RELATED THEMES IN THE FICTION
OF ETHEL WILSON

by

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ABSTRACT

Although highly regarded by critics, Mrs. Wilson's fiction has been subject to little detailed scrutiny. This thesis attempts to trace and consolidate the threads of her thought, to demonstrate that a substantial philosophical framework supports and enhances the more obvious presentation of "the vagaries of human conduct" which make her books so pertinent. An existential humanism allows her characters to attain individual dignity and authenticity regardless of status, sex, or endowments.

In Chapter II, the concept that in our society only the fittest survive is supported by Mrs. Wilson's attitude to nature, in which, however, there is always defeat with victory. The human attribute of compassion is what enables man to transcend the sorrow of humanity (as illustrated in Swamp Angel); nevertheless indiscriminate pity debilitates man and prevents him from asserting his individuality and enjoying life. In an absurd world, man's anguish is that he has the power of choice, and his freedom depends on his ability to live with his decisions. Tuesday and Wednesday is analyzed as negatively illustrating the struggle toward meaning in a purposeless world.
The element of chance is discussed in Chapter III as an introduction to Mrs. Wilson's theory that man would like to, but cannot be, an island. Focussing on the "odd man out," Mrs. Wilson finds complete detachment impossible, no matter how powerful are the factors militating against real communication between individuals: chance, misunderstanding, incompatibility (many of which are directly traceable to "character"). The resultant loneliness, and the means devised by humanity to ward off the realization of its predicament is noted. Hetty Dorval represents the predicament, and Mr. Willy's gnawing emptiness the result, of an a-moral world devoid of responsibility, love, or human intercourse.

Because women are "all one flow" they form a demonstrable focus for Mrs. Wilson's philosophy of continuity. Emphasizing the individuality of women, rather than their roles as wives and mothers, Mrs. Wilson is harsher, yet kinder, in her judgement than are most male novelists. Chapter IV analyzes Mrs. Wilson's fictional women and the feminine world of Hetty Dorval is discovered to contain the many aspects of women that are elaborated in the subsequent books. The questions of sin and justice as rationalized by women seem compatible with Mrs. Wilson's over-all view of life, and it is through their ability to rationalize that they are able (although limited by their economic role), to find fulfillment.
Like women, truth is illogical, difficult to define, and, in essence, paradoxical. Chapter V attempts to explicate Mrs. Wilson's belief that by admitting a "multiple" truth, one can better understand man's place in the universe, and consequently acquire tolerance. The relationship between appearance and reality is fundamental to Mrs. Wilson's philosophy, as is the paradoxical nature of morality, both of which are explored in the context of modern society. Since truth is an accretion - not something hidden behind a mask - man is always more than he appears to be, so life is a constant journey of discovery.

The Conclusion assesses the value of her work which seems to reside in her ability to transcend the current nihilism prevalent in sophisticated fiction, by orienting the reader's outlook towards a positive course of action. Most people's lives are worth living, even when they are lives of quiet desperation. Like Ellen, in *Love and Salt Water*, what one needs is courage, dignity and compassion.
PREFACE

Ethel Wilson lives with her doctor husband in an elegantly comfortable penthouse apartment near English Bay in Vancouver, overlooking an ever-changing spread of sea and mountains that alters its aspect with every "slant of light." She cannot exclude the influence of this grandeur from her writings, so immersed is she in its beauty, fortunately, for the significance of her characters is augmented by a contrast and comparison with the natural grace and dignity which counterpoises the ruthlessness and struggle inherent in every landscape.

All her novels and most of her short stories are dramas of everyday life enacted in or around Vancouver where she has lived since she was eight years old when, an orphan (her parents both having died in South Africa where she was born), she came from an English boarding-school to live with her grandmother in the young seaport town. The excitement and simplicity which was one aspect of the "growth of a young frontier town into a real city," and the atmosphere of a loving household and its salutary effect on an impressionable and intelligent adolescent have seldom been more charmingly and amusingly chronicled than in The Innocent Traveller, an enchanting blend of fact and fiction well suited to display Mrs. Wilson's ability to catch not only the essence
of a person, but also the flavour of a whole era filtered through the sensitive yet innocent vision of one who appreciated that

it was very pleasant and there seemed to be no trouble anywhere upon the face of the earth, that you could discern.¹

Assuming, then, that the Hastings household is a distilled essence of her youthful environment, one can readily understand Mrs. Wilson's preoccupation with women: their capabilities, their independence, and above all, their fierce individuality. According to Desmond Pacey, in Creative Writing in Canada, Mrs. Wilson's main theme is the conflict of innocence with evil, and this may well be so, but what seems more basic to her fiction is the universal emphasis on individuality in a world where "no man is an island". After one devours the small canon of her fiction, it is natural to turn to the critics for a learned and professional appraisal of her achievement. The harvest is disappointing. An almost unanimous verdict hails her as a writer of some stature with a fresh and vigorous style, an urbane wit, and a keen mind that sees and accepts without condemnation the follies of mankind. Such a consensus of approval, the absence of any derogatory criticism, has probably militated against any intense study of her writing.

However, intrigued primarily, perhaps by her style, this reader decided that her work merited and could sustain a deeper - or at least broader - critical examination.

In a world where the mechanization of personality seems to be an unwelcome but unavoidable corollary of the mechanization of industry, any suggestion of an escape from the dangers inherent in the great levelling process is welcome. An ability to transcend socially-conditioned values is characteristic of her women, and in her last book, *Love and Salt Water*, George and Ellen represent the true nobility - their courtship and acceptance of each other is a communion of love between two individuals who have realized the possibility of a genuine inner existence and who can communicate with each other on this basis. "Their happy and chequered life together" seems to underline the difficulties of the reaching-out, and the satisfaction in the achievement. Life flows on in a ceaseless change, as do personalities, which necessitates a continual adjustment, and also a continuous hope, an antidote for the deadening "mass-uglification".

The existential flavour of the plots directed this reader to a search for other manifestations of this philosophy. Several interdependent leitmotifs emerged which seem to cluster around Mrs. Wilson's definition of integrity: running away from one's self is evil, facing one's self is good; that we find our own standards of honesty in the situation; which is
just to say "to one's own self be true...." Such is Mrs. Wilson's unequivocal answer to the dilemma that is our human destiny: the problem of value.

In view of the prevalent nihilistic tone in contemporary literature, this healthy attitude seemed very worthwhile exploring, especially as some of her fiction survives well the test of repeated readings. Mort never ceases to delight; nor does Topaz, who literally was "never to be tamed"; and fresh insights into the complex problem of living surface with every fresh "dip" into Swamp Angel. Moreover - and this is an attribute that becomes increasingly valuable as journalism and factual reportage of world events supplant the need once filled by fiction - Mrs. Wilson's books and stories have a universal appeal because they tell a story - something happens which usually sounds a responsive chord in any reader's experience; because the characters are ordinary yet unique; and because the plots have several levels of meaning. In fact, if intelligently promoted, they could become best-sellers, in the best sense of the word, thereby reaching a wider audience than the educated - which is surely one of the aims of most good, modern literature.

Mrs. Wilson's fiction has been published in Canada, United States, England, Denmark, Switzerland, Italy and Argentina. The reception accorded her work in these various
countries attests to the universality of her themes, and endorses the excellent reputation she has won in Canada.

I would like to thank Dr. D. Stephens for his infinite patience and his many pertinent suggestions, and at the same time absolve him from any responsibility for the shortcomings and errors in the following thesis.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Because, as Henry James said, "the novel is a living thing", any attempt to unravel or isolate the intricacies of any one ingredient might seem both absurd and destructive. Yet the process can be illuminating, stimulating, and healthy. Just as tracer elements, introduced into an animal's blood stream to uncover the relationship and interdependence between the organs of the body, beget a more appreciative respect not only for the purpose of each biological part but also for the miraculous symbiotic functioning of the whole living entity, so, it seems, should an investigation and delineation of the linking ideas or themes enhance not only the appreciation of the technical and creative processes that support a body of fiction but also the interest and delight in the finished work of art. Although many artists sincerely deny the existence of any a priori fundamental design, having in some indescribable fashion breathed life into their creation so that they feel that a good novel in some respects writes itself, the satisfying work of art belies this rather wanton theory. Like many unprovable assertions, this hypothesis contains enough fact to make it conditionally acceptable and enough contradictions to render it highly controversial.
Widely disparate confessions of time-tested authors reveal an infinite variety of methods of composition: at one end there is Stendahl breezily asserting that to do any planning of a book freezes him stiff; at the other is Conrad depressingly deploring the pains of turning blood into ink. In any case, many authors seem suspicious of the critic's attempt to impose some outside pattern on a work of imagination.

Mrs. Wilson, as both author and critic, combines sense with sensibility in her succinct analysis of artistic creation:

There is a moment, I think, within a novelist of any originality...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...which takes place in a prepared mind when forces meet.

The synthesis is not wholly controlled but nevertheless can only occur from the forces meeting in a "prepared" mind, and although the spark that fuses the various forces cannot be adequately described or analyzed, the preparations in the mind are partly discernable to an interested reader.

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Even so, the voices of protest rise, why seek to impose a theoretical pattern or theme on imaginative beauty? In an increasingly electronically controlled world, does not the artist almost single-handedly fight for individuality and the unfettered play of the educated imagination? True. A critic, then, who tries to reduce creativity to any formula that is redolent of an applied science can be justly accused of mechanistic value judgements, anathema to the vitality of art. But what makes an interesting novel more enjoyable is the discernment of some pattern of characterization, significant style, recurrent motif, or thread of thought which, when echoed throughout an author's works, discovers and enhances the creator's personality and adds depths of meaning. Which seems ample justification for even an amateur critic to search for the connecting ideas provided he guard against imposed subjective patterns.

The freshness of her approach to experience in a prose style distinguished for its unobtrusiveness and sensitivity has been noted and commended by critics, which stimulates the reader to search for Mrs. Wilson's strands of meaning. Because her small but polished output of fiction - four novels,

³See Desmond Pacey's remarks in Creative Writing in Canada, Toronto, 1961, p.257, and Gael Turnbull's appraisal in Northern Review, VI, No.2 (June-July 1953), 36-40.
two novellas, and one volume of short stories - was all published after she was forty-seven, the ideas and philosophy informing her canvas are quite consistent. Her work does not reveal the groping immature excesses that often embarrass an artist in his maturity, but that are so fruitful a field for the critic who is interested in tracing the development of the writer. Here is no fumbling about for a style, an attitude, a philosophy. Her work reflects the wisdom and tolerance that maturity reserves for the few: the harvest of perceptive observations over many years of sensitive experiencing and intelligent awareness. She has come to terms with life; she knows to a great degree what she can or cannot expect from people; she is able to scrutinize with detachment and compassion the human comedy. With artistic fastidiously she refuses to dissect, she pieces together; she never probes, she tries to understand.

Although her interest is in humanity, her novels could be labelled novels of ideas - not of the intellectualized genre of Aldous Huxley - but akin to the works of George Eliot or Iris Murdoch in which the author's philosophy suffuses the whole book without obtruding or interfering with the natural flow of the story. The discovery of her basic ideas is not only exciting in itself but quite necessary if the reader is to savour to the full the tempting feast Mrs. Wilson spreads before him. For once her philosophy of existential humanism is recognized, all the seemingly disparate elements
and puzzling irrelevancies or omissions fall into a meaning­
ful pattern.

Though she is aware of the "heart of darkness" and
the unplumbed mysteries of human consciousness, except in two
or three of her stories such as "Hurry hurry," and "Haply the
soul of my grandmother," she usually prefers to seem to ignore
these psychological intricacies as rather exotic elements of
reality that few are capable of sensing or comprehending,
focussing instead on the observable realms of conduct. Con­
sequently, in "Fog," the emphasis is on the character and
behaviour of Mrs. Bylow rather than on the violent murder,
and in "Haply the soul of my grandmother" the mystical
experience is subordinated to the evocation of mood and its
effect on Mr. and Mrs. Forrester. Mrs. Wilson does recog­
nize the corruption of civilization and the moral ineptitude
that is the cause or the result, but from her vantage point
which she calls the stoke-hold,\(^4\) she discovers a coherent and
meaningful configuration which gives a dignity to the human
condition, dependent not on status, wealth, or blood but to a
great degree on the energy derived from living rather than
existing.

This tolerant perspective and dynamic attitude enables

\(^4\)Ethel Wilson, "Bridge or the Stokehold? Views of the
Novelist's Art," Canadian Literature, V. (Summer 1960), 43-47.
her to enjoy and appreciate the "vagaries of human conduct" with a humorous albeit ironic eye yet preserve, morally, a clinical detachment that attests to her own integrity. In this she is both like and unlike Daniel Defoe whose *Roxanna* and *Moll Flanders* she so much admires for his matter of fact acceptance of, even delight in, humanity in its less flattering aspects. For whereas Defoe in his writings betrays his own moral emptiness, Mrs. Wilson, by a twist in perspective, or a wryly ironic interjection, or simply by faithfully presenting the grim reality of a depraved soul, underscores her fiction with a deep moral seriousness that she herself feels is one of the admirable features of E.M. Forster. What Hugh Maclennan would call the "hard inner core" of integrity fashions Mrs. Wilson's delightfully economic style in which understatement illuminates brilliantly both the lack of direction or purpose of some characters and, conversely, the purposeful unequivocal activity of others. In *Swamp Angel*, when Vera in her consuming jealousy hints at some scandal in Maggie's past, Maggie takes direct action. In a few words Mrs. Wilson compassionately compares the self-rewarding virtue

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5 Desmond Pacey, "The Innocent Eye," *Queens Quarterly*, LXI, No.1 (Spring 1954), 45.


7 Pacey, "The Innocent Eye," p. 45.
in moral integrity with the sad degradation of a misdirected soul:

Henry Corder was deeply moved by the story of Maggie. He admired and loved her because she told the story plainly and without too much emotion. The jewel of Maggie's integrity shone in her speaking, and when, one evening, in Henry's shabby living-room, she told the Gunnarsens of her past with apology for her stupidity in not telling them before, Haldar was deeply moved, and Vera too, and the story bound Vera to Maggie with Vera's uncertain and wayward love.

For some time to come Vera did not disparage Maggie but praised her and told people how wonderful she was, and uncertainly loved her because it was plain that Maggie had no heart for any other man and only a woman's heart for a child. As yet, anyway, whispered Vera's malignant ghost."

It is because Mrs. Wilson has accepted life and has found a meaning for, not of, existence that she can submerge the unsolvable riddles of purpose, determinism, evil, and morality (to a degree) in the more rewarding preoccupation with human behavior. Her acceptance is not just a question of faith, which is so inexplicable that even the wise and confident Mrs. Severance becomes inarticulate when faced with the dilemma of defining what she believes in. This enigmatic, elderly recluse denies a benevolent Providence and haltingly gropes for words to describe an unknowable

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8 Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel, New Canadian Library, 1962, p.117.

9 She is like one of E.M. Forster's elderly women, Mrs. Moore or Mrs. Wilcox, who have rather mystical knowledge and inexplicable power.
ultimate: she says simply that she believes in faith, which suggests a kind of Kierkegaardian leap in the darkness to some transcendent power (which is suggested again in the short story, "Haply the soul of my grandmother"). Later, trying again to explain her faith to Maggie, she flounders in a maze of contradictions:

I have just a few convictions left and I hope to die before I lose them. But when Albert says What do you believe in and I say I believe in faith and Albert says faith in what, I can't tell him: but faith in God is my support, and it makes old age bearable and happy, and fearless I think. Yet that is not why I believe.\(^\text{11}\)

Believing in man "to some extent, at least," she can only affirm that she exists by virtue of her head and her heart - in other words, faith is a personal individual thing - and although life is "the damnest thing" she wouldn't have missed it for anything. From Mrs. Wilson's respectful attitude to this slightly ridiculous old juggler it can be assumed that her struggle to formulate an expression of her belief is Mrs. Wilson's own, and that the final affirmation of life itself is the essence of their mutual philosophy.

