are a means of self-defence and freedom. These harmless tales begin when she is ten and continue into her middle fifties. They also protect Eleanor. Lilly knows Eleanor's illegitimacy will harm her. Her myths save Eleanor from abuse and offer her a better chance in life, and generously enhance her self-image. Eleanor enjoys a security Lilly never had.

In reality, Lilly is a neglected child and a directionless adolescent who becomes pregnant by an irresponsible man. Seeking a better life for her daughter, Lilly sacrifices forty-five years of her life, living in forced seclusion and meanness. In her myths, Lilly is freer and grander. She becomes the young widow of a romantic rancher, a sister with family down east, and a caretaker

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

of sick relatives. Her myth joins her to the human community; her reality separates her from it. In the end, her marriage ties together the myth and reality of her life. Lilly emerges as a self-possessed, independent woman who finds in marriage a comfortable reality.

Mrs. Butler represents the leisure and luxury of the upper-class. For Eleanor and Lilly, she is a necessary step in their growth. She becomes a foster god-mother to Eleanor and exposes her to poetry, manners, fashion, and elegance. Life with the Butlers seems the answer to Lilly's quest, until she hears Eleanor described as "the maid's child" (EL, 195). Lilly leaves in search of the independence and dignity denied her at the Butlers.

Matron, a typically Wilsonian figure, is a working-class woman, more perceptive and better educated than Lilly. Unmarried, she administers the household staff of the hospital. She is also the sole support of an aging mother. Through Matron's bitter realism, Wilson pronounces the common fate of working-class women: "If she kept well and could work until she was sixty-five, and could continue to save, she would be secure - or almost secure... work, work, work, save and scrimp, and then the arthritis and then old age and what do you get out of life" (EL, 240).

A special relationship similar in quality to Nell Severance's friendship with Maggie Lloyd exists

between Matron and Lilly. Matron is like a sister to Lilly and her sole friend. Lilly receives from Matron the recognition, loyalty, and love she has never known. She also replaces Mrs. Butler as a kind of foster-godmother to Eleanor. As guide and mediator between mother and daughter, Matron helps to bring the two closer.

In Wilson's fiction, marriage frequently helps women: witness Hilda Severance, Lilly, and most of the women in The Innocent Traveller. Matron is a mature and sensitive single woman with a difficult and demanding life.

Mrs. Emblem of "Tuesday and Wednesday" is a strong woman whose three marriages, "two sad cases and one divorce," have made her life pleasant and relatively easy (EL 23). She is also able to control her future, whereas Matron is powerless to change the harsh times ahead of her.

Eleanor and Hetty make an interesting comparison: both girls are illegitimate; both are raised by self-sacrificing devoted mothers who want respectability for their daughters; and both believe their fathers are dead. Yet Eleanor achieves a wholeness in her character while Hetty remains incomplete. Eleanor's maturity illustrates Wilson's belief in family and discipline. Under Lilly's supervision, Eleanor becomes a loving and compassionate woman who in her marriage enjoys the perfection of love reserved for Wilson's elite: Mr. and Mrs. Burnaby,

Nell Severance, and Maggie Lloyd. Deprived of discipline, Hetty becomes a selfish egoist.

Eleanor is a rare success from working-class origins. Like her "father", she is the romantic half of Lilly. Enjoying the happy security her mother provides, Eleanor becomes introspective, poetic, and contemplative. She is Wilson's evidence that such qualities are the products and advantages of class. Donna E. Smyth reminds us that Eleanor accomplishes her change of class through the traditional channels of education and marriage.<sup>31</sup> Lilly's unconventional methods are in the service of very traditional goals.

Swamp Angel is Wilson's finest achievement and her work of greatest complexity. Her skillful manipulation of voice, her handling of place, and her structuring of human experience express her vision of human responsibility and interdependence. Maggie Vardoe and Nell Severance, friends and allies in the quest, are Wilson's most memorable characters. The story is set in urban and rural British Columbia.

Primarily, the story is Maggie's struggle for self-determination and joy. Having lost her first husband and child, Maggie has rashly entered into a humiliating second

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<sup>31</sup> Smyth, "Strong Women in the Web," p. 89.

marriage with Eddie Vardoe from whom she determines, as the novel begins, to escape. Fleeing from Vancouver, Maggie heads north and east. She becomes cook and housekeeper at a lodge owned by Halidar and Vera Gunnarsen on Three Loon Lake, near Kamloops. Her success provokes Vera's jealousy. Deciding not to run from the obstacle which typifies all the difficulties of human relations, Maggie seeks reconciliation with Vera. Consoling her after her half-hearted suicide attempt, and refusing the chance of a highly paid job somewhere else, Maggie remains at the lodge as its physical and spiritual overseer.

On a secondary level, Swamp Angel involves the struggles of Maggie's former human community: Nell Severance, her daughter Hilda, and the rejected Eddie. Nell, an eccentric and visionary old woman, is a kind of foster mother to Maggie. Nell brings about the conventional marriage of her troubled daughter and helps to rehabilitate Eddie Vardoe. Nell accepts her old age when she entrusts her precious revolver to Maggie's care. In a symbolic gesture, Maggie retains the essence of the past by throwing the revolver into Three Loon Lake, the water of life.

The human family, a recurring metaphor in Wilson's fiction, is important to the novel's structure and to the individual quests of the female protagonists which, like any family, has its stronger and weaker characters. Maggie is to

Vera as Nell is to Maggie. Maggie is Vera's foster mother, and Vera is Maggie's lost child. Maggie is Vera's guardian and teacher. In another sense, Nell is Maggie's foster mother, and Maggie is her lost child. Nell is the keeper of wisdom who passes it to the younger Maggie, the growing child, who receives the vision and becomes the visionary.

Maggie's growth involves four major steps: rejection of a bad marriage, economic independence, choice of place, and parthenogenesis. Her growth toward self-determination begins when she makes the difficult decision to reject her bad marriage to Eddie Vardoe. She had married him out of compassion and loneliness. Alberto, Nell's friend, rightly scoffs at the reason for marriage; compassion is not a reason for marriage (SA 62). Maggie has discovered that her marriage has been a betrayal, both to herself and to Eddie. When she chooses to leave him in order to recover her self-respect, Wilson is in feminist territory.

Maggie may feel compassion for Eddie, but she despises the woman she has become as his wife. In leaving him to support herself, Maggie chooses Self over Duty, or the love of Self over the obligation to Duty. Wilson's fiction suggests what Patricia Morley says of Margaret Laurence's fiction: "that we cannot truly love the other without self-respect and self-knowledge." This quest, Maggie's goal, is universal; it is asexual in one sense, yet



in historical or cultural terms it is a quest relevant to modern women.<sup>32</sup>

Like Lilly, Maggie works toward her economic independence with persistent determination and self-discipline. Yet Maggie is no superwoman, her heroism is credible. She has worked hard for her movement forward. Maggie secretly visits a sporting goods store down the Pacific coast. She uses her maiden name, realizing that psychological and economic independence are closely linked. She offers the shopman fishing flies on a free-lance basis, weekly. In one year she discovers she does not need male shelter, financial or emotional. Before the evening dishes, she leaves her prison, carrying a canvas bag, a haversack, a rod and her symbolic yellow bowl.

The northern wilderness is Maggie's choice of place, her "genius loci," a phrase from Hetty Dorval. In Morley Callaghan's fiction, the North represents freedom and peace. Gabrielle Roy, in Where Nests the Water Hen, sees the North as "the last frontier," a place where one is free to love. Blanche Gelfant sees the North as a primitivism untouched by time.<sup>33</sup> The North represents all of these

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<sup>32</sup> See Morley, Laurentian Review, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Blanche Gelfant, "The Hidden Mines in Ethel Wilson's Landscapes (or An American Cat Among Falcons)," The Ethel Wilson Symposium (Ottawa: University of Ottawa press, 1982), p. 130.

things to Wilson.

Here, Maggie's rite of passage takes place. From the lakes, she seeks purification, health and strength. From the mountains, she seeks intellectual, emotional and spiritual vitality. In her quest for freedom and self-possession, Maggie turns from the fallible order of man to the fine balance of the natural order. Finally, she self-confidently takes her place at Three Loon Lake.

Maggie also experiences a rebirth, a parthenogenesis, a symbol popular with the Women's Movement. By the water of the Similkameen, at the margin of life, Maggie sheds the memory of her past slavery and is reborn: "time dissolved, and space dissolved, and she smelt again the pinewoods of New Brunswick, one with these, and she was all but a child again" (SA, 38). At the lodge, she begins re-ordering her life.

Barbara Wild describes Maggie as a "woman for others."<sup>34</sup> In her return to personal strength, Maggie initially keeps herself private and inviolate. Her achieved psychological independence is expressed in a typical Wilsonian image: "now I know I am alone, and like a swimmer, I have to make my way on my own power" (SA, 99).

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<sup>34</sup> Wild, "Piety, Propriety, and the Shaping of the Writer," p. 34

She rediscovers her integrity. Choice is a reality. Maggie refuses another position because she sees a meaningful future with the Gunnarsen family.

For the community at Three Loon Lake, Maggie is a humanizing and a civilizing force. In this extended family she is, ironically, not unlike the ideal of Victorian motherhood: for Vera and Mr. Cunningham she is salvation; for Haldar she is hope; for Alan she is maternal guidance; for Joey Quong, she offers new horizons. She is a peacemaker, transforming the lodge into something approaching the ideal community. Maggie's altruism symbolizes Wilson's vision of human interdependence.

As questor, Maggie extends the Victorian sphere of motherhood beyond the natural family to the web of humanity. In her chosen role as Independent Servant, she continues the mission of regeneration given to Victorian women, and her journey is traditional to women's culture. In her individual quest Maggie becomes a strong, self-determined, introspective woman. She is an altruist and an idealist; Wilson's greatest questor is guardian of others.

Nell Severance, one of Wilson's wise old women, is a character who takes on symbolic quality. She is really the mother of all Wilson's women, and the character who most resembles Wilson herself. Maggie is primarily an idealist, and Nell, a realist familiar with the ironic vicissitudes

of time and the human dilemma. Age affords her an amused and ironic sense of detachment. Nell, the Juggler, juggles time and people: one minute she is caught up in her memories; the next minute, she is absorbed in her matchmaking. Unlike Maggie, Nell relishes her victories. At her best, she is a proud woman who learns to accept death and the loss of independence that accompanies old age.

Nell's youth was spent in the unconventional life of the circus. To her juggling she brought energy, timing and passion. Philip was probably attracted to her sensuality. In their bohemian life together, Nell was a reluctant radical. Ironically, she was conventional and wanted marriage for herself, her family and, eventually, for Hilda. Philip wished them to live together without marriage, and Nell assented. Consequently, Philip's family ostracized them.

Their possessive, even obsessive love excluded their daughter Hilda. For Nell loving Philip was joyful and painful: "I knew I was in the web, I did the best I could in the web, and it takes God himself to be fair to two people at once" (SA, 151). Neglected, Hilda grew resentful and jealous of her mother. Nell's penalty is seeing and accepting Hilda's insecurity and continuing resentment.

The Swamp Angel is a powerful and complex symbol. It has significance from the past: for Nell it represents love and artistic achievement; for Hilda, neglect and pain.

It also has significance in the present: for Nell it is an object of love (like Maggie's yellow bowl), and an escape from present boredom; for Hilda, her toleration of it becomes her secret and unique gift to her mother. Until her fall, the revolver is Nell's delight. Her fall exposes her "in her bulk ... she who was private had lost all privacy; she and her house had been exposed" (SA 79). Nell then makes the painful decision to relinquish the gun and to entrust it to a worthy recipient, Maggie.

Nell is Wilson's deepest questor because she moves from self-determination to human trust to acceptance. Nell has the detachment of the true questor that enables her to journey to a place in life where, as Wilson says, "she is able to lose everything and yet retain everything at the same time."<sup>35</sup> Commending the gun to Maggie is an act of trust that extends from one generation to another. This fine gesture of human commitment is repeated in Margaret Laurence's The Diviners with Morag's gift of the plaid pin to Pique.

Hilda, Nell's neglected adult child, is filled with self-pity. While Nell and Philip travel to exotic places, Hilda's youth is mostly spent locked up in schools. There, youngsters ridicule and exclude her for her parents'

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<sup>35</sup> Stouck, "The Ethel Wilson Papers," p. 51. Stouck is quoting from an unfinished manuscript by Wilson.

unconventional life style: "Isn't it a scream...And she hasn't got a real home" (SA 50).