It is a satisfying creed - this belief in life itself with man as the agent or vehicle - for while it offers

\(^{10}\) Swamp Angel, p.103.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p.151.
only intermittent splashes of definable happiness it inspires hope and gaiety and strength. Her heart does yearn towards the dull, the heartless, the mean-spirited people who by their denial of the infinite possibilities of creation destroy hope, or joy, or life both in themselves and in others. But her head forbids much sympathy with these people and implicit in this attitude are Mrs. Wilson's values. In an annihilating futility, Myrt, in *Tuesday and Wednesday*, crushes any innocent pride or spontaneous fun in her associates and is only partly saved from ignominy herself by the compassionate generosity of one who recognizes her wickedness.12 Similarly, Vera "spread dissension in her own heart and irritated everybody" so that Maggie barely survives Vera's destructive jealousy (but is too affirmatively strong to be beaten by such negative weakness).13 So the virtues of kindly intelligence and moral courage shine forth by contrast.

That Mrs. Wilson understands these weak humans, yet is so impatient with them might be regarded as a harsh trait, leading as it does to a recurrent motif in Mrs. Wilson's

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12 Although Mrs. Wilson's two novellas, *Tuesday and Wednesday* and *Lilly's Story*, were published in one book, *The Equations of Love*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1952, in this thesis they are documented as separate publications because of their length and distinction.

13 In this thesis Mrs. Severance, Edward Vardoe, Vera, Haldar and Maggie refer to the characters in *Swamp Angel*. 
fiction - the survival of the fittest. But as Desmond Pacey notes in his "Introduction" to the New Canadian Library edition of Swamp Angel, this seemingly inevitable cruelty of mankind is usually carefully counterpointed by a compassionate act. It is in the tension created between the cruelty inherent in the human will to survive and the little selfless acts of love and charity that her best characters find life. However much a reader might dislike Maggie or Mrs. Severance - and here an understanding of Mrs. Wilson's themes would certainly mitigate the impression of cruelty and selfishness sometimes engendered by these two imaginary women - he cannot deny that artistically they are quite satisfying, well designed to show the eternal paradox of human nature. And in their moments of unselfish awareness can be caught glimpses of Mrs. Wilson's own deep moral seriousness.

This basic and rigid integrity not only pares her prose of extraneous detail and comment butformulates in the uncluttered style the actual meaning of life. Just as all experience is a concentration of various diversified elements, so many different impressions and meanings are telescoped into one short passage whose significance widens in space like ripples from a stone tossed into a pool. In "A drink with Adolphus," for example, the humourless misfit, Mr. Leaper,
in a brief entry in his diary suggests a world of horror:

On the way home I have never known Mabel so outrageous except on that occasion in Winnipeg. She called me a sourpuss and used other terms which I shall never be able to forget. I went so far as to suggest that a little attention always goes to her head, which seemed to annoy her excessively. She was driving the car and I must confess that some very strange thoughts came into my head. You can imagine that on our arrival at home I was in no condition to write my diary. I sometimes think that whereas some people are born to joy, I was born to sorrow.15

Here are merged the outgoing assertiveness of women, the disparate view of truth or reality, and the inescapable web of human involvement, which compression explodes the last line of the story into an unconscious terrible irony:

"I must have another party," said Adolphus, busy with his lists.16

Moreover her deep moral concern with the plight of humanity softens the harshness of an existential philosophy, which directs less compassionate writers to an interest in mankind commensurate with its impact on the self. Undeniably Mrs. Wilson believes in the value of self-assertion, so the inevitable Odyssey motif weaves throughout all her stories. However, for the most part, she sidesteps the usual technique

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15Ethel Wilson, "A drink with Adolphus," Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories, Toronto, Macmillan, 1961, p.78. (Any short stories mentioned in this thesis are from this book, so hereafter will be referred to by their title; the page number will also refer to this volume.)

16Ibid., p.79.
of allowing her characters to journey into themselves (except in stories like "The Window" where among other things the window functions as a reflection of Mr. Willy's retreat into himself) in order to emphasize her primary postulation: that man is involved in mankind yet swims alone. Each of her voyageurs seeks for an identity in the world of human activity and life. As in Iris Murdoch's novels, which Mrs. Wilson so much admires, the protagonists can only find their authenticity through participation in the lives of others.\(^\text{17}\)

Individuals are not, primarily at least, in conflict with their alter ego as in *The Secret Sharer*, or their environment as in *Main Street*, or social forces as in *Two Solitudes*; they realize their own potential only through battling with, loving, and exasperating other people. In this light, *Hetty Dorval* can be read as a traditional tale of initiation or loss of innocence; *Tuesday and Wednesday* as the hopeless quest for understanding fulfillment among the deadening dullness of hopeless squalor; *Lilly's Story* as a search for a respectable niche; and *The Innocent Traveller* can be interpreted in one sense as the tragic history of a soul unknowingly out of touch with life and people.

\[^{17}\] Actually Mrs. Wilson bears a resemblance to Iris Murdoch. Both are philosophers vitally interested in humanity; both are individualists; both have a strong, analytical, perceptive intelligence.
In Mrs. Wilson's particular vision of reality, conveyed with unadorned honesty, the dictum that man makes himself is tempered with the realization of the extreme vulnerability of the old, the young, the wise, the foolish, to the intentional or chance influence of other people and events, until the texture of human life reverberates with the cross-currents of these often invisible forces. Mrs. Wilson at times even envisions some sort of a lotus-land removed from all the exasperations of civilization. Swimming alone, Maggie is dreamily envious of the seals and porpoises:

they have a nice life, live in the cool water with fun and passion, without human relationships, Courtesy week or the flame thrower,

but she is jerked back to reality, and because "she is earth-bound," not a "God out there," she must "...get the fire going and put the potatoes in and speak to Mr. and Mrs. Milliken." Living may be done alone, like swimming, but "The Window" shows the mental and spiritual shrivelling of a man who tries it, literally.

To discover "truth" or explore the difference between illusion and reality is the prime motivation behind most artistic endeavour. Victimized by the bewildering and oppressive forces of a technologically oriented culture, man has become increasingly confused and neurotic in his futile

\[18\] Swamp Angel, p.100.

\[19\] Ibid.
struggle against the morass of distracting and deceitful trivialities that tend to smother any worthwhile values and extinguish any vestiges of a meaningful truth. Moreover, truth itself is so nebulous, so fluctuating, so subjective, that interpretation depends not only on the disposition of the observer but also on the angle of perception. Each science, for instance, not only has its own version of reality but a single discipline often embraces a number of disparate views, rendering the task of imposing some order on chaos increasingly difficult as the complexity of discovered knowledge thickens the substance of being into an unbelievable density.

In Mrs. Wilson's writings the illusory nature of reality - or the realistic nature of illusion - is the leitmotif that harmonizes the various movements of her philosophical accents into a meaningful accord. While somewhat contrapuntal, the diverse strains of her thought need a modifying diminuendo which is provided by her anti-dogmatic attitude to the nature of reality. Being mainly subjective, truth cannot be clearly defined but, harmonizing with her existentially directed perception is Mrs. Wilson's admonition that to recognize truth as a kind of secretion squeezed out of the varied aspects or segments of reality and experience, gathered, shaped, and correlated in the individual mind is to appreciate the joys of living. Being primarily concerned with the problem of the individual realizing or finding his
being in the melee of human relationships, Mrs. Wilson attaches the utmost importance to the confluence of social classes, hence social structure plays a prominent, though unaccented, role in her dramas. Because it is apparent that each segment of society has its unique interpretation of reality, an individual's perception of truth is not only coloured subjectively, but also objectively according to his social status.

Epitomizing the unacknowledged inverted snobbery, or snobbery without pride in function, that is characteristic of bourgeois democratic society, Myrtle pretends to be all manner of things, for the cause of her day-dreaming is her unconscious recognition and resentment of the difference between herself and people of an upper caste. So any pride in her own ability is nullified; she expends her energy cleaning for society women and by her humiliation manages to feel superior to them, at the same time taking no pride in her own slovenly, filthy rooms. Mrs. Wilson is well aware that poverty and low estate breed ineptitude and flaccid mentality.

The economy of her style makes the separation of Mrs. Wilson's strands of meaning rather difficult and

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unfortunately results in repetition in the following examination of her themes. A separate exploration of the patterning of women might seem scarcely a theme, but her canvas glows with the unpredictable behaviour of women whose emotional vibrations are more discernible than men's. Besides being more sensitive to the vibrations of other humans than are men, women also have an intuitive and mysterious knowledge that illustrates well Mrs. Wilson's view of an illogical universe.

One thing more remains to be mentioned, before the detailed survey of her themes is begun: although Mrs. Wilson is not a regional writer the natural environment of British Columbia plays a vital part in her literature. According to Mr. Frye, one of the aims of literature is to bring mankind back into closer communication with nature.21 Eighteenth century artists could rhapsodize about man's affinity with natural objects because there was implied no physical relationship; even in the nineteenth century, nature "red in tooth and claw" was of a different order than "the elect of God." The post-Darwinian anguish was the stimulus necessary for the exploration of the human soul and personality, in an attempt to exalt man on his own merits. In the wealth of novels that

explored this concept, Nature was often the protagonist, inimical or hostile to the development of man's full stature. However, with the slow and reluctant acceptance of human limitations and vulnerability grew a dream of unlimited aspirations and a new kind of pride, tempered however, by a new anxiety in the realization of the responsibility and precariousness of man's present status. Through all this period of transition the horizons of literature widened until now not only can artists use natural phenomena as objective correlatives for man's emotions and plights but also they can with humble equanimity go to nature for lessons in survival.

It is part of Mrs. Wilson's humility before life that she can delight as much in the benign look on the face of a kitten relieving itself as she can in the superb sight of a migrating flock of geese which, once witnessed, is indelibly and gloriously etched on the memory. Why? Mrs. Wilson never pretends to know the answers; she claims to record only what she sees.

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22 In an interview with Mrs. Wilson, the writer commented on the significance of Ernestine's death by drowning in Hetty Dorval. Mrs. Wilson said, "But it happened!"
CHAPTER II

THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Vancouver people going home from work in the late afternoon who chance to look upwards, see the sea gulls flying out to sea singly, and in twos, threes, companies, through the changing skies of evening. On come the sea gulls, flying steadily westwards and seawards to the places where they will spend the night. If you scatter your pieces now, the gulls will not turn, descend, alight, and devour. Food does not tempt them as they proceed together on their appointed flight. Only a wind disturbs them, and when a west wind blows furiously in from the sea on a bright evening, the sea gulls, caught in its power, fly high, and higher, wheel, negotiate, gather and disperse. There is an exultation communicated to the evening watcher who lifts his eyes to the mysterious sight.  

The sea gull is indigenous to Mrs. Wilson's fiction. These "...calculating, active birds which have little to recommend them except their strength, their fine coarse beauty and their wheeling flight..." are a symbol of steady purposeful living. While any aspect of nature is a source of

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Tuesday and Wednesday, p.69.
deep and inexpressible delight to the sensitive and mature, it is not the delicacy of a finch's wing or the evanescent bluebells and tiny shrinking violets of D.H. Lawrence's ecstatic rapture that thrill or soothe Mrs. Wilson's characters. Rather, it is the high flying sandhill cranes, the geese flying strongly with outstretched necks, the osprey hitting the water in an explosion of flying spray, the rapacious hawk, the indomitable eagle, and the strong hardy sage brush that inspire her characters with "...a queer exhaltation, a sudden flash that [is] the deepest envy." The cumulative effect of this trenchant emphasis on the strength of nature not only augments the vigorous tone of her canvas, but also serves as a comparison and contrast for the more emotionally vulnerable and therefore weaker species, man.

It is Mrs. Wilson's belief that nature not only stimulates and satisfies the poetic and aesthetic need in man, refreshing and comforting, but also that the natural order in the universe provides man with examples of the technique of sheer survival. There are many ramifications of this

25 Such as Mrs. Gormley whose "ten cents worth of view" contains "...nearly all of the glory of the world and no despair..." ("A drink with Adolphus," p.68.), or Mrs. Golightly who could hardly believe the beauty that lay below her and was "...one with the rapture of that beautiful unexpected moment." ("Mrs. Golightly and the First Convention," p.10.)

latter concept, but is it not logical for a person with so energetic and positive an approach to life to focus on the glorious strength of the bold, noble scenery and the purposeful instincts of the allied life? Her dramas are often staged, for instance, against the treacherous west coast of Vancouver Island which lies

naked to the Pacific Ocean which rolls in all the way from Asia and breaks upon the reefs and rocks and hard sands, and the continuous brewing of weather up in an air cauldron in the north that seethes and spills over and rushes out of the Gulf of Alaska, often moderating before it reaches lower latitudes: but sometimes it roars down and attacks like all hell;27

or the rough demanding fishing country of the interior; or the rugged sage covered hills along the Canyon, where the sparkling coquettish Thompson is lost in the mighty, silent, relentless Fraser whose

wide deceptive flow of sullen opaque and fawn-coloured water...of boil and whirlpool show the river to be dangerous.28

A pale, indecisive mortal cannot withstand the vigour of this type of country since one of the prerequisites for the coexistence of man and nature is that man must take possession of his environment.

27"From Flores," p.36.

Sensitivity to beauty and a humility before its power and grandeur assist the intelligent to take possession of their natural surroundings. In *The Innocent Traveller*, even while Rachel was shepherding with trepidation and anxiety her aging mother and unpredictable aunt across the unknown miles of Canada, through a world entirely different and therefore frightening, she felt a new lightness of heart and a release, loving even the jackpines which, as Mrs. Wilson observes, "...are hard to love in their rank dark millions." Later, she

looked up at the railway cutting and saw, for one moment, poised alone against the blue sky, a single slender white stemmed aspen tree whose golden leaves trembled and shone and sang in the sunshine. It was there. It was gone. It was hers.

Settled in Vancouver, a new, vigorous, pioneer town it was not long before the contours of the mountains became part of their lives.... Along the topmost generous curve of the westward hills pine trees cut sharply against the coloured evening skies, and there were always the sounds of the sirens of ships and the cries of the sea gulls - sound of ocean.

Rachel found happiness and peace in her adopted country because it had become hers.


30 Ibid., p.119.

31 Ibid., p.125.
Although Rachel seems unaware of the brutal forces of nature – the book's theme precludes any exploration of this aspect – not all the characters in Mrs. Wilson's books are so unawakened. Because Maggie can understand and appreciate the wonder and glory yet be sensible of the horrors, the cruelty, which are as much a part of nature as of life itself, catastrophes or even malevolence can never overwhelm her. When Vera's festering jealousy became almost unbearable, Maggie witnessed a strange sight. An osprey in its interminable search for food had captured a fish and was making off with it, when out of the blue came an eagle beating the osprey with its great wings. For a while the osprey resisted, then as the battering persisted, as if suddenly accepting defeat, it dropped its fish. Down swooped the eagle. He caught the fish in mid-air and rose. His wings beat slowly and calmly, all crisis over. Maggie looked for the osprey but the sky was empty. Did a bird's rage or a bird's acceptance possess him? There was nothing he could do....

Maggie returned to the shore "...lifted by this battle of birds with its defeat and its victory." There is always defeat with victory, violence with beauty, evil with good. Because Maggie is in possession of her environment she cannot with integrity accept defeat, but being humane and human, she can temper with compassion her victory over Verda's

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32 _Swamp Angel,_ p.90.
childishness. In her weakness Vera has allowed her environment to overpower her; she hates the fishing country, blaming the solitude for Haldar's indifference, and her overt hostility to the situation alienates her not only from nature but also from humanity. So in life, as in the eagle-osprey battle, it is the fittest who survive.

Such a bald statement of a novelist's theme might deliver a shock, carrying as it does overtones of ruthlessness. But perhaps indiscriminate charity is just as unmerciful. As society becomes more socialistic, welfare-state thinking of a highly emotional nature is increasingly liable to completely smother reason and reality. Commendable compassion and consideration for the unfortunate, the helpless, the victimized, unwittingly but inevitably tends to embrace the physically and morally weak, the lazy, the stupid and the habitually and criminally careless, fostering at best a dull mediocrity, at worst a superiority of coercion.33 Such a social milieu is demoralizing to the vital spirit of growth and fulfillment. With clear-eyed wisdom Mrs. Wilson recognizes the trap. Her most sympathetically drawn characters consciously or unconsciously avoid the pitfalls of a blind humanism. If survival sometimes entails misery or even tragedy, there is no help for it; it is as inevitable as the westward flight each evening of the sea gulls; it is inherent in the human condition.