Accumulating pain she cannot share with her mother, Hilda becomes a conventional but insecure woman. In fact, both mother and daughter harbour secrets: Nell to protect Hilda, never tells her she never married; for her part, Hilda secretly suffers Nell her Swamp Angel.

In Hilda's quest, her growth begins in marriage. She who is self-protecting and mistrustful, dares to commit herself to love, though not with Nell's reckless abandon. Hilda's and Albert's is a reasoned and disciplined love (SA 121). Happy at last to be in a conventional family, Hilda thrives on domesticity and spoils her two children as compensation for her childhood. Nell comments on the quality of their marital bliss: "I think Albert and Hilda have a very fair working chance. They will not have perfect love but I foresee a kind of happiness and am thankful" (SA 128). Nell's death ironically releases Hilda, and in marriage she finds her identity: "Can this be Hilda Severance, the scornful one, daughter of Nell Severance? No, this is Hilda Cousens, blender of bottles, mother of Monty, who is writing to Maggie" (SA 154).

Vera, a victim of her own jealous insecurity, is a lonely and troubled woman. Still clinging to the memory of an unhappy childhood, she is threatened by people, even

places, and she is forever caught up in destructive love/hate relationships. Like Mort and Myrt Johnson (EL), Vera deceives herself and spreads dissension.

Her marriage to Haldar Gunnarsen, a coupling of mismatched personalities, cannot survive Haldar's semi-crippling accident: "She had the assumption that Haldar's happiness came first with her and that she was the most unselfish of women. It was a good assumption but it was not true" (SA 93). City-bred Vera temporarily surrenders to Haldar's rural dream because she hopes for quick success that will most certainly advance their future, in the city. Haldar's physical handicap, which he refuses to acknowledge, traps her in his obsessive dream of a fishing lodge in the wilderness. She literally blames the lodge for his accident (SA 71). She cripples him further with guilt until their marriage begins to sour. Lacking perception and sensitivity, Vera is soon threatened by Maggie's success and strength: "What is it? What does she wear, do, be that makes her like she is and different from me and better than me and all so quick?" (SA 113)

Determined to destroy Maggie, Vera fires her without anticipating repercussions. Haldar rejects her; she half-heartedly attempts suicide, then runs to Maggie for help. Nell believes that Vera is "hell-bound," but Maggie decides to stay and struggle for Vera.

The self-destructive Vera is Maggie's lost child. Despite their threatening relationship, Maggie believes she cannot reject her: "If I cannot cope with Vera and her folly, thought Maggie, I've failed" (SA 140). In Vera's jealousy, Wilson represents all human frailty and self-destruction. Vera challenges Maggie's strength and endurance. Maggie's greatest ordeal is Vera's suicide attempt: "She could not think what to say to Vera. She did not know what words to use to exorcise the Evil One" (SA 147). Maggie anoints the fearful woman with the lighted and warm refuge of her tiny room. Vera does not grow, but Maggie grows in coping with her. Vera, then, is a catalyst in Maggie's growth toward maturity.

Hilda is another lost child who is still resentful. By facilitating her marriage to Albert, Nell provides Hilda with the means to her ultimate fulfillment in marriage and parenthood. Nell's death also causes further independent growth in Hilda (SA 154). Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel affords an interesting comparison. Both Marvin Shipley and Hilda Severance, repudiated children and insecure adults, find release in the death of strong, dominating mothers.

Maggie and Nell share an apocalyptic mother/daughter relationship. Each is a means of truth for the other. Nell's story of her own life becomes for Maggie a meaningful myth: "So Nell has gone now. She is my greatest friend and the



friend of my spirit ... Even if she had never moved from her house, what a life she had lived, the worldly unworldly woman. For me there is no one like her" (SA 154).

The Swamp Angel is Nell's blessing to Maggie, a recognition of kinship, a bond, a communal trust. The exchange of the gun confirms the relationship between visionary and inheritor. In receiving the revolver and relinquishing it to the mystical water of the lake, Maggie admits the chain of interdependence. Nell's wisdom helps her to accept the darkness in Vera and the difficulties and challenges in her own life.

Through Nell, Maggie acknowledges her journey's end and recognizes herself, not as an island, but as part of an evolving cosmos. With Nell's death, Maggie is struck by the ageless vulnerability, the inevitable finality of life. The seer is mutable; the vision eternal, inherited. There may be no one to remember the memorable Swamp Angel: "Yet does the essence of all custom and virtue perish?" (SA 151)

With this inherited vision, Maggie recognizes that limitations of humanity, and a mystery of faith, are part of a larger fluctuating and interdependent whole: "When all was still the fish, who had fled, returned, flickering, weaving curiously over the Swamp Angel. Then flickering, weaving, they resumed their way" (SA 157).

One cannot read Wilson and Laurence without acknowledging their mutual admiration: Near the beginning of Laurence's publishing career, Wilson wrote to her to congratulate the younger writer.<sup>36</sup> The letter was received at a time when Laurence was experiencing difficulties in getting published.<sup>37</sup> Laurence later acknowledged how much it meant to her at the time.<sup>38</sup> Aspects of Swamp Angel and The Innocent Traveller are reflected in The Stone Angel and The Diviners.

Longevity, like Topaz Edgeworth's and Hagar Shipley's is a common feature in the fictional characters of both writers. Parthenogenesis is also a characteristic of their fiction. Maggie Lloyd and Morag Gunn abandon destructive marriages and rediscover a lost identity in the process of rebirth. Water, the prime agent of purification, is a recurring metaphor in the two writers' fiction: Maggie the swimmer has mystical power; Morag discovers the gift of divination.

Both writers uphold the vision of human interdepend-

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<sup>36</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences," in Margaret Laurence, ed. W.H. New (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977), p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

ence. The principal characters journey toward individual and social responsibility. Female protagonists are also introspective: Maggie journeys toward psychic and spiritual maturity; Morag attempts to come to terms with her psychic and sexual power. Both Maggie and Morag learn to cope with the formidable strength they both possess.

Wilson encourages the introspection that Laurence explores and refines. Wilson's protagonists are primarily altruistic and idealistic. With the rare exception of Hetty Dorval and Nell Severance, her women are not sensual. In this area, Wilson and Laurence differ sharply. Laurence's women struggle with sexuality and they also struggle toward spiritual and physical freedom. Laurence singles out three Canadian writers whom she calls "sodbusters" and literary inspirations to her generation: Ethel Wilson, Sinclair Ross, and Hugh MacLennan.<sup>39</sup>

Wilson's women as we have seen, range over a broad spectrum of abilities, class, and time. The Innocent Traveller shows us the varied but limited journeys of women within male-oriented cultures, British and Canadian. Hetty Dorval contrasts two women of different class and vastly different temperament. Lilly Waller Hughes Sprockett is

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<sup>39</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Ivory Towers or Grassroots: The Novelist as Socio-Political Being," in A Political Art. Essays and Images in Honour of George Woodcock, ed. William H. New (Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1978), p. 18-19.

transformed from a homeless vagrant into a mother with a passion for respectability, and thence into "the rebirth of a new woman" (EL 255). Maggie Lloyd gives us Wilson's greatest introspective who achieves responsible freedom and maturity. Wilson's unique contribution to the feminine form of the quest myth may well be her peculiar interest in and sensitivity towards social class. The latter factor becomes a critical element in her fictional women's psychological and spiritual quests.

### Chapter III

#### 'Everyman is a peeces of the continent': Wilson's Metaphors

"The metaphors are not mixed. The drop of water, the bird, the water-glider, the dancer, the wind on the canal, and Topaz, are all different and all the same"

#### Author's Note, The Innocent Traveller

Image patterns recur in all Wilson's fiction, patterns of houses, places, and animals. Water, mountains, and wilderness areas are typical terrain. These metaphors form a network of analogies which express the vision caught in the epigraphs from Donne: a vision of involvement, human interconnectedness, responsibility, integrity, and love.

Wilson's favourite metaphors are as old as literature. Houses have always represented their occupants and the lives which they contain. Wilson's fictional houses embody her Protestant values, where the individual and his/her social group are equally important and inseparably connected. St. Paul expresses this vision in his well-known analogy of the human body where the parts of the body each have their function and role to play, and the health or sickness of one effects inevitably the health or sickness of the whole (1 Cor.- 12:8-31). In The Innocent Traveller, for example,

the Puritan ideals of integrity, order, and authority are embodied in the Edgeworth-Hastings family and their Victorian house. In Hetty Dorval, the Burnaby ranch house and Hetty's bungalow form the poles of familial love and irresponsible egotism.

Houses, along with images of mountains, water, and animals are part of Wilson's fictional setting which she calls the genius of place. George Bowering, writing of James Beaney's poetry, notes that West Coast writers commonly used the word "locus" for their region: "Our Vancouver pet-word had been locus... It is significant that we had to find a new (for us) term. We could have said 'place' ..."<sup>1</sup> It would seem then that Wilson's use of the term either established a tradition or continued it. In Hetty Dorval, the adult Frankie reflects on what the wilderness scenery of her youth has meant to her: "The thing goes deeper than like and dislike. It is the genius. To some, the genius of place is inimicable, to some it is kind... My genius of place is a god of water. I have lived where two rivers flow together..." (HD 55-56). Compare Swamp Angel, when Maggie has just arrived at Three Loon Lake: "Meeting partakes in its very essence not only

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<sup>1</sup> George Bowering. A Way With Words (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1982), p. 38.

of the persons but of the place of meeting. And that essence of place remains, and colours, faintly, the association, perhaps for ever" (SA, 75). Both contexts leave us in doubt as to who is speaking, the protagonist or the omniscient narrative voice. The body of Wilson's work suggests, however, that the views are those of the author.

If Hetty Dorval is a paradigm of Wilson's fiction, as we have argued above, we would expect its image patterns to be significant and representative, as indeed they are. There are three principal houses: the Burnaby ranch house, Hetty's bungalow and, less importantly, Cliff House in Cornwall. The ranch house symbolizes the lives it contains. The Burnaby family's trust, love, and security are expressed through the meals they share, their fireside talks, and their cooperative work. Other archetypal symbols of fruition and joy surround the house, such as a large water-wheel, an excellent kitchen garden, and a small orchard.

Hetty's bungalow, by contrast, images isolation. It stands by itself, east of Lytton above the racing Thompson River, relatively inaccessible. It contains two women, one of whom is ignorant of the fact that the other is her mother. A large window holds an incredibly beautiful but limited outside view. Hetty's furnishings, which include a small grand piano, have transformed the small bungalow into a

place of beauty and art. Frankie calls it "a revelation... in comfort and colour" (HD 16). Yet this is the house which Frankie's parents buy and exercise: "So now Hetty Dorval's bungalow belonged to my mother, and my mother had opened the windows and Hetty had been blown out and away" (HD 48)

Cliff House serves as a Cornish variant on the Burnaby ranch. Significantly, it is the target of Hetty's attack. Frankie's friends embody her parents' values which are also Donne's and Wilson's. The Tretheweys' kindnesses to Frankie, when extended to her "friend" Hetty, threaten to destroy them. It is the security of this house and its occupants which Frankie is determined to defend.

Central to the place of Frankie's life and imagination are the Thompson and Fraser Rivers. One of her first memories and joys is of looking down on the joining of the two, "where the expanse of emerald and sapphire dancing water joins and is quite lost in the sullen Fraser. It is a marriage, where, as often in marriage, one overcomes the other, and one is lost in the other" (HD 61). The image is initially puzzling, since the Burnaby marriage in the narrative is a particularly happy one; as Sister Marie Cécile tells Frankie after her father's death, "your parents have between them the perfection of human love" (HD 61). It could symbolize Hetty's liaisons, where Hetty's powerful



personality dominates her various partners and intended prey, Richard.

A more startling analogy is suggested by the conjunction of the rivers when we consider the symbolic relationship of Hetty and Frankie as alter-egos, or Shadows in the Jungian sense. Their meeting and friendship represent the coming together of innocence and experience, good and evil, spirituality and sensuality, beauty and practicality. Hetty's beauty infatuates Frankie: a word used by Frankie to describe the water's effects upon her. In Jungian terms, the conjoined flow of the two rivers suggests the sexuality which is still beyond Frankie's experience but with which she will have to come to terms.

The contrasting rivers, one emerald-sapphire, one muddy and sullen, also suggest the duality in Hetty's face. The profile is spiritual, the full face sensual. Like the Thompson River, the profile is controlled by the stronger full face. Her profile is passive, the full face (the dominating personality) animated. The profile, the angelic part of Hetty, is the initial bait for innocents like Frankie, Terence Connot, and Richard Trethewey. The hook beneath the bait is Hetty's full face, her sensuality. Yet it is the ironic combination of the two that allures and continues to disturb her prey. Frankie has to admit her uncertainty: "How much of Hetty was artful and how much was

artless I still could not tell" (HD 66). In her own personality and in her liaisons, the coup de grâce is her sensuality that is, like the Fraser River, potent, silent, and absorbing.

For Wilson, as we have seen, place inevitably colours association for its human inhabitants. Frankie and Hetty's meeting has taken place in the Lillooet area of British Columbia, a fact that neither Wilson nor Hetty will allow us to forget. On the night of their final confrontation in London, together in Frankie's apartment, Hetty recalls the wonder and beauty in the Lillooet which to her has meant freedom (HD 87-88). In Frankie's memories, the wilderness is inescapably linked with Hetty and with the changes in Frankie's perception of her:

I remembered the two-coloured rivers. And my home. What a strange Hetty, after such an evening, calling up this magic - for it was a disturbing magic to me, the genius of my home - and Hetty's smart wrinkly gloves lying on the floor, her little black hat there too. I remembered Lytton, and the rivers, and the Bridge, all as real as ever in British Columbia while we looked at each other in London, yet saw them plainly (HD 88).

In London, the new maturity Frankie has acquired makes her see Hetty differently; she is now "a little old." Hetty's beauty no longer has the illusion of permanence which the mountains reflected. But Hetty asleep allows Frankie to

recover the vision of interconnectedness: "There is that in sleep which reduces us all to one common denominator of helplessness and vulnerable humanity... A sleeping human being is all people, sleeping, everywhere since time began" (HD 89).

The most significant animal imagery concerns Hetty. She is a human cat, even a monster. Hetty, like the cats in Wilson's fiction is indifferent and self-indulgent. Frankie, who uses the metaphor, feels Hetty is guilty, without malice, of great wrongdoing (HD 24). To some degree, Frankie's opinion of Hetty is correct. For example, Hetty wants Richard. That Molly will suffer the loss of her brother is no concern of Hetty's. She never burdens herself with responsibility, but "sheds people" as easily as cats shed hair. Hetty is also Torquil the Lobster Boy, a grotesque variant on the analogy. In this implicit metaphor, Wilson poses the question of Hetty's moral responsibility and leaves it an unanswered ethical problem: "Was Torquil the subject of some affliction that separated him tragically from his fellows, or did he put on his snappers in the morning and at night unscrew them to go to bed?" (HD 36) Indeed, critics have called Hetty everything from a "psychopath"<sup>2</sup> to a "victim."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> P.M. Hinchcliffe, "To Keep the Memory of So Worthy a Friend," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 11, 2 (Spring, 1973), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Beverley Mitchell, "The Right Word in the Right Place," p. 82.

To both women, the wild geese and the horses are personal images of freedom. Frankie, supported by ethics, has the more mature concept. The "swiftly moving company" of geese travelling to ordained destinations makes her conscious of the laws within the natural order (HD 14). She recognizes that the unity and self-discipline of the geese are essentials of their freedom. Hetty, however, seems more taken with the apparent spontaneity of the geese: " ' Can we often see that? ' she asked. " Will it ever come again? ' " (HD 16) By mistaking their self-discipline for spontaneity, Hetty confuses freedom with licence.

In The Innocent Traveller, image patterns recur that exemplify Victorian and Canadian cultures and express Wilson's vision of community, interdependence, and responsibility. There are five principal houses: the Edgeworth's mansion, Mrs. Porter's School for Young Ladies, the Hastings' Vancouver house, their summer retreat, and the elderly Topaz's apartment. The Edgeworth's Victorian house in the Midlands represents the orderly lives it supports. The Edgeworth family's Puritan ideals of integrity, order, and authority are expressed in the close unity of family members, in the strict decorum of family dinners, and in the reverence given to the family patriarch. Mother's funeral is "Decorum, decorum, sorrow and decorum" (IT 9). Other archetypal symbols of security and serenity support their second residence, Elder House, such as the private

grounds that surround it, and the trees and gardens that remove it from the harsher realities of Ware.

The education that Topaz receives in Mrs. Porter's School for Young Ladies is "not a classical education but the English reflection of a classical education which tintured her whole life, and particularly an unknown part of her" (IT 34). This comment, along with a nearby reference to Pan, suggests the repressed sensuality which a Victorian culture has bestowed on Emily Porter and Topaz.

The Hastings' house serves as a Canadian version on the Edgeworth mansion. Annie, Rachel, and Topaz create a microcosm of Puritan ideals in their Vancouver home: religious inspiration; filial piety; and loyalty to tradition, to reason, and education.

A comical episode at the Hastings' cottage on Benbow Island provides a further variant on houses as metaphors for lives and cultures. Topaz decides to sleep out one night, but is eventually driven inside when strange noises remind her of Pan. The incident ingeniously juxtaposes two cultures, a sophisticated urban one which encompasses Nature as pastoral or myth, and a newer provincial one where Nature is the Canadian wilderness.

The apartment where Topaz spends her last days represents, like Hagar Shipley's hospital room, a life that is shrinking to essentials and moving towards death: "Now her

world is bounded by one room... There is only her room and a friend ("Who is it?") coming in at the door, to be greeted with tremulous delight" (IT, 273).

The genius of place, in this novel, is twofold. There is the pottery town of Ware in Staffordshire, and Vancouver, British Columbia. Ware is caught symbolically in the opening scene at the Edgeworth's dinner table. The revered Mr. Matthew Arnold is an honoured guest. Clothing, service, food, conversation, and behaviour all embody the Victorian ideals of decorum, propriety, reason, and education. Arnold's suggestion that the latter be extended to girls strikes father as a "novel" idea. The winds of change, including changes for women, are felt in this dialogue on the very first page.

Wilson strikes the note again after the Edgeworths move to Elder House. The parents' lives continue to represent "a comfortable Victorian splendour," but their children "had begun to demonstrate vicissitude and change" (IT, 39). Topaz's undignified and comical interruptions in the opening scene also function symbolically in a novel devoted to women's lives. The irrepressible Topaz does not change: this is both her weakness and her strength.

Canada is not only a new country but a new culture. Its central significance are freedom and unconventionality: "This is a free country, isn't it," asks Topaz, as the train carries them westward: "now that you've come to Canada, you

know, you'll have to be less conventional" (IT, 109).

It is courageous of the three women (Annie, Topaz, and Annie's unmarried daughter Rachel) to venture here alone. Topaz anticipates "a fresh free life which she was eager to enjoy" (IT, 92). The Northern Lights and the great St. Lawrence River belong to this place. Water, northernness, and wilderness terrain, in Wilson's fiction, represent freedom, growth, change, and passing time. Annie anticipates learning new ways, and welcomes the change.

In British Columbia, the women come under the spell of the mountains, the dark forests, and the ocean. Annie sees God in this landscape, in "this golden world" (IT, 119). The mountains bring biblical metaphors to her mind. The journey by ship and rail which brings the women to their new home is itself a metaphor for their various quests. To Topaz, this "open country" is a cause for rejoicing. She literally dances for joy in this new space. As for the narrator's voice, it speaks in semi-religious terms of the mountains' "spell," of the "grace and strength" of the Lions' Gate Bridge, and of the beauty of this place" (IT, 122-23).

Topaz herself is a metaphor, as Wilson reminds us in the novel's epigraph (quoted above). Bird and insect imagery in The Innocent Traveller center on this character. Topaz is by turn, a water-glider, a twittering bird, a thrush, a fly, a seagull. The water-glider of the epigraph is the irresponsible

Topaz skating over the surface of life, unaware or innocent of the tangled depths of human relationships. In an extension of the metaphor over two pages, Topaz becomes "a water-glider of considerable education" (IT, 103-104). The grotesque or inappropriate nature of the image turns it into a conceit, an ingenious and extended metaphor such as we find in seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets like Donne, from whom Wilson has absorbed both vision and technique.

The bird and insect analogies, for Topaz, seem to revolve around this pattern of frivolity, of superficiality, and of constant motion. She is described as talking constantly for ninety-seven years. At William Sandbach's concert, Topaz is a twittering thrush: "She was not aware of the deep knowledge, the frustration, and the exultation of the conductor..." (IT, 45). En route to their Vancouver home, the disorganized women light on the train "crying and exclaiming like shorebirds" (IT, 102).

Topaz is not, however, without her deeper side. Near the novel's beginning, the narrative voice seems to praise Topaz for being an individual, while the other women are submerged in their roles as mothers, daughters, wives. Something of her pride, stubborn individuality, endurance, and gusto are reflected in an implicit metaphor, near the end of her life. Topaz is linked with the seagulls which assemble in Stanley Park and come to her window sill for food. The gulls are



proud, majestic, indifferent, arrogant, and amoral (IT 259-263). They are pitiless, yet Topaz delights in them. In the evening, the gulls fly westward "on their appointed flight"; grey below, silver above. Their mysterious and exulting flight suggests Topaz's imminent death.

Water and journeying are also recurring metaphors for human lives and one becomes the image of the other. Topaz, after reading "The Buried Life" by Matthew Arnold, gives a personal application: " ' My life rose in Staffordshire and I suppose it's going out into the Pacific Ocean ' " (IT 253). The narrative voice compares her life journey to travelling on a canal. This image, developed at length, suggests sound construction and administration (Victorian culture?), comfort, and clearly defined boundaries. Through the pattern of metaphors expressing Topaz's life, the other lives of The Innocent Traveller, and its two changing cultures, are brought together.

In "Lilly's Story," the series of rooms which house the protagonist chart her long journey from humiliation and insecurity to middle-class respectability. She moves from a boarding house to shared quarters with a Welsh miner. Her current dissatisfaction with herself is expressed in a startling metaphor: "Ranny was only a kennel into which a homeless worthless bitch crawls away from the rain..." (EL 164). After her baby's birth, Lilly finds refuge with an upper-class family near Comox, on Vancouver Island. Her small room here offers

"a place where Baby could grow up like folks" (EL 174). It will never, regrettably, be anything but the maid's room, and Eleanor will be the maid's child. Her comfortable refuge with the Butlers, Lilly realizes, is only "a beautiful dead end in the green of the countryside" (EL 172).

At the hospital in the Fraser Valley, Lilly's small house symbolizes dignity, freedom, independence, and joy: "She who had been homeless, had now a home, and in Lilly's eyes, this conferred a dignity upon her" (EL 206). From this isolated base, Lilly builds "the edifice... of which Mrs. Walter Hughes and her child was the culmination" (EL 210). Here, Eleanor grows into an ideal young woman, and from here, achieves the "magic" of a happy marriage.

Lilly's final home, as Mrs. Lillian Sprockett, represents security, happiness, and a caring love. Comically, she is content to share a "ménage à trois" with Bessy Sprockett and her husband (EL 277). Here she would be secure and without fear. Miss Larue's "adaptation" has assisted at "the rebirth of a free woman" (EL 255). With the addition of the wig to the persona of Mrs. Walter Hughes, Lilly finally achieves the perfection of her disguise. Comically, she carries her last house, or disguise, around with her like a turtle, and she walks secure in the knowledge.

The distinctive atmosphere of various particular locations and the maturing character of Lilly determine her

choice of residence. Fear, a desire for security, and growth require five different settings: Vancouver, Nanaimo, Comox, the Fraser Valley, and Toronto. Vancouver is an inimicable and fearful place for Lilly. The difficult beginnings, the abandonment, and the childhood neglect are harmful and repressive. In Vancouver, Lilly is a shiftless, aimless, and vulnerable teenager: "She took things as they came, living where she could and with whom she could, working only when she had to, protecting herself by lies or by truth, and always keeping on the weather side of the police" (EL 156). In her waitressing days, Lilly has no persona, and she is without the defenses which it might provide. Her fear of arrest and her hurried flight to Nanaimo reveal a strong feature of her character, a keen and stubborn instinct for survival.

The mining town of Nanaimo, an isolated refuge, is significant for Lilly's growth. En route, "the consolation of sea and wind and strange wooded shore" lessen her fear and restore her strength (EL 160). In her early days at Nanaimo, the fugitive is generally unaware of the life around her. Her pregnancy, however, brings about a class consciousness. Rejecting the monotony of the working-class wives' existence, she determines to obtain for her child the security, manners, and comfort of the "superior beings" she encounters in Nanaimo. One of them is called Eleanor. Lilly invents a persona; from a bitch, Lilly becomes Mrs. Walter Hughes, a

young middle-class widow. In Nanaimo, Lilly sets up her plan; from here she takes the name of Eleanor for her daughter. She now determines to seek a new place that offers both security and possibility for the plan.