33 Trilling, p.159.
In *Swamp Angel* Edward Vardoe's meanness, stupidity, and brutish ardour are gradually stifling and destroying Maggie's soul and spirit. Steeling herself to be ruthless she leaves Edward and spends three days of Gethsemane in the wilderness of the solitary forest near Hope:

A sadness fell upon her and the thin cruel thought returned. What dreadful thing had she done to Edward Vardoe? He...was humiliated...and unhappy with a helpless unhappiness that was shocking because he was unprepared. I can't help it, she told herself once again...I didn't judge him but I am his executioner just the same... We have been each other's executioners. Now this is the very last time I will think about it...it was too dreadful to bear...I shall always go unforgiven. God help me. I am humiliated for always by what I did, for marrying him. I won't think of it - there's no good in it ever...if I can...

Then, her soul and mind having been purged, "the cruel dangerous thought slid away and played by itself."34

The situation here, the plot of the story must be handled delicately to avoid pure melodrama which would alienate the sympathy of the reader. Should Edward become completely unhinged by Maggie's flight she becomes a monster; at the same time he must be weak and despicable enough to warrant the desertion yet somehow worthy of consideration. Actually he is saved from himself by the intervention of Mrs. Severance who, in the sense that she articulates Maggie's own thoughts and philosophy, is her alter ego. Does this then atone for Maggie's

34*Swamp Angel*, p.39.
ruthlessness? It is not intended to. The meaning of it all and the justification, if necessary, is in the laconic understatement that is Mrs. Wilson's triumph of technique. In its disjointedness and restrained emotion, Maggie's letter to her friend Hilda is the embodiment of mute suffering:

You will understand, perhaps, that my life wasn't endurable.... My plans have been made for some time and have been a great support to me. I shall write to you when I am settled, and where, but whatever happens I shall not come back. I'm not asking anything of you, Hilda, unless, if you can help Edward, do. Perhaps you can. I can't. Of course one never expects to arrive at this point in one's life, but here I am. I won't talk about "feelings." - My love to you both. Maggie.

Conversely, and in character, Edward's whimpering self-pity: "I've been done, done, had for a sucker." "My stummick's out." "Who'll I entertain?", objectifies the exhaustion of any value in their married life; a new approach is imperative to prevent their complete and mutual annihilation. Maggie acts.

In action is the only kind of salvation that is available to earth-bound creatures who continually have to keep reasserting their existence and learning, if possible, from their mistakes. Encompassed by the misery of the human condition, man should alleviate it as much as possible, without dwelling on the insupportable sorrow of humanity, from which realization, however, there is no escape. Man must suffer,

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35 Ibid., p.41.
man must toil, man must endure the frustration incurred by the vagaries of chance which too often are fraught with tragedy, and man can never ignore the knowledge of his own guilt. Poignantly aware of this inescapable burden, Maggie learns to live with it and to sublimate it in positive action.

In accepting the responsibility for Edward Vardoe's present misery she in a sense parallels Christ's agony on the cross where he suffered for the guilt of the whole world. Three days of imposed spiritual death are but a prelude to her regeneration. Strengthened by her abasement, her suffering, her humility, she discovers a new life, fuller and richer by virtue of her self-awareness, but infinitely more difficult because not only has her decision estranged her from the support of her friends, but she is committed to a formidable encumbrance, having assumed the sin of all mankind. To her dismay she finds it impossible to abandon Vera and Haldar. The moral obligation to alleviate their misery for which there is no lethe can now only supplement her own importunate need to fulfil herself in working and loving and enjoying the natural glories of her chosen sanctuary. Nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of one's own heart and mind. This then is the meaning of life: an obligation to take selective action in the amelioration of human distress:

Perhaps there's a way. I think there might be a way. It isn't easy and it's not going to be easy,36

36 Ibid., p.154.
and at the same time asserting one's own authenticity in the joy of continuous creation:

As Maggie and Angus drove up the hill past the Iron Mask mine the country became more delicately, coolly vernal. Strong fresh green had spread in the valley of the Thompson river. A pale frigid green had now begun to flow over the dun coloured upper levels. There still were distant pockets of snow. Here, once more they drove past the great solitary bull pines with their strongly hatched and corrugated bark—all the delights of the country spoke afresh to Maggie—swelling hills, wild and widespread sage—look! there is a coyote and his coat is the same dun as the hill on which he runs purposefully about his business. He vanishes. This was Maggie's third year in. Breathe the sagey air! See, a bluebird! Floating cloud, drifting scent, wild creature, curving fleeting hill—each made its own statement to Maggie in the imperishable spring.

When Ellen Cuppy, in *Love and Salt Water*, forces herself to break her engagement to Huw, like Maggie she shoulders the entire blame for the ensuing unhappiness. Involved in Ellen's dilemma is a situation that scarcely troubles Maggie. This is the probability of social censure and excommunication by her family and associates, most of whom have inherited their moral values from a social ethic based primarily on appearances, and which is at desperate variance with individual choice.

Morgan was displeased with Ellen's behaviour. Nora said, 'But Gypsy, how could you! Have you forgotten that he was a prisoner of war?'

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'No,' said Ellen very sad for losing Huw, and sad for Huw that he was a prisoner of war and still a prisoner, and glad for losing him, 'no, I didn't forget, truly, Nora, I didn't forget.'

It is Ellen's anguish that she is not yet immersed deeply enough in the destructive element to realize fully the tragedy of life and thereby understand herself as part of frail and errant humanity. So she drifts along for years in a state of somnolence, even boredom.

Boredom is itself an anxiety which manifests itself either in a hectic search for new thrills and excitement or in a partial or complete withdrawal from life. Both conditions feed upon themselves producing a state either of psychosis or worse, of deadening monotony, non-existence. Luckily, Ellen's boredom is only a superficial layer uneasily imposed upon a vital, inherent will to live which has been obscured only dimly by her deliberate withdrawal from further emotional involvements. Nevertheless her imposed isolation misdirects her into risking and nearly losing not only her own life but that of her nephew who is almost the sole "raison d'etre" of her sister's existence. Boredom and timidity before life blind Ellen to her sister's suffering; innoculated against

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38 Ethel Wilson, Love and Salt Water, Toronto, Macmillan, 1956, p.81. (Any mention of Ellen or Nora in this thesis will refer to the characters in Love and Salt Water.)
passion, her senses are numb to Nora's agonized motivation. In a mistaken conviction that her sister is over-protective of Johnny, Ellen seeks to enlarge his experience. Her misguided altruism obliterates her judgement and in the ensuing holocaust she endures the torture of the damned, the eternal and excruciating agony that absurdly enough is visited only upon those who admit the magnitude of their own guilt. She was in the water and blinded and thinking only Johnny, Johnny! Where are you? What a fool I am! Oh, Nora what a fool! Where is he? Oh Nora!...she was aware even then of the deepest anguish mixed inextricably with the bursting feeling in her lungs.... How long does this last? Nora, he's slipping! How long does this last?39

To really be alive one has to come close to death. Now that Ellen has gazed into the heart of things with an unflinching honesty she is equipped to endure the vicissitudes of life with courage, tolerance and vigour and thereafter can assert her fitness to live. She will survive. Because, like Sisyphus she is conscious of, and so superior to, her fate. The struggles of Mrs. Wilson's heroines could well serve to illustrate Albert Camus' theory of Sisyphus as modern absurd man. Because there is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night, reasons Camus, it is only when Sisyphus is conscious of his suffering that he is superior to his fate. Crushing truths perish from being acknowledged, and when the existential hero

39 Ibid., p.176.
contemplates his torment all the idols are silenced. (Maggie's Gesthemane is recalled and the thin cruel thought that welled up in her - unchecked.) Although one always resumes one's burden the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart, for he knows himself to be the master of his days.40

In an absurd world where animals are infinitely better adapted than man despite his supreme and unique gift of reason - or perhaps because of it - Maggie and Ellen represent the ultimate in human achievement, the most successful combination of emotion with reason. If it is a poor adjustment at best, how does the unresponsive residue of humanity fare? For there is a tremendous and unjustifiable discrepancy in the natural endowments of people. When Mrs. Severance broods over the meanness and stupidity of Edward Vardoe and sorrowfully protests that "Its not fair... not fair," she is verbalizing the anguished, puzzled, despairing cry that has echoed from the lips of man since time began.

But the unfairness, the bewilderment, the agony, must be accepted before a man can begin to appreciate and enjoy the delights of his birthright. A preoccupation with the injustice of life is usually debilitating. Because man

has the power of — or rather the necessity of — choice he decides every minute what he is to be. Therefore the present moment and what is happening now is of the utmost importance. When Mrs. Severance finally realizes her injustice to Hilda and painfully disencumbers herself of the Swamp Angel, she absolves them both from the unwholesome thralldom of the dead past which had imprisoned Hilda in a vise of stagnation. Now can Hilda take her unhappiness or her happiness, her worries and her fulfillment; now can Mrs. Severance achieve full stature and die in peace and resignation having experienced to the full the nothingness and glory that is life.

The philosophy of a continuous creation discounts to a great extent the importance of environment and early background on which the naturalist school of literature is based, emphasizing instead the responsibility of every individual to make or break himself. Not that background is a negligible factor. In the American edition of Swamp Angel which was published after the Canadian edition, there is a chapter describing the loveless, primitive, rough childhood of Vera Gunnarsen, making understandable her hatred of the life Haldar has chosen. Because the relative comfort

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41 It is interesting to note that the extra chapter was written at the suggestion of the American publisher (Harper, 1954). That Mrs. Wilson has not included this chapter in subsequent Canadian editions seems to indicate that she places the responsibility for Vera's behaviour on Vera herself — not on her background.
and civilization of Kamloops represents her escape from poverty and futile drudgery she fiercely resents her exile in the fishing country. While this explains her conduct, it does not excuse it. She has in herself the power of choosing. Deficient in wisdom and resolution she is unable to choose between the hard work and sacrifice of a life with her beloved Haldar and the easier more comfortable environment of the city, without, however, Haldar. She wants both. She gets neither. Driven to desperation by her blurred conflict she clutches at any straw to justify her irresolution, irrationally blaming Maggie for Haldar's growing indifference which propels her to the brink of suicide. Naturally, the attempt is a failure and her wavering reason almost collapses as she frenziedly capitulates before Maggie's resolute equanimity.

There is nothing quite so destructive to the personality as indecision. Right or wrong, the wise man decides and acts, otherwise the vacillation will corrode his physical, mental and spiritual balance. Moulded by an analogous childhood, Lilly's life, in *Lilly's Story*, expands into a purposeful fulfillment in spite of a more demoralizing adolescence than Vera's. Less sensitive than Vera, her governing passion is the fierce protective instinct towards her own child whom she can release naturally, as animals do, when Eleanor reaches maturity. More significant, however, is that Lilly accepts her limitations and deliberately chooses her course, then navigates with unswerving direction around any obstacles to
find her maximum contentment in a dignified respectability and an imagined security.

Capricious chance reduces security to a mere illusion, mocking human complacency and confidence. The only defence man has against an indifferent providence and a seemingly malicious chance rests in his own inner strength to react with equanimity, thought, and vigour to the unexpected, the unwelcome, the unjust. Unlike the animals man cannot adapt to his environment; he can only ignore or deny it, surrender to it, or fight it. Sooner or later every individual encounters a situation of death, suffering, or hazard and has to choose by his action to assert or deny his individuality.

One can accept the inevitable in a spirit of resignation as did Ellen, and Haldar Gunnarsen, sinking into a wretched apathy, of wear emotional blinkers like Nora, which denies the world as an illusion. Nora not only refuses to acknowledge the fact of her mongoloid son but also ignores the physical imperfection of her acknowledged son, Johnny. "You see," she said, looking earnestly at her sister, "the minute you admit something exists, it exists and can become worse...."42 Denial of reality usually results in tragedy or unnecessary grief: Nora's intense concentration upon Johnny can only - and does - bring misunderstanding, alienation and eventual empty loneliness.

Sometimes chance finds an accomplice or adjuvant in human folly. In "From Flores", indifferent Fortune, aided

42 Love and Salt Water, p.147.
by a crewman of little judgement, wrecks the Effie Cee
drowning all on board including Jason who was rushing to
comfort and marry the frightened and desperate girl he had
unwittingly made pregnant.

Because Josie did not read the papers, she did not
know that Jason was dead. Days had passed and
continued to pass. Distraught, alone, deprived of
hope and faith (two sovereign remedies) and with­
out the consolation of love, she took secretly and
with terror what she deemed to be the appropriate
path.43

Thus, with the irony of understatement, Mrs. Wilson demon­
strates another way of evading reality and the obligation
of free choice.

The alternative to acceptance with resignation or
denial of reality is to engage life with courage and spirit,
as illustrated above in Maggie's struggle. Energy and pur­
purpose transcend the stultifying mediocre and mundane, heighten­
ing the meaning and enjoyment of life. Chance, merely opens
the door to the existential hero, who can utilize his oppor­
tunities and adversities to discover or rediscover his
strength. The same circumstances that destroyed Josie im­
pelled Lilly to what was, for a person of her limited
sensibility, a full life. Later, when Chance sends Yow, who
alone could utterly shatter her security, she acts with a
calm fortitude and judicious determination. The cumulative
force of a lifetime of impassive objectivity ensures stability

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Pp.43-44.
and a measure of contentment, which only seems to be abjured when emotion and passion surprisingly influence her acceptance of Mr. Sprockett:

Lilly was happy too, happier than she had ever been and with a different variety of happiness. Perhaps what she chiefly felt was gratitude...

- a brand new sensation for Lilly -

but she did not enquire of herself. She had the same kind of confidence in Mr. Sprockett that she had in Matron with the added pleasure that he was a man. She would be without fear; nothing, surely, could touch her now.44

A most erroneous conviction. Still, with her imperturbable prudence, what could?

The existential philosophy emphasizes man's freedom which can only operate in the framework of a firmly based personality willing and able to contemplate an infinite number of possibilities. A worth-while life is a progression of decisions. Mistakes are inevitable but the only way to "beat the racket," as the stock broker would say, is to accept the loss and salvage the remainder for another opportunity. Mrs. Broom, in Hetty Dorval, is like Lilly in her withdrawal into the protective shell of anonymity, and for the same reason: to ensure respectability and security for her bastard offspring. Both women are unscrupulous, both are impassive, and both are resolute. But whereas Lilly with self-denying enterprise can expediently sever her connections, Mrs. Broom

44 Lilly's Story, p. 277.
resignedly accepts the burden of being Hetty's slave. Having with blind obstinacy devoted a lifetime of drudgery to nurturing a worthless callous monster, she crumples into nothingness with Hetty's repudiation. In denying herself the advantage or luxury of choice Mrs. Broom negates life and is herself destroyed. A tenacious clinging to a corrosive situation out of a mistaken sense of duty blended with perverted pride and innate timidity also strangles the heart and soul of Kate in "Till Death Us Do Part".

Innocence, good-will, self-denial prove impotent in an absurd world where the will to survive in heart and head is vulnerable man's only hope.

To focus on the novella, Tuesday and Wednesday as a means of illustrating the wholeness of Mrs. Wilson's theme seems slightly ridiculous since the movement of the book is slowly, but inevitably, towards death. But sometimes a truth becomes clearer by contrast with its negation: happiness is only fully known through sorrow, life only realized through death. The magnitude of a mortal soul's struggle towards satisfaction and meaning in a purposeless world can only be appreciated when viewed against a comparable failure. The story traces the thoughts and actions of a lower class couple as they wander through the enervating routine of the two traditionally dullest days of the week. The spirits of these
typically "hollow men" match the gloom of the drab Wednesday which presages the drizzling gray mist in which Mort will be annihilated, thereby giving a new lease of life to Myrt as the mist changes to a forceful, driving, vital rain.