The "genius" of Comox is its aura of security, isolation, fruition, and permanence. Located near an estuary, Comox ~~is~~ a place of beginnings. Its security encourages Lilly's myth-making. On the way to the Butlers, Lilly creates a past for Walter Hughes and a family for herself. Comox is a land of plenty, a place of permanence and hope and growing things. For Eleanor, it is also a place for instruction: for poetry, for manners, for fashion.

Yet Comox is also a cruel reality. It is a land of hunter and hunted where bird and animal and reptile are prey. Lilly becomes Mr. Butler's prey; Eleanor is caught in the vice of class: "She's the maid's child" (EL 195). Comox ironically harbours both security and threat. Here Lilly and Eleanor achieve necessary growth, but Lilly's plan enjoys only limited success.

The next stage in Lilly's life requires a place more public than Comox, but less threatening than Vancouver. Stronger now and less vulnerable, Lilly becomes housekeeper at a remote hospital in the Canadian Rockies. Surrounded by her own kind and befriended by Matron, Lilly is more secure and communicative. Yet the final stage of security, a willingness

to face the outside world, eludes her: "The world outside did not exist for her..." (EL 209). Lilly's isolated existence becomes burdensome after Eleanor leaves. Then her nemesis reappears. Yow proves to be a frightening but ultimately happy accident. He could expose Lilly's past associations in Vancouver. Yet this fear is an important force that propels Lilly into the final stage of her development and eventual liberation.

Toronto is Lilly's last, most public refuge. The sophistication of the city (its "genius of place") has a definite effect on her. Lilly becomes dissatisfied with her appearance and conscious of her peer group: "she saw many older women also whose well groomed heads seemed the key to an appearance she admired" (EL 250). Lilly's new clothes and 'adaptation' complete and secure the persona of Mrs. Walter Hughes. Lilly Waller is forever buried from public view. Lillian Sprockett will be free and secure.

Wilson's handling of animal imagery varies significantly according to the nature of the protagonist and her experience. Birds and fish are used to suggest intellect and compassion in Maggie Lloyd, whereas animal patterns associated with Lilly emphasize physical responses. Lilly's actions are animalistic: she crouches, sniffs, crawls. She smells fear, or tastes it.

Like Hetty Dorval, Lilly Waller is a human cat, hunter and hunted, cunning, capable, quick. Before her pregnancy,

Lilly is indiscriminate. She is eager for food, indifferent to her mother's planned desertion, and as unconcerned for the future as the little yellow cat: "Indeed, the only difference between Lilly and the cat in their apprehension of a future was that some day, no doubt, Lilly would plan for a tomorrow and the cat never would" (EL 146).

Indifferent to Yow's capture, she hides like an animal, "doubling and twisting, for some escape" (EL 157). Visiting Eleanor, Lilly can smell the police. Terror springs at her when Yow reappears. She shrinks from sight "like a silent animal withdrawing into a corner of the forest" and crawls toward her cottage door (EL 242, 243).

Yow and Lilly live double lives, and their doubleness functions symbolically. Both are, in some sense, predators, a quality inherent in upward mobility. At the Hastings' Yow is faithful, efficient, even loving. But in pursuit of his "white lady-friend," Yow is cunning, brutal, and dishonest. Lilly Waller is materialistic and promiscuous. Yet in her pursuit of respectability, Mrs. Walter Hughes is self-sacrificing and loving.

Other animal imagery represents Lilly's vulnerability and capability. With the Welshman Lilly is temporarily vulnerable, a bitch seeking refuge in his kennel (EL 164). Yet at the Butlers' we are reminded that Lilly is as capable as salmon of swimming against the harsher currents of life (EL 170).

In Toronto, J.B. Sprockett's initial view of Lilly as a startled deer seems strange. This view is consistent with his myth of her, as a sacrificial mother (EL 271). Yet Lilly is, in the narrator's phrase, a "self possessed deer." The proposal represents freedom; Lilly determines, in exchange, to offer comfort and joy.

The china hound and horse on Mrs. Butler's mantelpiece, and the Darwinian chain Lilly witnesses at the cemetery, are potent symbols. The hunt represents the universal predatory tone of life: "Around and among the grasses myriad invisible hunts went on" (EL 193). P.M. Hinchcliffe says that Lilly is without Maggie's understanding and that the scene draws very little response from her.<sup>4</sup> Yet its position in the novella is significant. A few hours later, the town labels Eleanor "the maid's daughter." Now the scene becomes analogous to her situation. She is "alert, alarmed, hunted," and determined to leave (EL 196). Lilly's seven years with the Butlers, though necessary for her growth, was merely an illusion of security. She is, in a sense, the prey of a class-oriented society.

Where the predatory chain images the immediacy of the hunt, the china figures image the permanence of the hunt. The two figures together image the duality of life. The happy horse is forever satisfied, forever spared the hunt. The melancholy

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<sup>4</sup> Hinchcliffe, Journal of Canadian Fiction, p. 64.

hound is forever dependent, forever a predator. The duality represented by the two figures is harmony and disunity, faith and fear, innocence and experience. Desmond Pacey makes a significant comment on the mirror that holds the scene: "the mirror reflects the formal reality of the visible world... as thesis and antithesis."<sup>5</sup>

Similar patterns of houses, places, animals, and journeys reach new levels of complexity in Swamp Angel. Images link its characters and add to our understanding of them. They illustrate the success or failure of the various quests. Many are changeable, ambivalent, expressing the different goals and attitudes of the characters.

There are six significant houses in this novel. The Vardoe house imprisons Maggie in contempt and loathing: "I'm always unfair, now, to Edward. I hate everything he does. He has only to hang up his hat and I despise him" (SA 17). Living with Eddie humiliates Maggie and undermines her identity. But for Eddie, the house means security and prestige. Without Maggie, its meaning for Eddie changes, and he finally abandons it.

A small yellow bowl symbolizes Maggie's wholeness, harmony, and peace: "It seemed to her that she held in her hand all beauty in a cheap yellow Chinese bowl" (SA 25). Its purchase had led her to the Quong family taxi business, and

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<sup>5</sup> Pacey, Ethel Wilson, pp. 132-133.



to her choice of Joey Quong as driver on the night of her escape. Their house, shared with two other families, is crowded and noisy. It is, nevertheless, a place of harmony: "There was almost ceaseless clatter, but the noise was not of crying or of anger" (SA, 43). The Quong household breathes security and mutual trust. Maggie shares in this atmosphere by choosing the young Chinese knight to assist in her rescue of herself (SA, 23, 108).

The Severance house is ambiguous: "The house was ugly and cramped, and had been rushed up about fifteen years before.... The windows were both too plain and too fancy" (SA, 77). The house images the relationship between Nell and her daughter. Hilda has been neglected for years, while her mother travelled with the circus. The two women are eventually thrown together. The relationship is volatile, since Hilda still resents her earlier neglect and her mother's freedom. Nell retains that feeling of freedom, despite the smallness of their house, while Hilda's inhibitions and conventionality are encouraged (SA, 76-77). In this house Hilda remains a resentful child.

Wilson's Christian mysticism is caught in her handling of archetypes: water, mountains, and wilderness terrain. The flux of water flanked by quiescent mountains images the paradox of permanence and change. Within this context, her protagonists seek to grasp the mystery of individual experience within

the passage of time. They also attempt to grasp the meaning of actions or objects, a meaning valid even beyond physical death. Her fiction, particularly her treatment of place, testifies to the reality of another world, not extraneous to immediate reality, but existing within it. This metaphysics is not original. It belongs to the tradition of European mysticism, as we see from Patrick White's fiction. As epigraph to The Solid Mandala, White takes an epigram from a German medieval philosopher, Meister Eckhart: "It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Wilson everywhere insists on human freedom and responsibility. She is by no means a quietist.

The city of Vancouver symbolizes restriction, but the view from Maggie's window of water and mountains represents promise. To an unhappy and hard-pressed Maggie, the window's view offers the possibility of change: "The escarpment looked solid at times, but certain lights disclosed slope behind slope, hill beyond hill, giving an impression of the mountains which was fluid" (SA 13). The narrator suggests one world existing within another. Maggie determines to leave Vancouver, to seek within herself and rescue the world violated by her second husband.

The North represents a spiritual retreat, a new

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick White, The Solid Mandala (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), epigraph.

departure, and a rebirth for Maggie. Her retreat begins by the Similkameen River near the town of Hope, which for many years was the personification of that virtue. Like many miners before her, Maggie seeks gold from the river, the gold of herself and her peace: "Some rivers are sweet and some are equable.... such was Maggie lying beside it" (SA 37). The first stage of her self-rescue is rest, symbolic of purification: "Time dissolved.... No thought, no memories occupied her" (SA 38). The departure from her past slavery is symbolized by the purgation of her guilt at the river's edge: "her solitude, her troubled mind, and a lifting of her spirit to God by the river brought tears to her eyes" (SA 38). Like tears her guilt slid from her. Spring heralds her rebirth, a soul refreshed with "the respite that perhaps comes to the soul after death" (SA 40). The final effect of the solitary three-day cabin retreat, "after her slavery, and her journey, and her last effort," is equanimity and purpose and rebirth.

The character of the lodge and lake as fecundity is evident from its "genius loci," its symbolic significance for Haldar, and its link with water. The lake is epitomized by the mysterious loons. The water and the tulé grass are dense with trout, geese, and water birds. The intensity of the struggle for survival is represented by the osprey and the eagle. The fawn is innocence; the kitten, capable of stalking a bird, is both innocence and experience. The lodge and the

cabins represent the simplicity and clarity of Haldar's dream.

The vision of the lodge is idealized. The place is Haldar's future, his legacy, and the best part of himself. For Vera the vision is ambivalent: the place symbolizes misfortune and intimidation. Initially the vision of the lodge represented challenge and harmony for Maggie: "Maggie's union with Three Loon Lake was like a happy marriage" (SA 84). When Vera's neurosis surfaces, it represents acceptance and compassion in Maggie. "The dream of the lodge," says Donna E. Smyth, is "the vision of an ideal community" existing in harmony.<sup>7</sup> W.J. Keith describes it as a world that contains cruel and unpleasant manifestations, yet it is a place where "meaningful lives can be led, and joy and fulfilment can be achieved."<sup>8</sup>

The lake sustains the lodge's potential. The fishermen find challenge and bounty in it. For Maggie it is continuing purification, freedom, strength and mystery. For Vera, however, the lake is darkness and danger.

Maggie's cabin, characterized by its simplicity and warmth, is a symbol of humanity: "a room lit by a candle... in a silent and solitary place is a world within itself" (SA 146). Vera runs to this cabin after her suicide attempt.

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<sup>7</sup> Smyth, "Strong Women in the Web," p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> W.J. Keith, "Overview: Ethel Wilson, Providence, and the Vocabulary of Vision," The Ethel Wilson Symposium (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 111.

Maggie knows no words of consolation, but the security of the fire in the small room and Maggie's presence may prove to be salvation for Vera. For Maggie the cabin is her individuality and self-possession.

Bird imagery is used as an analogue of the spiritual quest and it sustains the goal of freedom, a goal common to all her protagonists. The flight of the birds in the very first sentence of the novel images Maggie's departure as a determined necessity. If the planned desertion is discovered, Maggie will plot again, "like the bird who obstinately builds again its destroyed nest. So strong was her intention to depart" (SA 14). The flight of the birds also suggests Maggie's emotional state, and it hints at her rebirth: "A fringe of her mind flew after them." (SA 13).

The indifference of the fish in the last paragraph of the novel is an analogue for worldly survival: the fish are realists, shrewd, practical and sturdy survivors. When the water is again still, the cautious fish approach the revolver Maggie has thrown into the lake. Sensing that the Swamp Angel is unimportant to their existence, "flickering, weaving, they, resumed their way" (SA 157). The ooze at the bottom of the lake and the contrast of "light" and "sunlight" suggest Darwin's theory of the primordial beginnings of earth and life and catch Wilson's concept of "the everlasting web." The repetition of "flickering, weaving" reflects Donne's vision of

human interdependence and interconnectedness and Wilson's central preoccupation.

She seems to suggest that some values are subjective. Although the revolver shares the lake with the fish, it has no value for them. Its virtue does survive with the individual; in this case, it survives with Nell.

The fawn and the kitten, the osprey and the eagle which attract Maggie's attention symbolize duality. The three changes that occur in the kitten symbolize the passage from innocence to experience. The crouching kitten in its violent pose is like Vera's selfishness and jealousy, provoked by Maggie's goodness. Desmond Pacey says that the fawn and kitten together are Wilson's statement that compassion and cruelty are natural qualities that coexist.<sup>9</sup> The osprey and the eagle are an analogue for the human struggle and the pattern of human existence: rage and acceptance, defeat and victory. This compelling fight thrills Maggie and strengthens her resolve where Vera is concerned. Win or lose, she is committed to Vera.