The swirling drama of the forces of involvement is observed elsewhere; here the concern is with the struggle or non-struggle to survive. The couple lead an aimless, cheerless, but not actively unhappy existence in two filthy, slovenly, bare rooms in a kind of "darkness visible," a physical environment that symbolizes their mental and spiritual poverty. Because they are both dirty, inefficient, and self-centred they manage to maintain a precarious harmony of sorts, disturbed but never disrupted by continual bickering about trivialities, occasional meaningless outbursts of temper, and a prevalent, disagreeable, heavy atmosphere. Nothing with any vitality can breathe in this coffin-like room: Mrs. Emblem who comes only out of a sense of duty "puffing luxuriously into the dingy room," soon becomes irritated and irritating, and can only dispel the ensuing depression in the haven of her own spotlessly clean inviting apartment: Mort returns home apprehensively, his swagger camouflaging his reluctance to encounter Myrt; Vicki Tritt is glad to escape into the pleasant warm rain. For over the two shabby rooms broods the enervating gloom of

45 See pp. 48-49 of this thesis.
Myrt's spiteful grudge against life. Only Mrs. Emblem is immune to the power of Myrt's disconcerting eyelids whose disapproving judgement imperfectly conceals the destructive and selfish envy that daily reduces her associates to ineffective pawns. In Myrt's presence no joy can bubble, no pleasantness can warm, no kindness can leaven, the lump of depression. Just as the dirty windows admit the day but not the air, so Myrt's oppressive personality barricades the door against any vitality. The kitten is harbored only if it is not a female, the "emblem" of fertility and life.

The world is full of kill-joys whose own inner vacancy and jealousy drain the atmosphere of any pleasure, fun, or satisfaction. Against these people there is no defence for the weak or the innocent and little even for the strong and wise, as Maggie realizes from her intimacy with Vera. Dependence on such people is morally degrading and physically paralyzing, as Mrs. H.X. Lemoyne knows and cannot help. Nevertheless, had Mort possessed any spunk or will to survive he might have recognized and resented the nature of Myrt's power. But his likeable, easy-going, masculine effluence is only one side of the foolish lazy drifter that Myrt knows but only acknowledges when it seems expedient. One place or another, one person or another, one job or another is all the same to Mort, so anaethetized is he by his own apathy, so dulled by his own conceit. Far from feeling any release or lifting of spirits when he
escapes his tomb-like "digs" he is so impregnated with torpor that Myrt's unpredictable humour can colour his whole day. Mort is in the stage of non-choice, of "this as well as that" (the same condition that kept Ellen drifting aimlessly for years). He lives for the instant, is passively receptive to everything, and cannot commit himself to anything:

The past and the future have no significance, only the ephemeral present. This person never really accomplishes anything. The less he accomplishes, the more he tries everything....He eludes responsibility. His stage remains one of non-choice.46

Ellen never reaches the hopelessly low state that debilitates Mort. Even in her drifting she wondered about things, life and purpose and reality and her own direction. She

became aware of a sameness, a less-brightness near at hand and refused to acknowledge this less-brightness into which she had begun to move...where shall I go? ... She had begun to be teased sometimes by the discrepancy between the trivia of life and its purposes... She was restless...her inner life became question and answer, question and no answer.47

Her intellect and experience eventually triumph, which liberates her from the essentially meaningless thrall of non-existence. Because she has the will to live and love,


47 Love and Salt Water, p.102.
she is able to commit herself to a conscious choice. Mort, however, lacks the power of decision. Although the sight of Myrt sleeping always arouses in him a vague desire to slug her, any assertion would sentence him to a role of having to recognize his own possibilities. Unconsciously he avoids or rejects any action or situation that would disturb his all-encompassing slump that is slovenly comfortable:

If she lets one peep out of her, he promised, I certainly will slug her. He had, of course, no intention ever of slugging Myrtle. But whenever he made himself this promise—that he would certainly slug Myrtle if she let one peep out of her—he enjoyed it: it armoured him for the day and strengthened his self-esteem which was so vulnerable.48

Lacking the capacity for self awareness, Mort's undefined flabbiness impedes any mature composure so that he is easily insulted, easily pleased, although never ecstatic or despairing. Time is unconsequential and steady employment is valueless as his wants are minimal and his aspirations plebian. Unlike the rollicking Eddie Hansen, a Paul Bunyan of the coast, Mort drinks only three beers, enough to induce a state of neither drunkenness nor sobriety, but merely an enhancement of his habitual condition of half-sleep. Thoughts of malaise and death lie below his consciousness rising to the surface like bubbles of gas from a slowly fermenting yeast, flavouring every thought and circumstance with the taste of ultimate decay. Wantonly fabricating an

48 Tuesday and Wednesday, p.78.
illness for Myrtle he projects his own malignancy into her "touch of cancer." Subsequently at the funeral home the luxurious coffins, so inviting and charming in contrast to his filthy chaotic rooms, mesmerizes him into a morbid enchantment. Imagining Myrt in the lovely blue-lined casket is really only a transference of his own death-wish. So his death is not an accident. It is an inevitable corollary of the slowly rising efflorescence of his lethargy; suppressed memory is said to be responsible for the death-wish, which is the sin against the Holy Ghost or the "Will". Defenceless against the forcefullness of Eddie Hansen Mort guides his friend slowly onto the wharf where a grotesque dance of death is an overture to the senseless undramatic drowning. Mort

seizes Eddie and they fight there, choking, grappling, the two good friends in the dark water...bitterness despair anguish dreadful tearing anguish...and the water suffocated his eyes and blinded his lungs...and the agony grew and grew and at last diminished... and Mort and Eddie...became both of them drowned men,^\[49\]

with no witness to the almost hypnotic spell that tumbled Mort into Eddie's clutching embrace.

Although Myrt survives to bask in the glory of Mort's "heroics" her actual life-in-death is just a continuation of the slovenly aimlessness that is so spuriously comfortable to the empty and insecure. Vicki enjoys one authentic moment of

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\[49\text{Ibid.}, p.114.\]
bliss when her shrinking inner personality asserts itself in a momentous and magnificent lie, not for personal distinction, but to commemorate the romantic Mort of her imagination, and for the dubious comfort of his disdaining widow. Vicki's tentative blossoming is only momentary as habit and the thoughtless cruelty of Mrs. Emblem drive her back to the cell-like sanctuary of her nun-like retreat.

Among this debris of the human waste of ineffectual misguided souls does anyone manage to survive authentically? In the story itself, perhaps, only Mrs. Emblem, who with her ample bosom and radiating warmth has lived and loved and won and lost, but is now encased in a cocoon, a rosy one, but spun only with routine gossip and chatter. Nevertheless she does assert her personality and enjoys life to the limit of her capacity. Paradoxically, however, everyone in this short novella lives in the memory of all who have succumbed to the spell of Mrs. Wilson's pen. For she loves these silly, wayward, mediocre people who are sentenced to a daily routine of dull and meaningless work and play. Mort's peregrinations and his pallid temperamental fluctuations never cease to delight, and his odyssey culminating, as do countless other men's, in misunderstanding and ignominy, vibrates a sympathetic cord in most readers; everyone responds in some measure to Vicki's passive futility and the total annihilation of her identity; while Mrs. Emblem's enthusiasm and gaiety are infectious. Mrs. Wilson admires Maggie, she respects Lilly, but the tragedy of Vicki is presented with a sincere wise
compassion, and she unreservedly loves Mort.

So it is not enough to assert one's personality. Although the seagull is her symbol of free and purposeful living, Mrs. Wilson's final judgement seems to be that although "there is an exultation communicated to the evening watcher who lifts his eyes to the mysterious sight," of "... the gulls flying steadily westwards and seawards to the places where they will spend the night," the gull has a fine life "...but he is too earnest." It is significant, that in Chekov's *Seagull*, Nina too, finds that freedom and purpose are not enough:

I'm a seagull. No, that's not it...Now I am a real actress I act with intense enjoyment, with enthusiasm;...but knowing how to endure things ...I'm not afraid of life.

Later she reveals the secret of her courage and vitality:
"Yes I love him passionately, I love him desperately."

As a symbol only of strength and purpose the seagull then, is an inadequate model for a full and rewarding life. Love, gaiety, and compassion are necessary adjuncts to the development of the courage required for living. These can only be found in a passionate commitment to life, a positive assertion of being in which human relations are both rewarding and inescapable.

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50 *Innocent Traveller*, p.263.

"I AM INVOLVED IN MANKIND."

Practically the only even mildly derogatory criticism of Mrs. Wilson's literary technique suggests that perhaps coincidence and surprise are a trifle overworked in her plots. The antipathy to this element expressed by honest and respected critics must derive in part from their troubled concern about the appeal of the indiscriminate expediency that informs many of the "best-sellers," including, of course, in the plethora of therapeutic detective stories, the contrived discoveries that enable the reader to remain detached from and superior to the issues involved. Or they may have wearied of the overstated malevolence of chance in Hardy, the extreme antithesis of the literature of security, whose preoccupation with coincidence was his method of infusing fiction with imaginative realism. At the other extreme are writers like Wodehouse whose "highly machined and elaborate plotting" is a satirical and hilarious exaggeration of behaviour.

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52 Pacey, The Innocent Eye, p.49.


54 Ibid., p.439.
This rather suspicious critical attitude is even more understandable and justifiable when applied to writers who are tinged with the existentialist philosophy. In an attempt to show the world as highly absurd and illogical, there is a tendency to disregard human motivation and planning, but Mrs. Wilson's matter-of-factness and restrained and subtle humour which illuminates the frailities of man belie an attempt at any unnatural distortion of her keen and perceptive portrayal of actual life. From her life-long fascination with the oddities of behaviour and events which determine man's frail existence grew an appreciation that what is often labelled co-incidence is usually the outcome of individual unpredictability and predictability.

As no one can possibly fully understand himself, much less another, any prognosis of action is merely tentative and unreliable. Although most people operate on a fairly rigid routine, departures from the norm are frequent or rare dependent on a multitude of factors and influences among which are the personalities involved, the atmosphere, the total environment, and of course, chance itself. Chance or "Fortune" is responsible for accidents that have no known or knowable predictability. Coincidence, on the other hand, implies an unexpected partly explicable meeting of events that is often wrongly attributed solely to "fate." Some are trivial and merely illustrate the peculiarity of life while others, the target of Mrs. Wilson's investigation, reverberate almost endlessly. Mrs. Severance tentatively attempts to
differentiate between coincidence and fate:

Coincidence... seems to me to be what a Japanese friend of mine used to call a 'series of combination of events' which meet at a certain point of time or perhaps place. It is not as uncommon as people think...

When Philip and I lived in Burma we went from Rangoon to where there were some temples. A priest said There is a man here whom you must see, and there was a white man living in that village. So we went to the villager's house where he lived and his name was Philip Severance! It didn't prove anything... it was just coincidence and it felt very strange indeed. Of course when you get into the higher flights coincidence is sometimes called Providence- I mean when coincidence moves to the benefit of some people.55

Were coincidences merely dependent on arbitrary cosmic indifference, ordinary logic would dictate some balance between their malevolent and benevolent aspects, but as this ratio is upset in life, as in fiction, obviously there is some other principle operating. There are certain families both real and imaginary that seem to have a predilection either to catastrophe or to good luck. By all the laws of chance Jude (the Obscure) should have had at least "half a chance," while the intricately convoluted designs of the inimitable Jeeves would surely misfire at least occasionally.

Actually, a single incident of the machinations

55 Swamp Angel, p.101-02.
of fickle fortune can bring both misery and happiness, depending on the dispositions of the people affected and their involvement with each other. Could every coincidence be traced backwards to the fundamental origin of each element involved, the caprice of chance could often be disclaimed. Mrs. Wilson subjects the reader to no deep psychological analysis of her characters but economically suggests their probable reactions through their observable behaviour. Is it a complete surprise that Frankie and Hetty should meet on the boat to England, bringing sorrow and eventual happiness to one and the reverse to the other? Hetty's life had been one continual flight from unpleasantness and Frankie's voyage had long been planned. Is their meeting again in London, then, so unlikely? Hetty is merely up to her old tricks, "keeping her hand in" as Mrs. Broom puts it, of looking for another victim; and Frankie's youthful gaucherie prevents her graceful retreat from a distasteful encounter. Too inexperienced in life to be sure of her motives and responsibility she is almost relieved when chance (in the guise of a busy phone) intervenes and the burden of meddling, of warning Rick against Hetty's designs with only hearsay for evidence, has been taken off her shoulders.

Is it merely chance that sends Maggie to Kamloops and directs her to Henry Corder? Where else would a person of her accomplishments go? And who but Henry should she consult? Haldar's accident only expedited the mess that was inherent in both Vera's attitude and his own slowly awakening
sensibility of her instability and insecurity. Their helplessness was hardly engineered by fate— it was implicit in their situation and characters. No more did chance deliver the pottery dinnerware that precipitated the overflow of Vera's dangerously restrained jealousy. The pottery was the fruit of many little events, and that it engendered such divergent emotions of gratitude and resentment, pleasure, and hatred demonstrates the impossibility of gauging the consequences of even the simplest act.

Mrs. Wilson has also observed the illimitable influence of a chance remark or look which can alter the course of untold lives. The cup of coffee Joe buys Maggie spills over onto Vera and Haldar and Angus, completely changing their destinies; Vera's ill-timed but completely understandable remark, "I wish I never had to see this place again," destroys the fragile understanding that is struggling to flourish between her and Haldar; an overheard remark about "the maid's child" fires a chain reaction that years later sends Lilly fleeing to Toronto and a happy marriage. These are not completely fortuitous, they are but the logical and irrational outgrowths of personalities and living.

In no one story are all the ramifications of coincidence, chance, and interdependence so clearly delineated as in, again, Tuesday and Wednesday whose centripetal structure which swirls the characters in a glancing, gliding,

\[56\text{Ibid., p.112.}\]
touching, deflecting, pushing, escaping, but inexorably narrowing vortex, is one of the meanings of the novella. Chance probably removed the night watchman from the wharf at the crucial moment, but it was the push and pull of human entanglements augmented by the compulsions of individual egos that prescribed the coincidence of Vicki "happening" to witness the meeting between Mort and Eddie. Every thought word and deed in the story whirls the protagonists deeper into the convoluting melee of seemingly disparate occurrences.

A similar circumrotary ordering rolls together heterogenous and divergent happenings and personalities into the climactic accident in Love and Salt Water. A less typical pattern of influences supports the story "From Flores" and casts a humorous light on humanity in "I Just Love Dogs". All of which is merely the outer manifestation of a deeper and inner significance smuggled into Mrs. Wilson's stories under the cover of "a good tale".

The workings of chance in the matter of human relationships is just peripheral to Mrs. Wilson's fundamental concern about the importance of human involvement for the realization of one's own personality. Because man makes himself and in the long run existence depends on subjective assessment of one's uniqueness and potential, it is no mere accident that the characters in Mrs. Wilson's fiction who illustrate positively her philosophy of survival are solitary souls, happiest when alone and free of the encumbrances
and irritations of human intercourse and of the confining mediocrity of modern civilization. This suggests that society itself is a hindrance to man's authenticity. But as she demonstrates, seclusion is impossible. Everyone depends in some degree on society and, moreover, his relationship with other people is an important factor in his own development. An attempt to distinguish oneself from the mass, which is the basis of individuality, must be implemented by evaluating one's desires and feelings by a comparison with others. Whether the result is a feeling of superiority, distrust, or frustration, manifested in trying to keep up with people, keep them off, or keep them down one can never escape them, yet Hetty, who tries to keep people off, Myrt who tries to keep them down, and Mrs. Golightly who is happy when she can keep abreast of the other Conventioners are all anti-social to a degree.

A major cause of maladjustment is the divergence of personal values with those accepted by Society, yet only the mediocre accept the prevailing standards as a protection from unpleasantness and the unhappy necessity of individual decision. Hetty is not mediocre, Myrt is less than average, and Mrs. Golightly feels quite inferior. In any case a passionate commitment to values is hardly a characteristic of the passionless a-moral modern age which is marked by boredom.

57 The philosophy of survival was explored in Chapter II.
and anonymity, the inevitable levelling giving a comfortable illusion of security to the masses whose greatest fear is of realizing their lostness. But like the law of diminishing returns, the more men huddle together the more lonely they become; the more they talk, the less they communicate; the more they become alike, the more they are estranged from their fellow humans.