The description of the sleeper, a famous passage (SA 91), images the vulnerable aspect of humanity and suggests its redemptive possibilities. It follows immediately after Maggie's fight with Vera. The passage emphasizes the human need for comfort and a selfless response to that silent

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<sup>9</sup> Pacey, Ethel Wilson, p. 9.

demand. Maggie realizes that she may have to respond to Vera unselfishly and expect nothing in return:

There is a beautiful action. It has operative grace. It is when, seeing some uneasy sleeper cold and without cover, goes away, finds and brings a blanket, bends down, and covers the sleeper because the sleeper is a loving being and is cold. He then returns to his work, forgetting that he has performed this small act of compassion. He will receive neither praise nor thanks. It does not matter. That is a beautiful action which is divine and human in posture and intention and self-forgetfulness. Maggie was compassionate and perhaps she would be able to serve Vera Gunnarsen in this way, forgetting that she did so, and expecting neither praise nor thanks - or perhaps she would not (SA 91).

Her selfless compassion, for Vera and Mr. Cunningham, is her complete, robust response to love. In her special capacity for love, Maggie reaches what Jeanette Urbas says is "the highest achievement of human interaction."<sup>10</sup>

Nell's Swamp Angel, her "everlasting web" of humanity, and Maggie's swimming and fishing are all analogues for growth, integration, interconnectedness, and acceptance. The Swamp Angel adds structure to the novel because it represents the full cycle of time. The skill and the youth of Nell's past become today's treasured memory. Yesterday's passion is

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<sup>10</sup> Urbas, Jeanette, "The Perquisites of Love," in The Canadian Novel in the Twentieth Century, ed. George Woodcock (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), p. 65.

today's legend. After the fall, Nell realizes that time is inseparably connected. The small metal survivor, her "constant companion" who will survive her, has now become a potential danger to herself and others. Nell's final growth is her acceptance of this reality and her responsible decision to relinquish the gun. Its future is in Three Loon Lake: "It will be a memory, and then not even a memory, for there will be no one to remember it" (SA, 157). Donna E. Smyth says Maggie will incarnate "the balance of these qualities symbolized by the gun."<sup>11</sup>

Wilson uses swimming and fishing as the vortex of human experience. Both actions are individual, self-directed, solitary, and mystical. Ironically, both swimming and fishing are also integrating and interconnected with the rhythm of nature. Maggie's "avatar tells her she will be one with her brothers the seal and the porpoise" (SA, 99). The fisherman "becomes one with the aqueous world of the lake, of a sky remarkable for change, of wind" (SA, 133). The timeless qualities of both activities unite swimmer and fisherman to the timeless quest for purity, integrity, and spiritual renewal.

The "everlasting web," the timeless mystery of human experience, demonstrates the metaphysics of Wilson's vision. She perceives her regional setting of British Columbia with

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<sup>11</sup> Smyth, "Strong Women in the Web," p. 91.



the "fearful symmetry" of Blake, sensitive to nature's dualities and universal tone. Desmond Pacey remarks that Wilson's cosmos "is mysterious and violent... man needs the compassion of his fellows and the consolation of his family."<sup>12</sup> Her people are communal, vulnerable, and imperfect. The real survivors of Wilson's world are the socially conscious individuals who reach out to the other with compassion and love. Her metaphors belong to her web, and to her fiction.

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<sup>12</sup> Pacey, Ethel Wilson, p. 156.

## Chapter IV

### "The Blessedness of Common Things" : Wilson's Technique

Wilson's fiction is remarkable for its deceptive simplicity, its feminist perspective, its subtlety, pathos, irony, and humour. The mystery and complexity of human experience is reflected in her handling of voice. Her typical characters, like those of Margaret Laurence, are apparently ordinary people whose depths she reveals. Her ethical values, and her perception of transcendence within the commonplace, belong to her fictional fabric. Haldar and Maggie are linked momentarily, by a neighbour's barn: "The blessedness of common things seemed to restore the old common surface between them" (SA 114). Her affirmation, or optimism, is also characteristic.

A third-person voice in Ethel Wilson's fiction is common. Hetty Dorval, curiously, is the exception to this generalization. Omniscient narration is sometimes combined with authorial intrusions. This third-person voice pronounces a benediction, a warning, a commentary: " ' They love each other, this woman and this girl, ' a wandering god would say passing near and stopping to look at these two clasped for a moment together, ' and they are to part. Good. They will be much happier ' " (EL 234). These interruptions are sufficiently frequent and strong to have called down the wrath of more than one critic on Wilson's handling of voice.

This particular point requires greater discussion. Desmond Pacey, W.J. Keith, and W.H. New are among the critics who have censored Wilson for authorial intrusion. Pacey attacks this encroachment in Wilson's early work, especially in Hetty Dorval and Equations of Love.<sup>1</sup> He maintains that Wilson "is far too prone to adopt the old-fashioned device of authorial comment, to intrude into the flow of the narrative little chunks of personal philosophy."<sup>2</sup> W. J. Keith specifically directs his criticism of authorial intrusion at the novella, "Tuesday and Wednesday." He suggests that this style works for Wednesday's events, where it adds a clear adjudication impossible to achieve from the limited perspectives of Mort and Myrt.<sup>3</sup> Yet he feels that this omniscient clarity is not effective for Tuesday's events.<sup>4</sup> The prose, he says, is "a little stiff and pert by comparison with Ethel Wilson's best standard."<sup>5</sup> W. H. New criticizes this technique throughout her fiction: "I find some of these authorial passages (including the often lauded one about the sleeper), whatever their separable beauty, to be intrusive in context."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pacey, Ethel Wilson, pp. 117, 134.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Keith, "Overview," p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> New, "Critical Notes on Ethel Wilson," p. 144.

Yet other critics have come to Wilson's defence on this score. Beverley Mitchell feels the omniscient intrusion is a "rewarding feature of her fiction," one that adds to the "compelling sincerity" of her work.<sup>7</sup> Helen Sonthoff maintains that "such reflections or comments counterpoint the plot rhythm, broaden the range, keep the imaginative space open for the observer."<sup>8</sup> Wilson herself implied that this technique added realism to fiction in a lecture given by her in the Vancouver Institute series at the University of British Columbia.<sup>9</sup> Praising E.M. Forster's fiction, Wilson agreed with its life-like interruptions. David Stouck found this comment "particularly interesting in the light of her elliptical style."<sup>10</sup>

Wilson's authorial intrusions are often technically sound and artistically beneficial. In Hetty Dorval, a semi-omniscient intrusion anchored in Frankie's voice is fairly successful. The fusion of voices affords additional credibility to Wilson's vision of human interdependence: "But 'No man is an Island, intire of it selfe' said Mother's poet three hundred years ago, and Hetty could not island herself, because we impinge on each other, we touch, we glance, we press, we touch again, we cannot escape" (HD 57). In The Innocent

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<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, "The Right Word in the Right Place," p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> Sonthoff, "Companion in a Difficult Country," p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> Stouck, "The Ethel Wilson Papers," p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Traveller, an authorial comment combines voice and time giving unity to the novel that covers a hundred year span: "The six remaining sons and daughters were as nearly inaudible as six normal children could be except for Topaz who could not keep silent (how should she who talked persistently for over ninety-seven years?)" (IT 23). In the same novel, another successful authorial comment unites vision and time suggesting a golden era and juxtaposing it with current chaos: "Father had the kind of handsomeness of a happy dignified extrovert inspired by a strong and simple faith.... You and I, who pick our way among the appalling wreckage of our time... anticipating the unsure footing, rejoicing in a bit of solid ground... we can take our troubles much more easily than Father" (IT 9-10). In all these cases the authorial comment intensifies and expands the scope of the narrative.

Some omniscient privilege, however, is both intrusive and redundant. In "Lilly's Story," Wilson intrudes with this comment: "The little girl who accepted her mother as embodied authority and love, grew into the little girl who knew that her mother was limited and fallible" (EL 229). On the next page, Lilly's limitations are given within the narrative context: "' But don't you see, Mummy, don't you see, when he said Mrs. Sample was as common as an old shoe, he meant it for a compliment! ' ' Funny kind of compliment ' " (ED 230). Since another good example of Lilly's capacity is also given

on this page, the usefulness of the authorial comment is doubtful. In Swamp Angel, Wilson gives us a solid portrayal of jealousy and insecurity in Vera Gunnarsen's words and actions. Yet she still defines jealousy for her readers: "Jealousy, how potent it is, the very agent of destruction, a seed that grows" (SA, 113). The definition seems superfluous. These questionable intrusions suggest that Wilson either doubted the effectiveness of the narrative or the perception of her readers.

In Hetty Dorval the first-person voice of Frankie Burnaby is double or complex. One voice is limited, youthful; the other, mature, confident of ethical values. The limited voice simply and uncritically records past actions, while the mature voice occasionally reflects upon significant events with compassion, irony and humour.

Handling of voice in Margaret Laurence's A Bird in the House affords an excellent comparison here. Wilson and Laurence both employ the first-person narrative voice in these respective novels to encompass different stages of maturity in their protagonists: Frankie and Vanessa as children and Frankie and Vanessa as recollecting adults. The time element is important in both novels, where in each case, the narrative voice ranges from childhood to adolescence and maturity.

"The treatment of time and the handling of the narrative voice,"

says Laurence, "are" inextricably bound.<sup>11</sup> Laurence's description of the handling of voice in A Bird in the House is startlingly applicable to Hetty Dorval:

The narrative voice is, of course, that of Vanessa herself, but an older Vanessa, herself grown up, remembering how it was when she was ten. What I tried to do was definitely not to tell the story as though it were being narrated by a child. This would have been impossible for me and also would have meant denying the story one of its dimensions, a time dimension, the viewing from a distance of events that had happened in childhood. The narrative voice had to be that of an older Vanessa, but at the same time the narration had to be done in such a way that the ten-year-old would be conveyed. The narrative voice, had to speak as though from two points in time, simultaneously.<sup>12</sup>

In this handling of voice, in both writers, innocence and experience blend easily and well.

Like Laurence, Wilson shows us the changing attitudes of the maturing Frankie: "...I've had no experience and I don't know what to do" (HD 12); "I no longer felt an adolescent" (HD 74); "And here I was, a young woman with some confidence..." (HD 76). Frankie's mature voice shows us the limitations of her youth: "It could not be expected of a child of twelve..." (HD 23); "I think now that there was..." (HD 20). In the

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Time and the Narrative Voice," in Margaret Laurence, ed. William H. New (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977), p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 158-159.

education and growth of Frankie and Vanessa, we find the novels' themes. Both stories are about what Laurence calls "the reality of other people which is one way of realizing one's own reality."<sup>13</sup>

Frankie is the device for revealing and displaying the ethical judgment of Hetty which we understand to be Wilson's view of Hetty. In a sense, Frankie is the circular mirror that catches and holds Hetty's poses. Her focus of Hetty changes with time and with Frankie's developing maturity. Wilson seems to suggest that Hetty is best understood by the limited and changing perceptions of Frankie. The reflections of Hetty are caught and held in Frankie's mind like the still reflection of mountains is seized in the mirror: "This reflection, held in the circular frame, had more unity and significance than when you turned and saw its substance as only part of the true, flowing, continuous line of the mountains" (HD 42). Art, as Wilson reminds us here, is truer than life.

The time element in Frankie's voice spans her initial infatuation with Hetty and her eventual condemnation. Frankie informs us of her function as a limited narrator: "this is not a story of me... but of the places and ways known to me in which Hetty Dorval has appeared.... Hetty does not speak of herself" (HD 57). Frankie's focus of Hetty changes;

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 459.



determined by their meetings and Frankie's growth. Wilson reveals Hetty's character gradually, through Frankie, in the same way as Oscar Wilde used the painting of Dorian Gray to reflect the gradual breakdown of his protagonist. Eventually Frankie's view of Hetty becomes her parents' view and also the view that was in the double voice from the beginning: Hetty "endeavoured to island herself in her own particular world of comfort and irresponsibility. ('I will not have my life complicated.') But 'No man is an Island, intire of it selfe' said Mother's poet three hundred years ago, and Hetty could not island, because we impinge on one another, we touch..." (HD, 57).