That Mrs. Wilson is aware of this moral and spiritual abyss is evident more by what she omits than by concrete examples. What she seems to overlook - but does not - is just as important for understanding her themes as what she actually says. Except in *Tuesday and Wednesday*, she usually ignores the mediocre masses focusing instead on the odd man out, the lonely solitary soul who has deliberately detached himself from the mainstream of human drifting in an attempt to inject some meaning and life into ambiguous and indifferent existence. Whereas some of them succeed and some do not, all of them eventually realize that complete separation is impossible, that in fact "every man is a piece of the continent, that he is involved in mankind."\(^5\)

*Hetty Dorval* is a germinal book containing at least

\(^5\) This is part of a quotation from John Donne that Mrs. Wilson uses frequently: the inscription to *Hetty Dorval*, and in *Swamp Angel*, p.150, for instance.
in embryo the roots of these ideas which flower and reproduce in Mrs. Wilson's later works. Hetty can not only be considered a typical product of her age, but she can also be viewed as an objectification of the age itself. An immoral act of an illicit union was the procreator of this unnatural phenomenon: a person (or thing) outwardly beautiful, serenely attractive, "easy to be with," inwardly empty, a-moral, indifferent; subconsciously frightened, haggard, exhausted of any value. Does she not, in fact, represent the uneasy complacency, the deracinated predicament of the world between the two world wars, when traditional values and ties were no longer able to stabilize society? The precarious peace was only an illusion of security since it was fathered, as was Hetty, by a temporary and merely expedient alliance. No sincere well wishing or desire for a mutual benefit, no real understanding of the aspirations and need of fellow nations and men underwrote the Armistice, which was a truce at best, barely concealing the temporarily confined forces simmering underneath.

Hetty's life was analagous. Protected from unpleasantness by the ignorant and stern Mrs. Broom, "that formidable woman with such pretense of power and withdrawal ...," Hetty pursued her lazy, selfish, indifferent pleasures, aloof from the anguish and agony of the creatures on whom she fed, extracting her satisfactions without

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59 Hetty Dorval, p.95.
compassion or care for those from whom she drew her sub-
stance. In contrast to the ignorant masses she is cultured,
accomplished, and well educated, but she dissipates her
talents on empty air, (Mrs. Broom has no ear for music, no
appreciation of beauty), or on furthering her own material
comfort. With an unconcerned wilfulness she luxuriates
through life heedless of the destruction and misery that
amasses in her wake. When her security is threatened from
time to time her bland composure appears to crumble for only
a minute, but from the time she starts running and acknowledg-
ing her vulnerability (on board ship) she is headed for dis-
aster, since her power and continuity depend on her anonymity
and seclusion. And when the props begin to disappear, one by
one, when even her most obtuse and ardent protector denounces
her for what she is:

...you've brought me nothing but trouble...
you've led me to trouble and hard work and
shame of you...and now you'd bring the same
to these decent people...you're rotten bad
and selfish, 60

it is too late to salvage much from the wreckage. The end of
the complacent civilization is in sight. As Frankie hurries
through the dark streets to denounce Hetty she forsees a
London so soon to be ravaged by the senseless cruelty and
waste of war and death:

60
Ibid., pp.192-93.
For what are you destined you arrogant man walking unhurriedly down St. James St.? And you, you rolling bus with your load? And you, hurrying waiter? What awaits us all?

Nevertheless as Hetty leaves for Austria faintly haggard and running a little faster, Frankie finds her hard to hate or blame, so smooth is the veneer of calm and sweetness, but,

six weeks later the German army occupied Vienna. There arose a wall of silence around the city, through which only faint confused sounds were sometimes heard.°2

One era of selfish disengagement and indifference had ended. But the succeeding holocaust merely intensified man's confusion and loneliness.

What lends poignancy to the significance of Hetty's personality and behaviour is that she also so beautifully represents the human predicament. Hetty is both the dancer and the dance; she is the cause and the result of a world without love or without any passionate commitment to a moral standard. Reared by Mrs. Broom who was the essence of effacement ("the kind of woman that you didn't notice"), in an emotionless vacuum, deprived of any anchoring roots, of any family affection or blood ties, of any fundamental responsibility for herself or any other human, Hetty is a pure

°1 Ibid., p.94.

°2 Ibid., p.116.
isolationist, rejecting or disowning all tradition and all human exchange except what serves to keep her free and secure. She appears utterly bored by social obligations and intercourse, believing that she is happiest when galloping in the dusk on her sorrel mare down the deserted slopes of the sage bush country:

I never loved anything so much in my life, Frankie. It sounds ridiculous but I never felt so free before or since. You know...people...and her voice trailed off.  

In reality she is terrified of people, like a beautiful lone animal who envies the concerted grace of the wild geese:

Oh Frankie, when we stood there and the geese went over, we didn't seem to be in our bodies at all, did we? I seemed to be up there with them where I'd dearly love to be.  

Nevertheless Mrs. Broom's watch-dog tactics backfire when, unavoidably thrust on the mercy of the society she has shunned, Hetty finds that the success of her nefarious designs for a parasitic security depends on the compassion of others. Panicked by the threat of discovery and humiliation she facelessly but recklessly casts herself on Frankie's mercy, a quality she acknowledges but disowns:

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63 Ibid., p.111.

64 Ibid., p.20.
"Frankie," the very soft voice said hurriedly in the dark, "and your Mother? Mrs...Burnaby? Just one word. Please. I must speak to you tonight. Frankie, you were my friend once...for a little while. I don't know whether you are now or not. And you, Mrs. Burnaby, I cannot tell...but I think you are kind, and I'm casting myself on your generosity, both of you." Hetty's voice, usually indifferent and light, was urgent. I heard fear there.... "I shan't trouble you at all, I promise. But please...it's hard for me to ask this...can you forget that you ever heard of me or knew my name? I want security," her voice trembled a little, "I want it badly..."65

But although her terror is genuine at the moment, her promises are as the wind. Why is she successful in her unwarranted appeal for mercy from people she has already unconcernedly deceived, and will harm again, without a qualm? Because the very society she hoodwinks is apathetically, obtusely, and wrongfully kind. So Mrs. Burnaby and Frankie, both cognizant of Hetty's potential for evil, are terribly implicated in their beloved Rick's heartbreak. There is no insulation from people for no man is an island and the "bell tolls for thee" (or thine).

Ironically, Hetty's undesired and selfish involvement in the lives of her "friends" merely intensifies her dilemma, as a genuine, active love finally overcomes her self-centred schemes, condemning her to a forlorn confusion, and it is

65 Ibid., p.65.
suggested, to ultimate solitude. A victim of the illusion of security through withdrawal, she never recognizes her problem of needing to be one of a flock of geese yet preferring to ride alone, the Janus-like duality that troubles an increasing number of modern thinkers as they see people frantically adding themselves together in a spurious protective communion.

History is a record of frightened and confused people banding together for some measure of mutual support and comfort. But because of each person's basic individuality which usually seeks self expression by asserting the power of choice, the pressures of group conformity deny his true existence, forcing him to assume a mask, an inauthentic self. So his loneliness is intensified as the presence of others augments rather than mitigates his original insecure solitude. The frantic conglomeration of cocktail parties, the modern panacea for forlornness, is shown in all its futility in "A Drink with Adolphus," in which both Mrs. Gormley and Mr. Leaper are confronted and defeated by their depressing inability to communicate, as they vainly and valiantly ward off the annihilating silence with babble about nothing:

66 It is Frankie's love for her cousins that leads to Hetty's exposure.
Mrs. Gormley and Mr. Leaper began to talk in earnest about Spain and the prices there. God, thought Mrs. Gormley, what would I give to have Hamish's cold,...but cheaper still in Portugal!" she said, smiling, mustering pleasure and charm if any.67

Mr. Leaper's version of their conversation is significant of the insuperable chasm that separates these two (and other well-intentioned but incompatible) souls:

...a certain sense of 'noblesse oblige' made me spend most of the rest of the time at the party conversing with her.

We then spoke about hotel accommodation. While I was telling her my impression of the hotels in London she looked past me and at the windows behind my head...I think it must be a bad habit of hers, and I must say it is very disagreeable.68

Mankind's foremost problem is to discover a method of bridging this divide, or of reconciling the avowed differences in temperament and culture of individuals, nations, and races. With a wry and compassionate eye Mrs. Wilson has observed the struggles of man to cope with the polarities inherited from his painful evolution from a solitary independent hunter to a more or less badly-adjusted gregarious parasite. Could there be, for instance, a wholly social person?

67 P.72.

68 Pp.76-77.
To be fully integrated with society a person must be totally unaware of his solitude and his uniqueness as a personality, completely content with the status quo and happy to subsist on a common heritage and tradition. Topaz, the "Innocent Traveller," is almost a pure example of this strange phenomenon; whereas Hetty desires to withdraw from humanity but cannot, Vicki wants to mingle but is unable, Topaz mingle yet is free. As much a product of her age as Hetty is of hers, Topaz was reared as a Victorian lady stultifyingly shielded from any economic, social, or emotional unpleasantness. Consequently, although intelligent, well-read, full of curiosity and energy, she inhabits only the froth of life, oblivious of any dark currents or malign influences or evil intentions. Her quick mind devours facts and trivialities which come spouting forever forth like a fountain in a gay unquenchable chatter that unconsciously arrests any genuine constructive thought or, conversely, any destructive morbid pondering about the inequalities encountered in her perambulations of body and mind.

When responsibility is thrust on such people they dissolve into a quivering mass of incompetence, should any problems arise which require a sublimation of self into the larger, complex vision. (Mrs. Wilson described Topaz's state in such a dilemma as the period of "the great moan."

69 The Innocent Traveller, p.131.
Responsibility necessitates decisions which propel one dangerously and unavoidably close to the sorrows and passions of the human comedy. Were a person fully integrated with society he would be an uncritical morsel of the great masses yet completely free of any awareness of injustice and misery. Even Topaz is not completely untamed. Only fleetingly is she disturbed by some nameless fear of the unknown and the vast vistas of the subconscious mind which stimulates her need for the comforting silence of human rapport, as when sleeping outside on Benbow Island, she imagines she hears the voice of Pan, and

...inside the white satin body of Topaz...there opened a dark unknown flower of fear....Her whole body dissolved listening into fear which flowed into the terrible enclosing night. She, all alone, became only a frightened part of the listening elements.

Directly she stood within this frail unlit shelter of walls, door, window and humanity, even before she heard the comfortable crossness of Rachel's voice,...her living family and all her bearded memories rushed about her...She longed to feel the hard comfort of Rachel's capable hand upon her....

Here she admits that she needs humanity. When she surprisingly and momentarily appreciates that humanity also needs her in its fight against bigotry and evil, her pure courage and usually detached heart rise unprompted to defend innocence and tolerance. The strange feeling of being actively involved in mankind's

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Ibid., pp.193-94.
battles that is engendered by Rachel's rare praise makes

Topaz

humble and embarrassed. What could she say?
I think she said that I will go up to bed.
I will take the newspaper, and she stumbled
upstairs in her hasty way.71

Reading the newspaper (which has now been largely
supplanted by watching television) is one way of vicariously
experiencing life's horrors, tragedies, and delights and is
a dubious pleasure to which many of Mrs. Wilson's characters
are addicted. When the genuine sense of association among
people is absent or weakened enough to deprive social reality
of any genuine life, the newspaper or movie magazine is able
to supply a spurious and abstract communion with unreal in-
dividuals, who are nonetheless actual living people. Fiction,
paradoxically, is inadequate under these circumstances, for
the imaginary but real and rounded people portrayed involve the
reader concretely with the whole human predicament, which iron-
ically would only separate them further from their subconsci-
ous attempt to be a part of humanity. Significantly, Tom in
"Beware the Jabberwock, my son...," practically the sole repre-
sentative on Mrs. Wilson's canvas of a bookworm, fails to find
in his compulsive reading any answer to his unbearable problem.
Mrs. Emblem, like Topaz, free from anxiety, living in harmony
with her environment and no longer taking an active part in the

71 Ibid., p.157.
destiny of society revels in the activities of the socially prominent, ignoring the occasional wave of vacuity that threatens her complacent routine.72

This empty feeling stimulates various responses and explorations. One recourse is to find surcease in meaningless chatter (of which more will be said later). The antipathy to people may be strong enough to drive the individual deeper into solitude in an attempted total disengagement with the world, as Vicki Tritt, who like all extremely timorous, insipid, inadequate persons

hastens to avoid the revelation of her insupportable loneliness by means of small physical activities which at last through the similar years- become a routine.73

Vicki is not only an exaggerated representative of the faceless and useless sheep that constitute a major portion of humanity, but is also the personification of a part of nearly everyone that is usually submerged and controlled but which occasionally wells up, overwhelming in its inexpressible desolation.

72 Mrs. Emblem, in Tuesday and Wednesday, has had three husbands and has looked after them very well, but now no longer wants the responsibility of loving and being loved. She does not even visit her son in Alberta. Like Topaz, although far from as intelligent, she lives on the trivialities of life.

73 Tuesday and Wednesday, p.68.
Vicki is the antithesis of Topaz, yet both are alike in their refusal to become involved in "the sorrow of humanity." The tragedy of these wasted lives is the tragedy of all mankind, yet little pity is evoked because Mrs. Wilson's understated style precludes sentimentality and a morbid dwelling on the unbearable picture of man's loneliness. Those who are prepared to accept their condition without becoming apathetic or hysterical can resolve their loneliness to some degree by finding some worthwhile aim on which to base their endeavours.

Physical, mental, and social fulfillment can sometimes be found in hard work which obviates the bond of sympathy that is usually necessary to counteract the destructive ravages of isolation. Lilly is blessed with enough self-knowledge and tough determination to facilitate a physical and spiritual withdrawal from humanity only to the degree that ensures her welfare, her dignity, and the privacy she finds so necessary. But since the reciprocal relationship of interdependence is the source of man's true being, those who disregard this are never in real harmony with themselves and subsist in a continual state of tension, a condition which made Lilly old beyond her years and forced her to flee eventually, a catastrophe (no matter how felicitous was the outcome) which could have been averted had she recognized her responsibility to others and attempted some communion and exchange.
For the most part the young are ignorant of the conditions necessary for the realization of the authentic self, and it is significant that Mrs. Wilson puts her philosophy into the mouths of two elderly people, Mrs. Severance who articulates Maggie's code of living, and Mr. Willy in "The Window," a man who has fled from the irritations of married life to an independent, unencumbered, deceptive tranquility. Instead of the expected release of new vigour with its concomitant contentment, Mr. Willy's emancipation is something less than satisfying:

Sometimes a thought or a shape (was it?), gray, like wood ash that falls in pieces when it is touched, seemed to be behind his chair, and this shape teased him and communicated to him that he had left humanity behind, and that a man needs humanity and— if he ceases to be in touch with man and is not in touch with God, he does not matter. "You do not matter any more," said the spectre like wood ash before it fell to pieces," because you are no longer in touch with anyone and so you do not exist. You are in a vacuum and so you are nothing."74

Modern man's increasing uneasiness and loneliness then is only augmented when he senses that some inexplicable force—some call it God—beyond his comprehension is battering in vain at the bastions of the scientifically-induced scepticism, while he himself has erected barriers against human communication, so that his soul, heart, and mind are slowly parching and withering. Because he has denied both spiritual and

74 Pp. 197–98.
human intercourse he is no longer genuine but only an abstraction:

He went to the glass door and examined it. It was intact. He turned the key and drew the shutter down. Then he went back to the telephone in this state of abstraction. Death or near-death was still very close, though receding. It seemed to him at that moment that a crack had been coming in the great wall that shut him off from the light but perhaps he was wrong. He dialed the police perfunctorily, not urgently. He knew that before him lay the hardest work of his life - in his life but out of his country. He must in some way and very soon break the great wall that shut him off from whatever light there might be. Not for fear of death but for fear of something else.75

Mr. Willy is only in the process of discovering what Mrs. Severance communicates to Maggie in one of her rare moments of affectionate understanding:

"I sit on top of my little mound of years," said Mrs. Severance "and it is natural and reasonable that I should look back, and I look back and round and I see the miraculous interweaving of creation...the everlasting web...and I see God everywhere. And Edward Vardoe...and your little Chinese boy and the other little boy and you and me and who knows what. We are all in it together. No Man is an Island, I am involved in mankind, and we have no immunity and we may as well realize it. You won't be immune ever...76

Maggie does realize it (this makes her almost unique in Mrs. Wilson's world of fiction), and her gentle

75 P.209.

76 Swamp Angel, p.150.
acceptance with an almost sad serenity partially reconciles her craving for solitude with her necessary attachment to people. Mrs. Wilson feels that the assaults on man's freedom are weaker in small intimate groups where love and genuine concern can cultivate an inclusive harmony which makes inevitable suffering endurable. These little oases of warmth in the prevalent "mass uglification" are so rare and beautiful that they are almost hortatory in their haunting appeal.

Several things are common to these segregated groups, the most discernible being real communion with little actual verbal communication. While phatic communication is compulsory and eminently stimulating to geniality and concord in the exigencies of ordinary living, its abuse stultifies and strangulates any genuine reciprocal pleasure. Idle prattle nearly ruins Maggie's enjoyment of the magnificent Canyon Scenery, and Mrs. Golightly's nervous garrulity simply abets her insecurity. Significant, then, are the discussions between Maggie and Mrs. Severance which are not idle chatter, or peppered with learned abstractions or scholarly speculations, but instead, infused with the heady aura of the sparkle and energy that derives from a wisdom nourished by fearless experiencing and intelligent observation. Between Frankie's parents, between George and Ellen, between Mrs. Forrester and Laura, there is a fundamental gravity that springs from a deep and abiding love and concord that is too
precious and profound for utterance:

"- we stay whole days silent like male
and female happy Trappists."77

The only chatterers in the corpus of Mrs. Wilson's work are the totally irresponsible like Topaz who has always talked so much she has forgotten how to keep quiet, and the empty-headed and spiritually arid who gabble to conceal or forget their inward emptiness, for although they have nothing to say, silence would expose the nothingness, the loneliness that uneasily lurks behind the torrent of meaningless syllables. Filling the air with sound is therapeutic to the malaise of mental and spiritual vacuity. Mrs. Emblem deflects this affliction by talking with Maybelle indefinitely, over a cup of coffee at Mrs. Emblem's place, or over a cup of tea at Scott's (where they have their fortunes read) about themselves, their pasts and their futures, and what they counsel each other to do.... She discusses endlessly with Maybelle the advantages and disadvantages of a further marriage, the feelings she has about Mr. Thorsen-stein,...then she and Maybelle discuss Maybelle's problems which are similar and also capable of being extended indefinitely over the tea leaves.78

In "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...," Dolly wards off the terrible fear of loneliness and the acknowledgement of her ineptitude and stupidity by continual jabbering which backfires, driving her intolerant husband out of the house and nearly out of her life. The basic rule of good conversation

77 "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," p.113.

78 Tuesday and Wednesday, p.52.
is that it is imperative to know how to keep silent, to
listen, and digest in order to be able to think constructively and build up a store of cogent ideas that can be clarified and communicated by intelligent discourse. Gabbling away with indiscriminate abandon about everything and nothing is another alarming symptom of the passionless levelling disease of this age. Talkativeness is now so objective and comprehensive that human relationships lose in intensity and depth what they gain in scope.

The tension inherent in the inability to communicate which suffuses Mrs. Wilson's works is only one more pigment on the indelible picture of human involvement which Mrs. Wilson has sketched so clearly and succinctly. More sensitive than the male to the nuances of admiration or disapproval of her associates, friends, and family, the female is more prone to vocalize the growing concern with the problem of finding one's identity in the inescapable labyrinth of human entanglements. Moreover since women live predominantly for and in others, fluctuations in emotional intensity, while illogical, are more concretely objectified in their behaviour and therefore more easily observed and interpreted. Which is one reason Mrs. Wilson finds in women a receptive focus

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79 Robertson Davies revives a delightful word for this communion - chunnering, in The Table Talk of Samuel Marchbanks, Toronto, Clarke Irwin, 1949, p. 46.
for her existential ideas. But that is not the only reason that her works abound in female personalities. She is endlessly fascinated by the manifestations of the perplexing female psyche, and the following chapter will attempt to analyze Mrs. Wilson's ideas of "Woman" and her struggle to achieve authenticity.
CHAPTER IV

A FEMININE WORLD?

As might be expected in so subjective a female writer, one of Mrs. Wilson's primary concerns is women, and on her colourful canvas can be found the infinite variety that makes to an increasingly large number of students of human nature the female of the species more interesting than the male. Just as no reader of an honest male novelist such as Hardy, Faulkner, Conrad, can fail to have enlarged his appreciation of the complexity of man, so it seems impossible for a reader of Mrs. Wilson to remain oblivious of and unsympathetic to the feminine psyche with its perplexing mixture of both traditionally feminine and unfeminine traits.

Appraised by a highly individualistic feminine standard, the female temperament is unveiled in a light at once both kinder and harsher than that of most male novelists. Although feminine disparity is registered in a myriad of creations between extremes: the saintly Annie Hastings, the purely sensual Mrs. Emblem, the a-moral Lilly, each such woman in Mrs. Wilson's books is held responsible for her own conduct; and although her ultimate destiny is in part
controlled by extraneous factors, no attempt is made to justify behaviour by a specific reference to the male-dominated environment in which modern woman battles for personal expression. The domination is implicit, of course, in Maggie's necessity for flight, in Hetty's economic dependence, and in Topaz' immaturity, but rather than a barrier to, or a deterrent from, the assertion of the female personality, the male world is simply a pervasive aroma that quickens the love, the strife, and the beauty that constitutes living.

Mrs. Wilson's feminine world is entirely encased within the accepted social institutions. No unhappy suffragette, she mildly pleads for mere recognition and preservation of a woman's self-respect and a worthwhile employment of her abilities. Supernumerary in society, Topaz sacrifices her brilliant mind and dynamic energy in a nebulous oblation to the Victorian god of propriety; confined to asserting herself in ephemeral trivialities, she is a subtle yet graphic demonstration of human waste. It is true that not all women are capable or desirous of fulfilling their biological

80 In Mrs. Wilson's fiction the male-dominated environment often explains woman's behaviour, but does not excuse it, in contrast to Mme. Bovary, for instance, or The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne.
function. But what alternative does society offer?

Accepting the restriction of opportunity, Mrs. Wilson again emphasizes individual responsibility. The years of child-bearing and raising are almost ignored, although not disparaged or discounted, the family companionship emerging valuable less as a mother-child relationship than as an interaction between two personalities. The importance of a healthy domestic atmosphere is subtly implicit in the contrast of Frankie's adolescence with Lilly's, or Angus's with that of the two delinquents in "Fog".81

...Mother, was a small insignificant woman of enormous character. Her children never desired to quarrel among themselves. Whether this was due to the powerful domination of the Mother or whether some alchemy in which Joe (the father, Joe Quong) and the Mother had separate parts had wrought this miracle, no one could know, and no one wondered. The result of this was that in the Quong's home - for these partitioned rooms were indeed a home - there was almost ceaseless noise and clatter, but the noise was not of crying or of anger... The youngest little boy was blind, but he was healthy too, and he was so much beloved and watched over by his brothers and sisters that one might say he was luckier than many other little boys.82

When they (the two adolescent murderers) arrived back, each at their own home, their parents said in pursuance of their habit of long years past "Where you bin?" and the hoodlums said in pursuance of their habit of long years past "Out".

81 Frankie is in Hetty Dorval, Angus in Swamp Angel.

82 Swamp Angel, p.43.
This satisfied the idiot parents. They said "My that fog's just terrible," and the hoodlums said "Sure is."²³

Moreover the happiest and most effective women are the creative and responsible home-makers, loved and respected by their children and husbands. Yet the mutual devotion of the Burnabys in Hetty Dorval, the busy and comfortable peace of Isa and George in Love and Salt Water, the satisfaction in Maggie's first marriage, are seldom-realized utopias; more often are the women frustratingly dependent: Mrs. Cuppy (Ellen's mother) keeping a lonely vigil with her daughters while her husband roams the world; Mrs. Butler (Lilly's kind intelligent mistress) constantly suffering pain and humiliation from her husband's infidelity, yet always forgiving; even the tormented Vera Gunnarsen, unable to understand Haldar, therefore isolated and unhappy in a self-imposed trap. A sublimation of self for mutual satisfaction and economic stability, often necessary and frequently desirable, cannot be arbitrarily imposed, especially when an unequal endowment of sensitivity and intellect breeds frustration, resentment, and hatred. The shackles of convention perpetually war against the will, yet women can and do exert immeasurable influence both within and without the family structure. Those who can achieve a

personal identity in love and service as wife and mother are fortunate; those outside their normal role, either by choice or necessity, face an infinitely more difficult struggle in achieving a productive and reasonable security, unfairly hampered as they are by the discrepancy between the male and female propensity for compassion and pity.84

In a rare outburst, Matron protests the injustice of woman's lot in a male world:

"That's it, for a woman," said the Matron with unusual bitterness, "work, work, work, save and scrimp, and then arthritis and then old age and what do you get out of life?"85

In "Till death us do part" the narrator, seeing Kate and that mother going on forever and ever together and no escape till death comes for one of them,...

chooses a questionable alternative:

I don't say I'd really choose Peterborough Edward and I never thought I'd turn to Peterborough on account of these circum­stances but he might be a comfort and anyway, what can you do.86

Mrs. Wilson suggests what "you" can do. No

84 In "Cat Among the Falcons" Mrs. Wilson defines her own role.
85 Lilly's Story, p.240.
86 P.193.
matter how cheated physically, biologically, or economically, everyone possesses some specific, often latent, capacity or talent which emerges in crucial moments, blossoming into a personal asset if assiduously cultivated with a determined assertion, as Lilly belatedly discovers. The intrinsic value of nourishing any aptitude, however humble, lies in the glorious serenity attendant on any fulfillment, manifested in the quiet efficiency of Rachel who managed the Hastings menage

for no reward other than the fulfillment of her own fierce integrity and sense of order, and the confidence and placid affection of her family.  

Similarly, Maggie seeks and finds a release in congenial labour and so provides comfort and inspiration to all her associates through her own courage and integrity, for as Angus said, he "...trusted her because she was Mrs. Lloyd and that was enough."  

In much of men's fictional writings women are delineated in relation only to the emotional life of man,
a condition which, however valid in the author's view of reality, distorts one huge segment of being: the actual emotional, intellectual, social, and personal life of woman. Too often for credibility are the archetypes of the Earth Mother, or the selfless Saint, or the eternal Temptress, or some other mythologized concept of the female principle allowed to refine the "heroine" into an unsubstantial shadow deriving life and significance mainly from her influence on the more corporeal male protagonists. In MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night*, for instance, Catherine is totally unbelievable as a person, existing only as the etherealized instrument on which both George and Jerome test their emotional growth or maturity. Tossed between the two positive men, she is only an irritatingly pallid imitation of a real woman.

Refreshingly, Mrs. Wilson's women are unique and tangible individuals predominantly because of their inherent feminine nature and their own free choice. This is not to deny or mitigate the influence of the environment and circumstances of a male-oriented world. Lilly's early encounter with the police generates in her simple nature not only a realization of her female vulnerability, but also a permanent fear of the "Law" - a male institution - which is the instrument that banishes her from Vancouver to a wholly new existence in which previously unrecognized facets of her personality channel her life into strange seas. In a small
Island town she observes for the first time the advantages of respectability and the security that derive from being accepted by a responsible section of society. That her starved, perhaps newly awakened emotions, finding a passionate focus in her baby, seem to change her nature into a dedicated seriousness is but an illusion; the metamorphosis is simply a matter of emphasis, Lilly continuing as impervious as a catalyst unperturbed in the midst of seething reactions.

No one had loved her, and she did not even know that she had missed love. She was not bitter, nor cruel, nor was she very bad. She was like the little yellow cat, no worse and no better. She expected nothing. She took things as they came, living where she could, on whom she could, and with whom she could,...protecting herself by lies or by truth, and always keeping on the weather side of the police.89

No ethical scruples or human kindness, just a conditioned, psychotic fear of trouble and the resultant effect on "baby", prevent an amorous dalliance with Major Butler. Weathering many a traumatic experience, she remains essentially the same materialistic Lilly who coveted and bought (with her only asset) Yow's bicycle; the same a-moral Lilly who, after only three days in Nanaimo, bartered her body for the comfort and security of Ranny's masculine protection. She is from

89 Lilly's Story, p.156.
birth ruthlessly self-centred and stubbornly unimaginative, determined to survive at anybody's cost. No person, no event, no circumstance can be blamed for Lilly's choice of life or her queer moral code.\footnote{See \textit{Lilly's Story}, pp.162-64 for Mrs. Wilson's theory of the change.} For living is a dynamic process and it is through women that the flow is maintained.

Ever since Eve deliberately asserted her power of choice thereby freeing herself and Adam from the thrall of blind obedience (perhaps the serpent was an illusion, but the apple was real) women have assumed the responsibility for the continuity of life and love, for the anguish and for the ecstasy. While men tend to live in jerks, in bursts of activity and creativity, women are all one flow, unspectacular but continuous. That men recognize and appreciate this overall serene dynamism is attested to by some of the most unforgettable creations in English literature: The Wife of Bath, Moll Flanders, Becky Sharp, Mrs. Morel, Ma Joad, Molly Bloom; nevertheless rarely is there recorded an intimate, honest, and impartial impression of women as personalities, isolated as much as necessary and possible from the spasmodic but often smothering masculine vitality.

Mrs. Wilson's human existentialist philosophy of a continuous creation where "everything happens again and
it's never the same," where life is a perpetual movement forward, a gliding or swimming around obstacles, can be most clearly formulated and consistently expressed in the behaviour of women, who, more than most men, accept the full responsibility for their errors and have enough courage - or perhaps perversity - to maintain the life-stream. Such female characters must be revealed in their pettiness and their magnanimity, hiding behind no gloss of determinism or idealism, utilizing their traditional feminine foibles and prerogatives with the conscious intention of realizing their own potential, not merely as a foil for masculine vanity. While such a realistic appraisal precludes the usual allowance for feminine weaknesses and inconsistencies, paradoxically this seemingly harsh attitude is kinder than that of more sentimental writers. Little pity is evoked for even the most spiritually desolate characters, Hetty and Myrtle, since they are allowed to stand or fall on their own merits, on their ability, however limited, to choose their own destiny:

and Vicki,...saw with a dawning understanding the dreadful thing about Myrtle Johnston - that she was content to have Morty die as she then thought he died....and Vicki dimly apprehended that Myrtle in her self-love did not intend to cease being wronged by Morty in his death.91

91 **Tuesday and Wednesday**, p.122.
This clear perspective of the situation precludes sentimentality since the reader's sensibility is not violated by any ludicrous ambiguity in Myrtle's role. Is it a submerged guilt that prompts an author, for sociological reasons perhaps, to pity his women protagonists, an attitude that inadvertently strips them of any human worth? What is more degrading to the human dignity than being made an object of ridicule? Any excuses proffered for a person's behaviour denudes the character of individual pride and rights leaving but an empty face in a mirror and a less-than-human chance for redemptive affirmation. A comparison of Judith Hearne with Vicki Tritt might illuminate the difference in integrity between a falsely sentimental treatment and a clear-eyed, tougher rendering of two analogous situations and women. Shrinking from a positive commitment to a contemporary life, both women seek sanctuary in their "lonely passions" which provide protective outlets for their parched emotions. Whereas Judith's weakness is exposed gradually - almost with relish - in progressively more humiliating scenes, well calculated to ruin anyone's self-esteem, Vicki's withdrawal is presented without condemnation or ridicule, and she is allowed to retreat (as Judith is not) into her desired comfortable anonymity.

92 Brian Moore in The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne evokes this reaction. The very title backfires making a mockery of Judith's life, as do the various scenes of her degradation. To evoke pity, too much is stacked against Judith so that both she and the reader look and feel ridiculous.
Although Brian Moore tries to justify Judith's degeneration by an implied indictment of a society that fosters such human waste, he only succeeds in alienating the reader from any identification with the victim. However, Mrs. Wilson, in recognizing individual responsibility, invites empathy with Vicki and a kind of purgative release of self-consciousness, for Vicki is not judged, merely observed as a "silly Thing," or one who is afraid of discovering the ultimate sorrow of humanity, or, observes Mrs. Emblem, as a person who "...reminds me of some poor dawg that nobody wants."93 She is, however, a person, not the objective correlative of some man's pity; she is an authentic part of life, a part of Mrs. Wilson's philosophy, and a part of universal woman.