The Innocent Traveller varies the handling of voice. Wilson uses an omniscient narrator who moves from character to character and event to event, with free access to the motivation, thoughts, and feelings of her characters, and introduces, at will, information for the reader. This omniscient voice modulates from sentence to sentence. An authorial commentator whose voice shifts backward and forward in time, complements the omniscient narration. In the handling of time, the combination of omniscience and the third-person voice, ideal for Wilson's subtle irony and superb humour, simultaneously gives unity to the whole and immediacy to the past.

What Laurence calls "a collective cultural memory" is implicit in this third-person omniscient voice. The Edgeworth/

Hastings family - Father, Annie, Rachel, Topaz, and Rose - bear the responsibility (as Laurence suggests characters must) for the treatment of time.<sup>14</sup> Father, whose expectations of comfort are upheld by a patriarchal culture, casually thinks of remarriage at ninety years of age: " ' it would be nice to have a woman near me. ' This he said disregarding the proximity of Topaz and the constant nearness of Austin, Cook, and Betsy" (IT 76). Father's voice combines with the omniscient voice, thereby giving the Victorian outlook an edge of modern irony. Annie's thoughts are emblematic of genuine Victorian piety; Rachel thinks in terms of Victorian values: integrity, order, and responsibility. As a loyal Victorian and a proud new Canadian, Topaz reflects both Victorian and modern attitudes. Rose's thoughts, often immediate and individual, reflect young, modern concerns. She struggles with boredom, an offshoot of leisure.

Topaz's long life is another ingenious aspect of voice. Because she lives for one hundred years and remains a "disgracefully natural individual," Topaz uncritically reflects the manners of both eras, on both continents. The novel is framed by her hundred year lifespan whose current runs counter to the prevailing winds of Victorian England. Her temperament suits the less conventional Canadian social climate. Her brother John and she emphasize by juxtaposition

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

the "pretty" manners and the "twittering" wit of Victorian England. Topaz's perpetual childhood juxtaposes with family events so as to serve as indirect commentary. Her boundless, free spirit images the freedom of the vast Canadian landscape. She becomes the central metaphor for the way we perceive time. At the novel's end, Topaz's life is clearly individual, but in death, "her small commotion of living" disappears within the great community of time. The novel's ending evokes the mysterious core of human experience, of Time and eternity.

The omniscient voice has the speech, the values of the twentieth century. The voice clearly originates from a Victorian background and yet, at the same time, it lovingly mocks the period. The voice moves freely from time past to time present, holding one hundred years in its grasp and giving unity to the novel: "Only the irascible Topaz was an individual from the time she uttered her first sentence ("Oh, yes, I spoke clearly and fluently at the age of nine months; my Mother was surprised!" "Now, Aunty....!") until that day nearly a century later when, still speaking clearly, she died" (II 15). Speaking for the Victorian view, the voice injects an edge of modern irony: "Only the faintest and most religious smiles might be exchanged in the slow progress of the congregation towards the chapel door.... But outside the chapel door the House of God became the street of man" (II 17). Contrasts in both periods, implicit in the

narrative voice, suggest paradoxes in human nature. The omniscient voice becomes an analogue for both cultures whose flaws and strengths provoke Wilson's compassion, dry wit, and humour.

"Lilly's Story" again employs the third person narrative voice in its exposition of the human dilemma. The novel is narrated principally from Lilly's point of view, but Wilson also enters the minds of other characters at will. An interesting aspect of Wilson's handling of voice is the combination of the third-person voice with the voice of a particular character: "Lilly's mother wanted to take the kid and the lodger would not take the kid" (EL, 146); or again, "She, Lilly, didn't want no dogs around..." (EL, 217). This combination gives Wilson's fiction a wholeness she apparently desired. Sometimes a philosophical voice universalizes the joy or sorrow, guilt or innocence of a particular character: "Maurice Butler, injured as we are injured when we have given ourselves - the best gift we have - and the gift is disregarded, thought of the child he had treated as his own, and of Lilly's mild acceptance.... and he grew very angry" (EL, 203). Wilson's vision is rooted in Christian ethics and the authorial voice provides the basis of her moral ethics. The moral view implicit in the voice provides Wilson with her desired control.

The early, distant attitude of the narrative voice towards Lilly is curious because we know Wilson sympathizes with

and admires Lilly. The deliberate distancing of the omniscient voice isolates Lilly: "Proud skillful dangerous Yow, poor fellow, what had he done? He has lost liberty, and the English bicycle, and old Mrs. Hastings, and he has lost Lilly, the pale slut who is running, running through the dark lane..." (EL 145); "The Chinaman - if he told - would have lied. She cared nothing for him. Ignorant girl, she thought of no other witnesses" (EL 158). Two possibilities occur: the distancing is an expression of moral judgment; or Lilly has no identity with which Wilson can sympathize.

Wilson does embrace Lilly more closely with each development. At one point, Lilly's stream of consciousness combines with the third-person omniscient voice who understands and pities Lilly's fear:

Year after year she had lived in an obscurity that was so planned and safe that there were times when it seemed that the years of vagrancy had never been.... She had forgotten the associates of her vagrant years, and here was Yow, the most dangerous, the most violent of them all. There was a bicycle wasn't there, and there were some underclothes.... There were the police; the police! and Yow's cries in the night, and Lilly hiding in the bushes, and Lilly running, running in the dark from the police, and the same Lilly now a desperate elderly woman (EL 243).

This passage reminds us that nothing is given to Lilly, not even the initial approbation and sympathy of the narrative

voice. Her struggle is long and hard and lonely. But Lilly's is a winning effort: she secures her freedom and she gains approval and admiration, from reader and narrator alike.

Wilson is most successful with the handling of voice in Swamp Angel. She relies less on the omniscient narrator and more on the third-person voices of her principal characters, in particular, Maggie Lloyd and Nell Severance. Her authorial intrusions are less frequent in this novel. Desmond Pacey remarks that Wilson "has so identified herself with Maggie and Mrs. Severance that her thoughts seem to be their thoughts and do not break the smooth surface of the story."<sup>15</sup> One feels that with Swamp Angel, Wilson came closest to achieving what she calls an incandescence:

There is a moment, I think, within a novelist of any originality, whatever his country or his scope, when some sort of synthesis takes place over which he has only partial control. There is an incandescence, and from it meaning emerges, words appear, they take shape in their order, a fusion occurs. A minor writer, whose gift is small and canvas limited, stands away at last if he can and regards what he has done, without indulgence. This is a counsel of perfection which I myself am not able to take with skill, but I must try to take it. I am sure that the very best writing in our country will result from such an incandescence which takes place in a prepared mind where forces meet.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Desmond Pacey, Introduction, Swamp Angel, by Ethel Wilson (1954; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1962), p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, "A Cat Among Falcons," p. 29.

Such an incandescence which moves beyond conscious authorial control bespeaks a maturity in the vision of the author that allows her to distance herself from her work and judge it. Consequently, the very credible voices of Maggie and Nell create Wilson's sharpest and strongest individuals.

The nuances of Wilson's diction catch all the subtleties of her perceptions on the human predicament and her themes of individual aspiration. Economy is a strong feature of her diction. In "Ethel Wilson's Lost Lady: Hetty Dorval and Willa Cather," Catherine McLay says Cather "would have welcomed the new writer from British Columbia to a small group of artists who succeeded in reducing their fictions to the simplest and most concise expressions."<sup>17</sup> David Stouck has made the same point in "Ethel Wilson's Novels."<sup>18</sup> The novella form, her favourite, best accommodates Wilson's penchant for economy.

Wilson frequently uses short sentences to move to a new topic. In one instance, however, her economy is questionable. Wilson is cold, almost brutal, when she describes the rapid growth of British Columbia: "Down came the forests: Chop. Chop. Chop... The forests vanished, and up went the city" (IT 124). The three short words, "Chop.

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<sup>17</sup> Catherine McLay, "Ethel Wilson's Lost Lady: Hetty Dorval and Willa Cather," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 33 (1982), p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> Stouck, "The Ethel Wilson Papers," p. 51.

Chop. Chop....," record indiscriminate plundering. The passage might imply that the razing of this landscape is insignificant; or it could read ironically, as social satire. Blanche Gelfant criticizes this paragraph as gross understatement. Wilson, she says, disposes of "tremendous historical transformations that effected radical social recording - of the entire drama of growth, industrialization, urbanization, and their consequences - in three words now rather terrible for modern ears attuned to cries of ecological depletion and economic greed."<sup>19</sup> The passage is jarring by juxtaposition with Wilson's usual compassion for and sensitivity to the minutiae of common things.

The abrupt sentence works well in "Lilly's Story." Adhering to the novella form, she maintains the unity of impression by using a short sentence that closes off any digression: "It seemed the easiest thing to do" (EL 161). This quickly moves us ahead in the main action of the story. Lilly has found work on Nanaimo and a place to stay. "It seemed the easiest thing to do" prevents any discussion of Lilly's action, emphasizes Lilly's initial impulsiveness, and moves us ahead in the action.

The short chapters in Swamp Angel (Chapters 28-35) that deal with Eddie's futile attempts to find a suitable

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<sup>19</sup> Gelfant, "The Hidden Mines in Ethel Wilson's Landscapes," p. 133.



woman are excellent examples of Wilson's economy. She distills action to a single comment, and the effect is sharp comedy. In four pages of single sentences, Wilson covers Eddie's advertisement for a female companion, a situation of bliss, an argument, and finally, a desertion. Chapter Thirty comically focuses on Eddie's flattery and faulty perception: " ' You're a lovely little lady. A real womanly woman, ' said Edward Vardoe, thinking also of Ireen" (SA, 125). In Chapter Thirty-one, the honeymoon is over, a disintegrating relationship is comically and abruptly presented: " ' This coffee's punk, ' said Edward Vardoe. ' Make it yourself then, ' said the blonde turning sulky" (SA, 125). The foregoing constitutes Chapter Thirty-one in its entirety. The comical, abrupt chapters confirm our impression of Eddie as insensitive, immature, and self-centered. Maggie was correct in leaving him.

David Stouck gives us a fine example of Wilson's economy in Swamp Angel. Before Maggie throws Nell's beloved gun into the lake, the omniscient narrator poses a question that was very important to Wilson: "Yet does the essence of all custom and virtue perish?" (SA, 157) The problem of "the lasting significance of all human endeavour" was originally a lengthy statement, Stouck tells us.<sup>20</sup> Wilson distilled the essence of the statement and turned the idea into a single

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<sup>20</sup> Stouck, "The Ethel Wilson Papers," pp. 51-52.

rhetorical question.<sup>21</sup>

Wilson often uses dialogue as a means of class distinction. Hetty Dorval provides us with a case in point. Like Lilly, Mrs. Broom has an urge for respectability, and she too keeps her past a mystery. When Mrs. Broom reveals her identity, however, she lapses into the dialogue of the working-class which sharpens the revelation. Referring to Hetty's father, Mrs. Broom says: "He done all right by you... and it was his money edjicated you well" (HD 82). Eddie's "Ireen," or "woodja" (SA 17) catches his accent. In "Lilly's Story" when Mr. J.B. Sprockett is thinking of proposing to Lilly, Wilson shows us the compatability of their backgrounds: " ' Would you mind if I ast your name? ' " (EL 274); " ' If you and I were to get married righthere in Tronno - ' " (EL 275). Wilson also uses a recurring motif, the movie magazine, to show class distinctions. When Lilly visits Eleanor, she sadly discovers they have many magazines with few pictures, and not a single movie magazine. She and Bessie Sprockett are both fans of movie magazines.

Wilson is particularly adroit in her choice of single words. An example of an apt word from The Innocent Traveller makes the point. Topaz feels the need of a listener on the evening when she attempts to sleep outdoors on Bambow Island:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

"But there were/no human ears at hand to oblige; so she conversed with herself, within, or fell silent, pinioned in the Bedclothes" (IT 189). This sensitivity to words is

evident in the memorable opening sentence of Swamp Angel:

"Ten twenty fifty brown birds flew past the window and then a few stragglers, out of sight" (SA 13). The sentence immediately establishes a state of flux and suggests the novel's theme of freedom. "Lilly's Story" gives an example of Wilson's best work in this regard. Mr. Sprockett asks Lilly to name the church of her choice for their wedding: "' United, ' she said almost inaudibly, faint with her happiness" (EL 281). This clever double entendre not only prevents a near crisis ("Whichever's handy"), but also enunciates the vision of human interconnectedness.

Wilson is also familiar with the music of language. The poetic opening of Swamp Angel is a case in point. A fine paragraph from Swamp Angel is a melody of sound and rhythm: "An expanse of air in the night, endless, soft, fluent, still, blowing, moving, cleaving, closing, sliding through dark leaves and branches and lamp-posts and black silent areas and bright areas of sound ... quite hid Maggie afar from Edward Vardoe" (SA 30). Wilson exhibits her predilection for alliteration and personification. The sounds of the words create a sense of motion in the lines. The contrast of flux and stasis is struck by the juxtaposition of "still" and "blowing." The

passage begins by commenting on the general flux of life and by describing the particular but separate moments of Maggie and Edward Vardoe.

Wilson's typical characters, as we have seen in Chapter Two above, are women. Her novels as a whole contain a composite portrait of three generations of British and Canadian women: their problems, confrontations, goals, and achievements. They come from the ranks of the middle-class and working-class, but they differ greatly in abilities, outlook, and age. Annie, Topaz, and Rachel are primarily significant because they record and survive the heavy restrictions of a domineering patriarchal society. Challenges for a new generation of women are suggested through the great-granddaughter Rose whose main concerns are individual rather than social. Frankie, Lilly, and Maggie struggle with economic and social dependence and they aspire towards individual and social liberty and security. These strong, independent women express a concern for the individual and the community of which they are a part. They are compassionate and caring women who move towards self-determination, freedom, hope and joy.

A dominant character type is Wilson's wise old woman: Annie Hastings, Matron, Nell Severance, and Aunt Maury Peake. These wise old women, says Donna E. Smyth, are vessels and

dispensers of experiential wisdom.<sup>22</sup> For the most part, they are unselfish altruists who understand the interconnectedness of humanity and appreciate the recurring patterns of human activity. Ironically, they are both detached and involved in human dilemmas. In fact, they are surrogate mothers who establish important mother/daughter relationships with the principal female protagonists: Annie is a surrogate mother to Topaz, Matron to Lilly, Nell to Maggie, and Maury Peake to Ellen Cuppy of Love and Salt Water. Anchored in their perceptions is Wilson's vision of human interdependence. Indeed, as Wilson depended less on the omniscient narrator, she relied more on the wise old women who became her spokeswomen.

Generally the wise old women are successful and satisfying. Nell Severance is the most fully developed and the most memorable. She is wise, imperfect, and plausible. Nell is a world traveller, a circus juggler, a happy common-law wife, a somewhat negligent mother, and finally, a smug but kind old woman. Her experience supports her wisdom. She has knowledge of the working-class and the middle-class; she has known love's pain and perfection. Nell has learned acceptance and, with it, a sense of humour and irony. Desmond Pacey finds it refreshingly ironic that Nell should

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<sup>22</sup> Smyth, "Strong Women in the Web," p. 94.

articulate Wilson's philosophy of life.<sup>23</sup> Nell's experiences seem to make the words as much hers as Wilson's.

The character of Matron is not as successful or plausible. At times, Matron's words seem stiff and puzzling. An example of this difficulty is her definition of Puritanism. Matron calls Lilly a Puritan, using the word as a pejorative. We assume Matron's view is Wilson's view. Implicit in her definition is the negative side of Puritanism: materialism and pragmatism. This definition of Puritanism is similar to Hugh MacLennan's. In The Immoral Moralists, Patricia Morley charges that MacLennan's definition is incomplete because it ignores the positive aspects of Puritanism, namely, moral and social idealism. She defines the historic phenomenon, in part, as "an attitude of moral seriousness, an overriding concern to discover (and do) man's duty towards God and his neighbour, and thereby to reform and improve society;"<sup>24</sup> "Puritanism was not only a religious creed, it was a philosophy and a metaphysic; it was an organization of man's whole life, emotional and intellectual."<sup>25</sup> Ironically,

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<sup>23</sup> Pacey, Introduction, Swamp Angel, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Morley, The Immoral Moralists: Hugh MacLennan and Leonard Cohen (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1972), p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Perry Miller, The Puritans: A Sourcebook, in Morley, The Immoral Moralists, p. 35.

Wilson's moral and social idealism is Puritan. Her narrator, for example, criticizes Lilly for learning "the forms of obedience and nothing about truthfulness" (EL 151). The Burnaby family believe that " ' Good is as visible as green ' " (HD 69). The moral authority in the third-person voice is Wilson's Puritanism, her Methodist heritage.

Men have relatively minor and polarized roles in Wilson's fiction. Fathers tend to be idealized (Mr. Edgeworth, Mr. Burnaby, and Mr. Macdonald, Maggie's father), or very inadequate (Hetty's father, Philip Severance, and Mr. Waller). Husbands are absent (Tom Lloyd and Rose's husband), dead (Mr. Hastings and Tom Lloyd), inadequate (Haldar Gunnarsen and Mort Johnson), obstacles (Eddie Vardoe), or - again - idealized (Tom Lloyd, Philip Severance, Morgan Peake, and George Gorden). In the four novels with which this thesis is concerned, there are few mature and compassionate men: Alberto Cosco, Morgan Peake, George Gorden, Mr. Burnaby, and Mr. Cunningham. All are relatively minor characters.

Mothers are devoted (Mrs. Burnaby, Annie Hastings, and Mrs. Broom), or inadequate (Mrs. Waller, Vera Gunnarsen, and Nora Cuppy). Children are idealized (Eleanor and Maggie's dead daughter), unhappy (Hilda and Vera), or illegitimate (Hetty and Eleanor). Only the protagonists escape this type casting.

Wilson's wonderful sense of humour may have been

stimulated, initially, by her father. Mary McAlpine describes him vividly as "a laughing man."<sup>26</sup> Her humour is particularly rich in The Innocent Traveller. Wilson uses a child's perception, Topaz's, as a means of humour. The child's words and actions are often humorous beyond her intention. Topaz's description of the flush toilet delightfully contrasts with the decorous and splendid dinner-party held for Matthew Arnold. Her insatiable desire to be noticed and her hyperbolic desire to please parody Arnold's lofty educational ideas, which actually serve the same purpose. Certainly Arnold's desire for attention is no less than hers. Her perception of the shoes under the table is an ingenious comic technique. People are actually introduced by means of their footwear. Topaz's understanding of Mr. Porter's desertion of Mrs. Porter blends humour with pathos. She vividly remembers her mother forgetting Hannah and herself in a Ladies' Waiting Room, so she is convinced Mrs. Porter has been deserted somewhere in another Ladies' Waiting Room. The child's perception often highlights the absurdity in a particular situation.

Her fiction is rich in situational humour. Topaz's visit to the Sistine Chapel is a good example: "It was when Topaz lay on her back on the floor of the empty Sistine Chapel, better to observe the wonderful ceiling, in an

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<sup>26</sup> McAlpine, "Ethel Wilson as I knew Her," p. 7.



attitude that John's ideal, Ruskin, would have comprehended, that John nearly started back in a fury" (IT 67). The humour springs not so much from Topaz's action as it does from John's absurd reactions to it. The reader anticipates the humour because she knows John is "the mirror of Victorian manners." In this instance, the limiting aspect of Victorian manners is made ridiculous.

Tea at the Empress Hotel, years later in Victoria, is another sparkling example of situational humour. An elderly Topaz is "spoiling for commotion" in the crowded hotel lobby (IT 249). After spying the portraits, one on each opposite wall, Topaz sallies forth: "By the time she reaches the portrait of the King, every eye has become unglued and has turned on Aunty, who drops a deep curtsy to the portrait, wobbling a little, and says for the benefit of those near at hand, 'I bow to my King!' " (IT 249). She repeats the gesture to the Queen at the other end of the hall. The situation is humorous because Topaz intends it to be and she is successful. Topaz intentionally delays the humour for full impact. She herself is a spectacle. Her actions are unexpected and some of the humour is the shock she creates among the staid observers.

Topaz's preparations and attempt to camp out for the night on Bemow Island are unintentionally comic. Her intention of communing with nature is in sharp juxtaposition

with her comical list of necessities: a walking-stick, an umbrella, a parasol, chocolate and biscuits, a quilt, a shawl, and a hat. The disgracefully natural creature to whom we have grown accustomed seems unnaturally prepared for her encounter with nature. Topaz begins to converse with herself to allay her fear of the evening sounds around her. Finally, she admits that " ' This is, when all is said and done, a very wild country, and only newly inhabited ' " (IT 190). Wakeful, she begins to remember various beards, somewhat in the manner that people count sheep: "She tried to evoke tenderness at the thought of Mr. Sandback and his beard, his benign, deceiving, heartless, hypocritical beard" (IT 191). The comical episode ends with Topaz's ignominious retreat indoors.

Many individual characters in Wilson's fiction are humorous in appearance, action, and speech. The laconic Alberto Cosco reacts comically to Nell's information that Maggie married Eddie Vardoe out of compassion: "Compassion! Compassion is to sympathize and carry the suitcase and give a drink of brandy but not to marry" (SA 62). Nell suggests another reason may have been Eddie's spaniel eyes:

" ' Spaniely eyes! ' Alberto said. ' Marry a man for dog's eyes! That's a new one. And anyway he's got them shut all night... ' " (SA 62). Like Nell, he has a marvelous sense of the absurd.

Nell is humorous in appearance, action, and speech. She is a fat old woman who dresses like a gypsy and frequently juggles a small, silver revolver. When a blustering Eddie stands before the Severances shouting and threatening, Nell begins unobtrusively to juggle the gun until Eddie's fear silences him: " ' Why does she do that? ' ... ' She likes doing it ' " (SA 33). Eddie leaves without saying another word.

Nell's single statements are often humorous. Speaking of her friend Alberto, she says: "It's too bad that he likes red wine and I like white wine because that always means that we have to have a whole bottle apiece" (SA 63). After much trouble Nell agrees to wear a hat to Hilda's wedding, but a plain hat: " ' A feather! My God, woman, I'm civilized ' " (SA 122). Sometime later with Maggie, she says: " ' Everything of any importance happens indoors... ' " (SA 149). Irony tinctures most of Nell's humour, and indeed, much of Wilson's.

Hilda is comical as a doting wife and mother. She is initially afraid of marriage and not inclined toward children. After her marriage she becomes "more conventional by the minute" (SA 127). She dotes on Albert's beard, her in-laws, and her infant son: "Baby is a darling and so good....I will send you a photograph" (SA 154). Hilda herself is amused at the irony: "Can this be Hilda Severance, the

scornful one... No, this is Hilda Cousins, blender of bottles, mother of Monty..." (SA 154). The archetypal convert, Hilda is zealous in the cause of Motherhood.

Unforgettable is Great-Grandfather Edgeworth and his very tardy marriage proposals to two women in the same day. Great-Grandfather seems unaware of the humour implicit in his proposal and only mildly interested in the response. He begins by proposing to old Mrs. Grimwade by saying that Topaz needs a mother. She replies: " ' Don't be silly, Joseph. The girl's nearly fifty ' " (IT 78). Then he admits he needs a woman around him: " ' Just marry me and stay on ' " (IT 78). Mrs. Grimwade painstakingly and politely makes a lengthy refusal that cites every complication possible, only to discover that Great-Grandfather is no longer listening.

His second proposal to Miss Raphael is as comical. Long forgotten is Topaz's need of a mother. Now his concern is for the wasting youth of the seventy-eight year old spinster: " ' You should marry, Sarah, ' he said. ' You should marry. Why not stay here and marry me and let us be old together? There's nothing much left now ' " (IT 82). Again he almost ignores her lengthy refusal: " ' there's no need to get excited; either you do or you don't, you know ' " (IT 84). The humour arises from the casual nature of the proposal, its effect on the elderly ladies and his matter-of-fact acceptance of the refusals.

Topaz is humourous in the way she looks, and in what she does; what she says is also humourous, often beyond her intention. We first meet her at the splendid dinner party, perched upon cushions, "as innocent as a poached egg." She extols the virtues of the flush toilet to Matthew Arnold, avidly recites poetry for him, and finally retreats to the world of shoes (IT, 1). Some ninety years later she is as humourous, immobilized on a sidewalk, with her drawers around her ankles: " ' I'm paralysed! I've had a stroke, I do declare! ' " (IT, 270) Once she discovers her drawers are the problem, she steps nimbly out of them. Undaunted as she was years before under the Edgeworth dinner table, she declares the drawers quite unnecessary and walks home lighter and happier. Throughout the novel the humour is produced by the juxtaposition of Topaz's individuality, ingenuousness, and appearance, and the staid, inhibited cultures on both sides of the Atlantic.

Like most humourists, Wilson uses the humour of repetition with variation. The closings of Lilly's letters are good examples. Concocted notes for her school absences would close with "And Oblidge" [*sic*] (EL, 152). Lilly repeats this closing in the note she leaves her Vancouver landlord when she flees to Nanaimo. A few years later, there is a significant change in her letter application to the hospital. "And Oblidge" has become "Respectfully Yours" (EL, 198).