In her typically flexible style, Mrs. Wilson suggests an ideal of womanhood in the earthenware dishes sent by Mr. Cunningham which were "...honest and gay and had been conceived by people who were honest and serious and gay."94 Since to arrive at a realistic personal standard

93 Tuesday and Wednesday, p.25.
94 Swamp Angel, p.139.
or ideal it is necessary to observe and define all variations, in her first book Mrs. Wilson analyzes microscopically several female types, isolating the dominant characteristics of each one. Three women, each representing one facet of a more complete personality, dominate the canvas of Hetty Dorval: the honest, fun-loving mother and wife, Mrs. Burnaby; the beautiful, predatory, gay Hetty; and the romantic, serious adolescent, Frankie. Although all are artistically satisfying persons in the novel, a subtle shift of emphasis projects each as one side of Mrs. Wilson's whole or complete woman. Not only do all women differ although composed of the same ingredients in varying proportions, but each, by the magic alchemy of spirit, is more than the sum of her separate components. Almost, but not quite, could the ideal mothers, Mrs. Burnaby and Mrs. Cuppy, be interchanged, for somehow Mrs. Cuppy is a bit more patient, a shade less fun than Mrs. Burnaby, although both function as the voice of reason and love. Too, some women who appear to be totally deficient in some essential feminine ingredient would be monstrous in their imbalance, did not Mrs. Wilson perceive a glimmer of the redemptive quality which fortuitously smuggled into a

Which makes a tremendous difference in the final product: e.g. HgC2 (Mercuric Chloride) is deadly, and HgCl (Mercurous chloride-Calomel) is, in small doses, a laxative.
larger scene freighted with heavier implications. Such a revelation is the wild goose scene in Hetty Dorval which reverberates through the whole story, only casually suggesting both the potential in Hetty for a normal life and her yearning for direction and purpose. On a more basic level, Myrtle's protective delight in the stray kitten intimates succinctly an unselfish, maybe maternal, love not wholly suffocated by her unwholesome and unnatural "accidie." Topaz' rare moments of insight and Norah's obsessive and exclusive love for Johnny are further samples of the depths that would probably remain un plumbed by acquaintances in real life, but which enlarge the reader's understanding and tolerance of humanity and its undisclosed or submerged motivation and potential.

The three faces of woman in Hetty Dorval are superimposed on each other and united by the alchemy of two real yet passive men, Frankie's father, and to a lesser degree, her cousin. Frankie, the perennial romantic in all women, provides the instrument of connection between the characters, but some neutral adhesive force is necessary to amalgamate the various feminine attributes that together constitute a whole, or a wholesome, woman. The cottage on Lytton Hill

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96 There are such monstrous people of course, but they are rare, and Mrs. Wilson finds in practically everyone elements of what is culturally desirable - kindness, perception of beauty, self-sacrifice etc.

97 Hetty Dorval, pp.19-20.
is an inspired setting for the mixing - empty before Hetty, and empty after, it has apparently never been contaminated by a man, so can furnish a purely feminine temple for a cult of women to which men are rarely even admitted and then not to worship, exactly, but to offer homage, admiration, and perhaps love. Emanations of a pagan, even a diabolical, mystique disturb and nullify the pious minister's kindly blessing:

I admired Mrs. Dorval's disposal of Mr. Thompson; yet there was something somewhere that was not quite right. I heard the front door close...I came out and saw Mr. Thompson going down the hill in the dusk. I think now that there was a burning sort of goodness and directness in Mr. Thompson against which Mrs. Dorval had to defend herself with her weapon of lightness.

As for me, a country child, I had come under a very fancy kind of spell, near to infatuation.... 98

Hetty's husband looms incongruously dangerous as he brings a curious discord to the shrine; 99 but Frankie's sanatary father, by unconcernedly falling asleep on the floor, uncere­moniously both reduces the temple to the "lair of the menace"

98 Ibid., pp.25-27.

99 It is shortly after this that Frankie's visits are discovered.
and elevates it to the status of a real home:

...Hetty had been blown out and away. The bungalow had almost begun to mean to me not Hetty, but "That picnic we had on nearly the last day - you remember?" and Father lying there, asleep in the sunshine.100

Significantly, he is killed soon after purchasing the cottage as a Christmas present for "his girls," but after his death Mrs. Burnaby is able to find peace and contentment in the house, while Frankie regards it as home, the malign aura and influence of the hypnotic Hetty, the menace, having been exorcized, or at least minimized, by the blessing of the neutral yet balancing maleness. Here, unfettered by the actual presence which would contaminate the union of purely feminine features, Mrs. Burnaby's personality can fuse with part of Hetty's, sparked by a male catalyst "in absentia". Here can be wedded Frankie's romantic seriousness, Hetty's gay fascination, and Mrs. Burnaby's honest womanliness - in terms of a mythological cult, the creator, destroyer, and preserver inseparably melded into one deity. While not exactly matriarchial, Mrs. Wilson's society does embody an idea of the ecology of women in contemporary life that is rather frowned on in Christian cultures: women have become the generating forces while men are relegated to the subsidiary supporting roles.

100 Hetty Dorval, p. 61
Not purely functional however, Mrs. Wilson's male creations are substantial, sympathetically-drawn individuals falling broadly into two categories: the weak, effeminate, conceited, albeit assertive, egos of which Edward Vardoe and Cousin Sid are the extreme poles; and the quiet, very masculine, rather insensitive type of which genus Mort and Mr. Burnaby are two species, Mr. Edgeworth of the same order but a different era, Haldar and Mr. Cuppy varied mutations. There is a strong suggestion that the woman concerned determines to a great degree a man's ultimate category. Mrs. Emblem often muses, "What I could have made of Mort!"; Mrs. Severance with a frightening dexterity and power manipulates like puppets Edward Vardoe, Arthur, and Arturo; even the domineering Mr. Edgeworth can only maintain his veneer of patriarchial authority and superiority because his "harem" so unobtrusively and capably manages his affairs; and Haldar fluctuates between an impotent despairing seclusion and a vigorous and contagious elan in a direct ratio to the disposition and spirits of Vera and Maggie. Yet each man is unique and his influence and power is never discounted.

That the male principle is indispensable is manifested both in the haunting authority of the masculine background and in the composition of the women themselves. The stern, uncompromising, single-minded masculinity of
Mrs. Broom, which hovers unpleasantly, inexorably, yet almost invisibly over the organization and fulfillment of the feminine shrine, symbolizes a personal asset, but a social liability, which most women can successfully relegate to the unobtrusive background of their personality. Since the once rigid demarcation of the sexes has been weakened by the dissemination and popularization of psychological theories, it is now acceptable, if not quite respectable, for one sex to exhibit traits of the other. Although Mrs. Wilson endows most of her women with some masculine tendencies which add strength and charm to a well-adjusted person such as Maggie or Rachel, she is alert to the danger of an imbalance which nullifies the specific genetic and creative role, exhausting a woman's own emotions and ultimately killing the emotions of everyone around her. Mrs. Broom and Myrtle testify to this. Usurping the man's position, both have repudiated the gentler, more thoughtful feminine qualities, making happiness impossible, as the resultant pervasive self-distrust creates an atmosphere in which appreciation, tolerance, and love cannot blossom. On the other hand, a total subjugation of male qualities is desirable and permissible only under specific conditions,

101 See Sean O'Faolain in "Vive Moi," The Atlantic (Jan. 1964), p.98, in which he says of his mother "...the terrifying onesidedness of her life cut her off from everyone else's life."
such as the protective institutionalized Victorian society which cultivated and nourished feminine saints like Annie Hastings, or the intellectually arid milieu of a certain social strata that could encourage and sustain the rather parasitic sensuality of the warmly feminine Mrs. Emblem. In Mrs. Wilson's active world, a mixture of traditionally male and female traits is highly prized.

On the periphery of Hetty Dorval examples of other emotional qualities distinguish the feminine temperament. The grim dogged devotion peculiar to women is objectified in Mrs. Broom and echoed in Lilly and Kate and Rachel. Drowned while trying to save her beloved dog, Ernestine (Frankie's chum) not only foreshadows Frankie's blundering idealism when she battles with Hetty for the happiness of her cousin, but also illustrates the selfless love for helpless creatures inherent in every woman, which makes the joys of motherhood so surprisingly poignant and enriching.102 A chief difference between men and women lies in their attitude to love. Socially conditioned or not, men's tendency to compartmentalize their needs relegates family affection to a specific time and place, while women wear their love like a perfumed cloak, at once shielding and dispensing an aura of devotion. Men need

102 But which often end in destruction - i.e. - Hetty's mother.
to be loved, women need to love.  

Why, then, is sexual love almost ignored in Mrs. Wilson's fiction? Again, it is a matter of emphasis. Because actual behaviour rather than psychological analysis of motivation economically suggests areas of life outside her immediate observation, Mrs. Wilson's casual understated rendering invites bold leaps of the imagination as the reader supplies the necessary associations from his own experience: just prior to her flight, Maggie's brief remembrance of the nights when she "...lay humiliated and angry..." encapsulates the shame suffered by generations of sensitive women from the mechanical gratification of sex without love or respect; while Lilly's fleeting glimpse of Eleanor's ecstasy in her husband's embrace is etched vividly as an ideal marital relationship. Although the power of sex underlies the drama in Hetty Dorval and is sprinkled throughout the other books, it is sublimated in the overflowing of woman's ability to sustain love at a lower, broader, and more continuous pitch, which is just to say again that women are all one flow. Although the

103 This is apparent in Frank Cuppy's marital relationship, in Haldar Gunnarson's, and even in the nebulous Mr. Golightly's.

104 Swamp Angel, p.16, and Lilly's Story, p.239.
most harmonious relationships such as the Burnaby's\textsuperscript{105} and the Forrester's\textsuperscript{106} owe much to this flow, it can be extremely unhealthy when the force engenders an overly-possessive attitude producing a selfish stifling atmosphere, anathema to mature adjustment. Although it is rarely stressed in Mrs. Wilson's writings because her attention usually focusses on independent, dynamic women, this smothering situation, so common in modern society, underlies much of the suggested domestic incompatibility. The most obvious example is the situation in "Beware the Jabberwock, my son..." in which Tom's garrulous, clinging wife, significantly named Dolly, reduces their marriage to an impotent sluggishness:

"Oh but Tommykins just a minute, do you really love me?"
"'Yes'! And don't call me that!" A prophetic wave of frustration rose and broke softly over him with familiar competence and his future lay clear without delusion.\textsuperscript{107}

Implicit, too, is the observation that love and sex are potent forces in women that often result in extreme romanticizing with a pathetic dependence on demonstrative and quixotic assertions. However, some women find their fulfillment in creative occupations or independent subsistence

\textsuperscript{105}In Hetty Dorval.

\textsuperscript{106}In "Truth and Mrs. Forrester."

\textsuperscript{107}P.173.
as do men, and these women are the ones admired by Mrs. Wilson, for they alone fulfil the promise of her positive philosophy of continuity.

Moreover, women form a focus for practically all of Mrs. Wilson's themes. Because they act more instinctively than men, possessing a mysterious knowledge which is often inarticulate, women are perfect vessels to contain the idea that "onlie the heart knows". Naturally then, an uneducated but intuitively wise old juggler rather than the educated and well-read Tom Krispin or Arthur Cousins is chosen to formulate in halting phrases Mrs. Wilson's philosophy, for she knows, as Tom Krispin does not, that love and intelligence are complementary:

He could have wished Dolly to be more intelligent. He did not think of enlarging that wish to include himself and it did not occur to him that love and intelligence - or their lack - might have any relation to each other. 108

Widely-read, intelligent, and learned, Mrs. Wilson recommends books for delight (John Donne, Shakespeare), for facts, and for a quick lesson in human relationships, but merely as a guide, a preliminary to the more fascinating study of the actual behaviour of human beings, which

108 "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...," p.154.
discipline is indispensable not only for writers, but for anyone who wants to experience life to the fullest.\textsuperscript{109} This doctrine is most explicit in \textit{Love and Salt Water}, in which, although George attempts to steer Ellen's keen but groping mind into some ordered channels of thought, significantly she learns only through experience, through painful trial and error, notwithstanding that her instincts are usually trustworthy.\textsuperscript{110} (Lest the reader should deduct that men are naturally wiser than women, a graphic picture of George's worthless first wife is strategically included, thereby emphasizing the need for personal experience.)

Yet the grim spectre of unsatisfied womanhood seems to haunt Mrs. Wilson's fiction. Women lead a rather trivial or barren life. A routine of cooking and cleaning interspersed with an occasional swim and fishing sortie, unrelieved by any friendly or stimulating conversations or any delight in reading, reveals the disturbing picture of Maggie finding life only in a withdrawal from humanity and a physically tiring job. Does her life seem complete - or satisfying? And what about Mrs. Severance who exists only between her bed and the kitchen, the newspaper and her daughter's company the only diversions in her monoto-

\textsuperscript{109} See her remarks in "Cat among the Falcons," and "Bridge or the Stokehold? Views of the Novelist's Art."

\textsuperscript{110} See pp. 137-38 of this essay.
nous endless days? Would not the stimulation of a good book or the contact with a keen mind have helped these women even in their human relationships which are less than satisfactory? That they would not then be Maggie and Mrs. Severance is beside the point; what is significant is that even Maggie, the best example of Mrs. Wilson's existential heroine, is much more sensitive to and sympathetic with human frailties than is Haldar or any other man on the whole canvas. It is to Maggie that Vera stumbles hysterically after her attempted suicide, implicitly trusting that Maggie will understand, and forgive, and help. Haldar would - or could - do neither. What is implied, then, is that what men try to learn from books and formal education, women know instinctively or learn through human intercourse, for their emotional antennae

111 Is this just a manifestation of Mrs. Wilson's admiration for the independent spirit? One of the axioms of society seems to be that women talk more than men, yet the garrulous females in Mrs. Wilson's stories are usually weak-minded. The privilege of discussing their intimate troubles with other women, thereby gaining emotional relief (a safety-valve denied the prouder males who are less prone to admit personal problems), is largely withheld from her stronger characters who best embody her positive philosophy.

112 Maggie does help, but only a little, for, unreceptive to Vera's need for an emotional confidante, she throws Vera back on her own inadequate resources.
are more receptive to the waves of human desire, frustration and needs which forever seek consolidation and interpretation. Examples are numerous. Although Mrs. Forrester and Laura see beneath Cousin Sid's mask, yet know the mask is, in fact, Cousin Sid, he fails to realize that they too are acting a part for him;\textsuperscript{113} Mrs. H.Y. Dunkerley instinctively flatters Mort into uncommon exertions, but Mr. H.Y. Dunkerley nullifies her cunning by his impatience with the trivial yet important nuances of communication that manipulate and influence behaviour; Mrs. H.X.Lemoyne is intimidated by Myrt, but pampers her by attention and almost deference, an attitude that makes Myrt "fairly cooperative" and agreeable, but which would infuriate Mr. Lemoyne - "How cross Hughie would be if he heard me talking like this!..." - who, it is implied, as a man is preoccupied with more important issues in life.\textsuperscript{114} But what is life except an accumulation of little things?

Because women are of necessity immersed in the innumerable trivial concerns, the niggling details of everyday life with the involved subtle problems of human

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{113} "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," pp.114-16.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Tuesday and Wednesday, p.11.
\end{itemize}
relationships inherent in raising a family, managing a household, and contributing to the vitality and functioning of the community, they invariably become familiar and conversant with most of the petty sins, jealousies, and deceits to which mankind is prey in the normal exigencies of living. From this knowledge and from their instinctive ruthlessness born of a will to survive, issues the sin of injustice which is not always recognized as being morally wrong, but which disturbs women much more than the punishable transgression of lying. "It takes God himself to be fair to two different people at once."

In Mrs. Wilson's novels there is little planned evil. The few deliberately lawless crimes as in "Fog" or "Hurry Hurry," or the petty larcency of Yow in The Innocent Traveller not only are committed by men but are merely incidental to some other theme or aspect of the story. This absence of violence, of destruction, of any connivance to gain unwarranted material or worldly advancement, merely throws into sharp relief the proliferation of the sins of jealousy, pride, untruthfulness, and deceit. Two intimately

115 Both Maggie and Lilly possess this ruthlessness, but whereas the problem of injustice is foreign to Lilly's ethic, Maggie is often unbearably tortured by the necessity of choice.