Lilly's growth is marked through this comic, skillful technique.

For comfort and security, Lilly resorts to movie magazines, Mort Johnson to his personal charm, and Mr. Waller to his hat. Lilly feels insecure in her daughter's home because there is not one movie magazine. However, she is reassured when Mr. Sprockett tells her his first wife loved them. Mort is secure when he feels he can inspire "bonhomie and confidence" in women (EL, 17). Reality reduces Mort in size, and his sense of injury mounts. Without his hat, Mr. Waller feels "bald and betrayed" (EL, 153); with it he sees himself as "a tall lounging man with a pair of bedroom eyes that caressed the female on whom he looked" (EL, 153). In each character, the idiosyncrasy recurs and becomes, in Wilson's handling, more humorous with each recurrence of the motif.

Wilson's use of parentheses as a comic technique is unique. This particular technique is most mature in "Lilly's Story". Wilson's humour is delightful when she interrupts Matron's serious analysis of Lilly's Puritanism with "(oh Yow oh Ranny)" (EL, 232). Mr. Sprockett shies away with distaste from a fat woman who uses heavy make-up. In the brackets we are reminded that Bessy was just as fat and as heavily made up (EL, 258). Before Bessy's death, he thought of widows as a social or business classification:

"(fill out Form A Section 3, state whether unmarried, married, widowed or divorced)" (EL 263). He is a changed man, now that he is a widower. Telling Lilly about his middle-aged friends back home, he refers to them as boys and girls. The brackets intrude again to remind us that the boys are bald boys and the girls are grey girls (EL 270). The brackets generally convey a delicious piece of irony.

Wilson can also be humorous by implication and indirection. Chapter Thirty-two is a wonderful example of admiration turned critical: " ' But you got a hat already! You got two hats, ' objected Edward Vardoe, looking at her sharply " (SA 125). Most of Wilson's bracketed insertions are comical and ironic, but at the end of Hetty Dorval we find a tragic one: "(Mrs. Broom, to what a bleak morning you awoke all alone)." With an absolute minimum of words, we are reminded of the pain which Hetty has caused to the person who has shared her life most closely. Many of Wilson's stylistic devices compress meaning and significance into the smallest of spaces. Small wonder that the novella is her typical form.

She also gives us some wonderful throw-away lines. Topaz's letter from school has two good examples. Topaz is thrilled to tell her mother she's reading The Golden Fleas; she also loves Shakespeare's King John; as she says, " ' I love the bastard ' " (IT 35). Yow's bullying ways and manipulative habits tend to be blackly comic. Against the

wishes and the upper-class conventions of his ladies, he continues to serve dinner at six, for his own convenience. He also frightens them by saying he will serve snake for dinner (IT 184). When Rose annoys Yow by spitting on his iron he retaliates by pulling his loose eyelids away from his eyes in a disgusting way. His instructions to the mild little Chinese who is to replace him temporarily in the household richly exploit almost everyone, to Yow's advantage (IT 169). Black humour, which is relatively rare in Wilson's fiction, is a marked feature of the final confrontation between Frankie and Hetty Dorval.

Writing of Stephen Leacock, Malcolm Ross gives us a concise definition of irony as distinct from satire: "To attack and defend, to love and hate in one breath, is not the genius of satire but the genius of irony, the subtler art, the deeper wisdom."<sup>27</sup> To suggest the complexity of life, Wilson exploits its natural ironies, along with the ironies of situation and of coincidence. Hetty Dorval provides some striking examples. Frankie, schooled in the discipline of love and responsibility, chastises Hetty for continuing to disregard this human bond. The reason for her final confrontation with Hetty is her sense of responsibility toward

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<sup>27</sup> Malcolm Ross, Preface, Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town, by Stephen Leacock (1931; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. xi.



Richard and Molly. When Mrs. Broom makes her unexpected revelation, Frankie discovers new depths and complexities in human pain. Ironically, she deserts her own social ethics and attempts (like Hetty) to resign from social responsibility: " ' I don't want you here again! You muddle up my life too much. Please, Hetty, look after your own affairs but keep away from me. I've got my own life to live and I don't ever want to see you again - ever ' " (HD 91). Wilson underlines Frankie's lapse by Hetty's ready agreement with what she calls her own phobia.

Topaz is a walking paradox, an educated child whose whole personality is ironic. She is both frivolous and serious, naive and sophisticated, vulnerable yet strong. Topaz spends seven years preoccupied with unrequited love. In her time of desolation, she calls upon heaven to curse her love. Many years later she encounters him as a frail old man, "only a still interesting object seen from afar" (IT 89). By contrast, the Royal Family continues to fascinate. In her extreme old age this unrequited love becomes for Topaz an object of pride, an ironic boast. For most of her life she is completely dependent on Annie and on Rachel, fifteen years her junior; a surrogate mother. When Annie and Rachel die, Topaz flowers. She buys her own apartment and achieves an ironic freedom in extreme old age.

In "Lilly's Story" the great lie of her life is

transmogrified into the truth. She pretends to be a young widow who sacrifices herself to give her daughter a chance for respectability. Lilly protects the fabric of the lie with a lifetime of hard work and relative isolation. Her origins have become the lie; she is a hard-working and respectable mother. P.M. Hinchcliffe says: "Being Mrs. Hughes becomes more than second nature to her; it becomes her real nature, and being Lilly Waller becomes her second nature, to be evoked only in crises like the reappearance of Yow at the country hospital."<sup>28</sup> In another ironic twist, the reflective and imaginative life denied Lilly flowers in her daughter Eleanor. The very success of Lilly's carefully plotted scheme is ironic; more commonly, the best laid plans go astray, as Robert Burns tells us.

Irony and pathos are closely related because, as Ross suggests, the ironist must love more than he hates.<sup>29</sup> Irony and pathos blend easily and well in Topaz's long life. Topaz is usually a water-glider who manages to stay afloat human complications, yet she sinks defenseless beneath the waters of love. She is again vulnerable at the time of Annie's death-bed revelation. She who believes her life is full, discovers "that something in human relations of which she

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<sup>28</sup> Hinchcliffe, Journal of Canadian Fiction, p. 65.

<sup>29</sup> Ross, Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town, p. xi.

was unaware, or which she was incapable of feeling, existed..." (IT, 221). As well, Rachel's horrible suffering and death are sadly ironic juxtaposed with her long life of sacrifice and devotion.

There is tremendous irony and pathos in "Lilly's Story." The best example from the novella occurs when Lilly flees from the Fraser Valley. Travelling east, she sees her mythic origins:

Afar off, remote from village or train, she saw small isolated dwellings. Was it there I lived? she thought with a slight sardonic smile, or there, with Walter Hughes? She took the train guide and memorized the names of stations through which the railroad passed. At least, she knew now where she had lived, and the unfamiliar and endless prairie was her nearest familiar friend (EL, 248).

Mr. Sprockett's new experience of loneliness also blends irony and pathos. After Bessy's death he discovers: "that he was lost, that he was irrelevant, that he was no longer the self into which he had grown after thirty-nine years of living" (EL, 257). Aging and dying remain the great ironies of human existence, as Wilson suggests.

Maggie goes north to be free only to find perversity and human complication in the wilderness. She finds freedom in serving. This is a Christian paradox and is at the heart of Wilson's central theme of interconnectedness. Freedom, Maggie discovers, is acceptance of individual and social

responsibility: " ' No Man is an Island, I am involved in Mankind, ' and we have no immunity ..." (SA, 150).

As Beverley Mitchell reminds us, Wilson has been acclaimed as the most exquisite stylist of this century.<sup>30</sup> Wilson herself was obsessively concerned with technique. She had, by her own admission, a "reverence" for the English sentence that approached worship.<sup>31</sup> Her experiments with voice, which have irritated some readers, are (for the most part) technically sound and artistically beneficial. Mitchell's point, that the intrusion of Wilson's personal philosophy adds sincerity to the work, is well taken.<sup>32</sup>

The subtlety and originality of Wilson's technique makes for difficult analysis. She works, typically, by indirection. Her apparent common sense, her matter-of-fact mood, masks a keen intelligence and a sensitive understanding of human experience. Blanche Gelfant summarizes some of the admirable features of Wilson's art:

Canadian critics, as they describe the abundance contained in Wilson's fiction,

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<sup>30</sup> Mitchell, "The Right Word in the Right Place," p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, where Mitchell quotes from the Ethel Wilson Papers, U.B.C. Library.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

its richness of natural and social detail, have praised the surface serenity of her art: the detached tone; the compassionate and comic insights into the foibles of the great human family; the faith that remains unshaken even when these foibles, our seemingly innocent but obsessive meddling with each other, turn into destructive or coercive acts, violations of each other's freedom.<sup>33</sup>

Gelfant goes on to criticize Wilson for "profound ambiguities" which remain unsolved in her fiction, and for unrealistic idealism concerning human interdependence and love.<sup>34</sup> We agree with Gelfant. Sister Marie-Cécile writes to Frankie after her father's death, that her parents had had "the perfection of human love" (HD, 61). The very claim denies their humanity. Nell Severance is Wilson's most plausible character, one who admits to ethical errors, who learns from them, and who grows. Wilson maintains, through Nell's voice, that perfect human love defies description (SA, 127-28). To this, I would add imperfect love is open to scrutiny and analysis. Nell's understanding of the tenuity of "the everlasting web" is mature, practical, and genuine. She shared with Philip the perfection and the imperfection of human love. The imperfect part of their love was

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<sup>33</sup> Gelfant, "Hidden Mines in Ethel Wilson's Landscapes," p. 133.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 122-123

egocentric, possessive, separating them from their respective families, isolating them from their only daughter. As Nell tells it, "it takes God Himself to be fair to two different people at once" (SA 151). After Philip's death, Nell lives with Hilda's silent recrimination. Explanations will only hurt Hilda further, so Nell accepts this insular aspect of her life. She recognizes her own limitations and Hilda's because life is a compromise. She is secure and happy, smug and fallible; her perception of life with its limitations is plausible.

Maggie is too good, too strong, too right. Unlike Nell, she has no character flaws. She is generous, capable, happy, altruistic. Her bad marriage to Eddie is attributed to her compassion; the trouble with Vera stems from her jealousy, Maggie is simply magnanimous. The few dreams of Eddie that worry Maggie are soon dispatched. Everything in the novel suggests that she was correct in deserting him. Maggie struggles with the problems of others, not with herself. Though Nell expresses a realistic view, ("The unhappy Vera; house-bound without an opening window; hell-bound, I think. Poor Vera. Poor people"), Maggie believes she will win over Vera (SA 152). She possesses an undaunted optimism,

Frankie's recognition scene is conspicuously lacking when Frankie retreats to isolation. She apparently sees nothing strange when she attempts to isolate herself from

the responsibility to others after Mrs. Broom's revelation. In this retreat she draws no comparisons between her actions and Hetty's. She fails to recognize her own limitations and her growth falls short of expectation. Hetty gives her the cue: " 'I understand exactly, I feel for you.... It is my own phobia ' " (HD 91). Yet Frankie makes no comment on the situational irony. Hetty has touched, impinged on Frankie, but Frankie loses the illumination. Where is Frankie's epiphany? An idealism, then, which verges at times on naiveté is perhaps the chief flaw in her fiction..

The reverse side of her weakness is, however, her great strength. The cynicism which marks so many modern writers finds no reflection in Wilson's work. Her view of human nature is optimistic, sympathetic, generous. She chooses to emphasize our strengths rather than our faults. This vision is saved from sentimentality by irony and humour. Wilson's characters are rarely vicious (Yow and Vera are exceptions), but she has a keen eye for folly. The moral intensity for which she has been praised<sup>35</sup> belongs to the genius of irony, "the subtler art" in Ross's phrase.

In 1961, A.J.M. Smith called Wilson "Canada's

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<sup>35</sup> See Mitchell, "The Right Word in the Right Place," p. 73; Mitchell is fitting Ethel Wilson in F.R. Leavis' great tradition.

finest woman novelist."<sup>36</sup> In an autobiographical essay of the same period, Wilson expresses her deep admiration for the giants of English literature, especially Shakespeare, and her own sensitivity towards language. She speaks of "the mark of personality" in fine writers, and the "incandescence which takes place in a prepared mind where forces meet."<sup>37</sup> Wilson's finely controlled style is her mark of personality, her distinctiveness. Her intense vision of human possibilities and interdependence supplies, to use her own word, an incandescence. This gentle ironist celebrates our humanity with wisdom and wit.

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<sup>36</sup> A.J. Smith, ed., Masks of Fiction (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-28.



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