116 Swamp Angel, p.151.
related passions in women are responsible for this emphasis on such aberrations: the obsession to preserve the status quo, and the conviction that everyone should have a reasonable chance for happiness. Women are most unscrupulous in their methods of preserving harmony. Lies and deceit are rationalized on the basis of the end in view and there is a similar disregard for man-made laws and conventions designed to enforce a common morality. So, when Maggie weighs the consequences of flight and concomitant exile against the mutually destructive atmosphere of her marriage with Edward, she decides in favour of self-respect and a restoration of tranquility:

It's a good thing I'm going now, she thought as she stirred the gravy. I'm always unfair, now, to Edward. I hate everything he does. He has only to hang up his hat and I despise him. Being near him is awful. I'm unfair to him in my heart always whatever he is doing, but tonight I shall be gone.

When Maggie has agonizingly rationalized her guilt on the basis of the ultimate good, she resolutely banishes

117 In the recent riots in South Africa, in which natives were imprisoned, many white women showed remarkable courage in their support of the suppressed "blacks".

118 See Swamp Angel, p.150 for Mrs. Severance's views on conventional morality. In contrast to her husband, she wants to comply with conventions in order to avoid hurting other humans.

119 Swamp Angel, p.17.
further feelings of remorse. Men are usually much more
guilt-ridden, being more rigorous about distinctions
between right and wrong; when morality defines itself as
black or white they are comparatively untroubled, but when
the complexities of expediency, inequality, and divided
loyalty intrude, they tend to lose their sense of proportion.
It is this haunted psychological state that is the theme of
so many contemporary novels.\(^{120}\) Paradoxically, pragmatic
decisions entailing unkindness, which torture women, hardly
disturb most men. An afternoon spent with an aging tiresome
couple upsets both Ellen and Huw, but for different reasons:

Life is unfair, thought Ellen, Mr. and
Mrs. Ransome are innocent and tiresome and
quite old, and devouring, and eager, and Huw
and I are snooty and heartless and will our-
selves be old some day (how tedious Heaven
knows) and Huw has behaved like the very
devil and I am a monster of duplicity - both
ways.

Have Mr. and Mrs. Ransome no rights at all?
Haven't they even the right to be dull?...
But Huw said, staring over the wheel, not
'Well that's over, darling,' but "That's a
hell of a way to spend an afternoon! You
seemed to enjoy it - all right, all right...
well, I only said you seemed to anyway...You
seem to like those kind of people..."\(^{121}\)

Similarly, Mr. Burnaby's incredulous amazement at Frankie's

\(^{120}\) Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, for instance.

\(^{121}\) *Love and Salt Water*, pp. 79-80.
voluntary confession of disobedience emphasizes the difference in flexibility of viewpoint and conscience between men and women:

Father lowered the newspaper and pushed his rancher's broad-brimmed hat back from his forehead and looked at me as if he couldn't believe his eyes and ears. 
"Well, I'll be blowed" he said slowly, "I can't understand you."
"But Father..."
"I-don't - want - to - hear - anything - more - about - it," he said pausing emphatically at each word. "You go and talk to your mother."122

Against the grimmer, blacker world that erring males inhabit, women's sins may appear petty and trivial because they learn early to compromise, to live in a gray world of mixed morality where evil is encountered and dispatched with a tolerant equanimity. Modern psychiatry tries to induce in criminals a sense of responsibility which, unfortunately, is often destructive unless one has the faculty of accepting guilt and mistakes without becoming possessed by them. The capacity for absorbing responsibility without being immersed in any unsolvable moral dilemma is one of the strengths of women, and is why Mrs. Wilson finds in them a compatible vehicle for her modified

122 Hetty Dorval, p.51. (Frankie had been forbidden to see Hetty, but her innocent and kind heart compelled her to one last explanatory visit.)
existential philosophy, most explicitly stated in Maggie's thoughts as she breaks her routine of work with a relaxing swim:

There was this extra feeling about the swim: Maggie's life had so long seemed stagnant that - now that she had moved forward and had found her place with other people again, serving other people again, humoring other people, doing this herself, alone as a swimmer swims, this way or that way, self-directed or directed by circumstance - Maggie thought sometimes it's like swimming; it's very good, it's nice, she thought, this new life...now I am alone and like a swimmer I have to make my own way on my own power. Swimming is like living, it is done alone. She pushed away the knowledge that Vera was quick in liking, but quick in disliking, quickly resentful, quick to be kind, quick to find fault, sometimes sulky, holding her resentment. What should that matter, thought Maggie, because that is something I cannot help. I will swim past obstacles...because I am a strong swimmer.

.................................

She dives off the deck, down into the lake. She rises with bubbles, shakes her head vigorously, and strikes out.123

123

Swamp Angel, p.99.
"This Matter of truth is really difficult and important," philosophizes Laura in "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," as she and her aunt explore the intricate convolutions of the eternal search for veracity, some absolute standard against which to measure individual interpretations of virtue, honesty, reality. The quest is endless and brings even itself into question in Mrs. Wilson's fiction, for truth and reality are constantly changing as people themselves are in a continual state of flux, adjusting their personalities and identities with the ebb and flow of human involvement. Since women are the matrix in which Mrs. Wilson's ideas take formal shape it is natural that Mrs. Forrester, plagued by the puzzle of her own psyche, should muse:

"...it is strange (still talking about truth) how in the presence of Cousin Max, or Miss Riley, or Lee Lorimer Smith - all of them nice people - in order to preserve one's integrity - that is, truth - one proceeds to act, which is to lie."
"So, Aunt Fanny," said Laura,..."can one wonder if, since the presence of - for example - Cousin Max, or Miss Riley, or Mrs. Lorimer Smith, changes one's identity just a little," ("No, a lot," said her aunt) "that Moscow...and London and Washington when they are reduced to actual people talking to each other change their identities, and complicate issues, and make things very hard for my generation.... "This matter of truth is really difficult and important."124

This passage (incidentally one of the rare but apt instances in which Mrs. Wilson betrays her awareness of the pertinence of her themes and philosophy to the mainstream of human destiny) conveys directly and unpretentiously the essence of her exploration of reality.125 How impossible is the discovery of any final assessment of truth or reality is the impression left by this and nearly all her stories and novels. Consider the story just mentioned. Although Laura smugly imagines that she and her aunt are completely themselves when alone together, that they really do "...understand what each other means, and what is true and what is false...", when her aunt receives the telegram with the joyous news of her husband's recovery, Laura sees "...the true Mrs. Forrester standing

124 "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," p.112.

125 For another humorously satirical comment on this same theme see "We have to sit opposite," in Mrs. Golightly, pp.49-60.
there...something had changed her into herself." Who was she, then, before? Who will she be tomorrow?

Illusion and reality continually fluctuate in a manner that defies any logical analysis and prediction, a phenomenon illustrated in "I just love dogs," Mrs. Wilson's first published story, in which a commonplace incident, satirically dramatizing one of the odd "truths" about human behaviour, humorously reveals the unreliability of everyday factual knowledge:

It was the queerest feeling. A minute ago there had been the dog dead, as you might say, and us all bound together, feeling very important, and very sorry about the dog, and the next minute there was the dog alive and gone, and us all feeling pretty silly.

..............................

...I didn't get over feeling silly for days and I was so mad at myself that I hadn't even gone into a store and watched for the lady in the purple hat and the policeman exploding at each other down Granville Street to where there was no dog.

If people can be so deceived and mesmerized by a "dead" dog, how foolish is any dogmatic assertion of fact. Always the tocsin is ready with subtle, intermittent, yet persistent warnings against the purely reasonable interpretation of appearances. Desmond Pacey, in his article "The Innocent

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127 P.84.
Eye" notes Mrs. Wilson's use of the double-take, both for humorous effects and to prick the bubble of her own drama with the needle of irony, in passages such as:

The Indians always looked as if they had nothing to do, and perhaps they had nothing to do,128

and

It was evident that Mr. Sandbach had something to say. He looked down at her with the kind look that was to her so personal and tender. (Oh, look at Holy Willie!)129

However there is another significance to these personal intrusions which are often bracketed and therefore emphasized: their overall effect is to underline the elusive nature of reality in the light of man's conditioned biases and responses.

As in all fiction the "famous twins," appearance and reality, provide one of the fundamental problems explored and the conflict engendered is usually basic to the theme, whether it be the loss of innocence attendant on maturity, or an enquiry into the nature of evil, or simply why mankind in general exists behind false fronts. Today no one doubts the reality of the outside world but,

128

129
The Innocent Traveller, p.53.
as scientific facts accumulate in stockpiles of discoveries, the mind, forced into heretofore unimaginable realms, rebels against such incomprehensible expansion, seeking assurance and justification for its own existence in a phenomenological view of reality. Objects and facts have really no existence in themselves, depending for their being on individual recognition and interpretation, a most satisfying credo in that man is able to blot out the cold formulation of empirical knowledge with contradictions that substitute an esthetically satisfying revision or representation.

As has been noted, Mrs. Wilson's existential philosophy is always adulterated by psychological flavourings, but never more so than in her recorded vision of the nature of truth and reality. So that while interpretation is undoubtedly subjective, the influence of environment, especially of people, is extremely powerful. Although there are as many truths as there are eyes that see, every one apprehending reality from a different angle, each unique view is valid. In "God help the young fishman," Mrs. Wilson leavens with light humour the assertion that any standardizing of human reactions and apprehension is impossible. In this trivial episode, a young fishman, after a trying progression of indecisive vacillating customers whose fluttering has strained his patience to the point of uncivil
...looked about him at the customers. "Next?"
he said.
"Two herrings," said a bad-tempered looking
woman with a dark moustache.
"Did you say two herrings?" said the young
fishman with a light in his eyes.
"You heard me," snapped the customer.
What a lovely lady, thought the young fish-
man, what a lovely lady. He looked tenderly,
earnestly at the bad-tempered-looking woman in
whom all the sins of woman were forgiven on
account of two herrings.
Still the young man gazed. Something was
held suspended. The fish shop seemed to dream.
What's wrong with him, the bad-tempered-
woman thought uneasily. God, what's he looking
at; and instinctively she covered her moustache
with her hand.
The young fishman gave her the small parcel
and unwillingly withdrew his eyes from her.130

Just as it is "...a matter of light falling, how
green or how not green the forests can be,"131 so do people,
events, things, differ according to "whose ox is being
gored." Mrs. Wilson never suggests stopping at any iso-
lated interpretation. Her own vision is wide and encom-
passing and in demonstrating the validity of a multiple
view she invites her reader to form a more comprehensive
and integrated outlook, thereby not only becoming more
tolerant of others, but better able to understand one's
own place in the wider view of being. Human nature is not
in itself logical, being a disturbing but appealing paradox

130 P.48.

131 Swamp Angel, p.104.
of endearing and repellent characteristics. What is enduring, and therefore real, is the eternal change, the continual process of Heracletian becoming, which confuses the problem in a delightful melee of shifting viewpoints.

Were it possible to isolate and arrest some portion of existence in space and time would it then be real and immutable? Mrs. Wilson questions this a few times in her fiction. In Hetty Dorval Frankie discovers the relative nature of truth by an unconscious association of a natural and a human distortion: immediately before she records a chance sight of Hetty in Vancouver, Frankie had described the mirror in her room that

"...seized and isolated a portion of the beautiful descending and ascending lines of the mountains..." [the Sleeping Beauty, noting that]"...this reflection, held in the circular frame, had more unity and significance than when you turned and saw it's substance as only part of the true flowing continuous line of the mountains."132

Although she finds Hetty "...as beautiful there as when, in Lytton, no one had challenged comparison,"133 Frankie is dimly aware that Hetty, by herself, has much more power and influence than when compared with or judged against things that matter. In the larger vision Hetty is rather

132 Hetty Dorval, pp.52-53.

133 Hetty Dorval, p.53.
an insignificant factor and, suggests the author, as Frankie's experience and outlook broadens, Hetty will fade into indistinguishable outlines as she becomes the victim of both time and change. Seen in London in a bare room under the harsh glare of an unshaded light, Hetty no longer challenges comparison: this once disturbing beauty appears faded and a little pitiable to the maturing, intelligent, and observant young lady, Frankie. No longer the wide-eyed romantic who has "isolated" Hetty, Frankie is now able to correlate her various youthful impressions of Hetty with her own maturing insight and the reactions of her friends into a balanced comprehensive whole.

Truth is only visible in Mrs. Wilson's world in relation to human activity. There are, however, incomprehensible realms of being, a vast superconscious, which transcends in brief flashes the barriers of reason, logic, and even sensibility, to highlight a tiny portion of life in an intoxicating or frightening moment of truth. Sometimes, for an instant, time and space seem to dissolve in a mystical evocation of timeless creation. This mood is successfully created in "The corner of X and Y street," a haunting description of a dreamy impromptu concert by an accordion player who, in the dim light looked "...sad, or quenched, and detached from the street corner and from
people," and a girl who simply "lifted up her voice," and a seaman who danced like a marionette incanting a strange and ghostly dirge as an accompaniment to his balancing and wheeling, so that the narrator, obviously Mrs. Wilson, both questions and accepts the mystery:

We were very much surprised by this stranger, and his dances. Everything - light, shadows, time, distance seemed to focus on him. There was silence somewhere, and we turned to look at the accordion player who seemed to have stopped playing, but he was not there. We turned to look at the dancer, but he had gone. The girl and her boy were not there.... Had these things happened? Yes, and they had left no trace as dreams leave no trace. Something had snapped and ended and now everything was ordinary...we finished up at Café Royal where there were plenty of ghosts if one could see them.

This year I heard that Oscar Wilde used to frequent Kettner's. I do not understand these things but for ten minutes there had been something simple and complicated and timeless on the corner of X and Y streets.134

Similarly Ellen is puzzled by the relationship of reality and light (and its negation - darkness):

The thought alarmed her - what is around us? She did not at that moment think that there was somewhere some parallel of light and darkness, of illumination and blotting-out, and perhaps our whole existence, one with another, is a trick of light. This may be somewhere near the truth, which is often hard to determine because of the presence of lights and shadows of look, word, thought which touch, glide, pass or remain. Sometimes the light falls, and rests, with a beautiful clarity, and truth lies clear. That
was the case with Ellen and her great friend Isa Graham...and it had always been so with her mother and with Billy Peake.... But with Huw and Ellen the light did not fall clear.135

Here, both the cause of Ellen's philosophical musings concomitant with her sleeplessness and the example given of a clear truth involve the changing kaleidoscope of human involvements.

Mrs. Wilson's few brief excursions into the realm of metaphysics simply endorse her practical, man-centred theories of truth. That ultimate reality is tantalizingly elusive is an unmixed blessing, for were it known or knowable there would be no possibility, no change, no becoming, no human freedom, which are all so essential to human existence and meaning. Only when people think they know the answers do they cease to have an authenticity. They become arrested, imprisoned in a meaningless vacuum because of the absence of possibility, of a reason for search. Men do not search for things but for the search of things. Until he begins slowly and dimly to sense a mysterious unknown beckoning to him, Mr. Willy might as well be buried in his house with the penetrating window. But stirred by the wonder and portent of the Northern Lights, his stagnant peace becomes troubled by vague, uneasy stirrings:

In his life of decisions...he had sometimes looked forward but so vaguely and rarely to a time when he would not only put this life down; he would leave it. Now he had left it and here he was by his window. As time went on, though, he had to make an effort to summon this happiness, for it seemed to elude him.

..."You do not matter any more," said the spectre,..."because you are no longer in touch with anyone and so you do not exist. You are in a vacuum and so you are nothing."136

As is usual in Mrs. Wilson's stories, this excursion into metaphysics precedes a clarification of a practical or moral question. Mr. Willy begins to doubt his smug withdrawal. Sometimes

a storm would get up and the wind, howling well, would lash the window...carrying the salt spray from a very high tide which it flung against the great panes of glass. That was a satisfaction to Mr. Willy and within him something stirred and rose and met the storm and effaced the spectre and other phantoms which were really vague regrets.137

Mr. Willy is beginning to see that reality and truth lie only in action and change, and in possibility.

If truth is always becoming, how can any absolute standard of morality be formulated? Mrs. Wilson offers no


137 Ibid., p.198.
solution. Suggesting tolerance and understanding, she merely presents without judgement or bias the paradoxical nature of morality. A moral code, like a legal code, is based on the over-all needs of a specific society. One tells the truth and behaves according to social conventions. In order to survive, man has to bend before social pressures as much as before physical strength, so Mrs. Golightly is a misfit until she accepts with clear eyes the exaggerations and harmless deceptions of the "convention" world. Morality is not a set of abstract rules inscribed on man's conscience; it is a system of social functions consolidated under pressure of collective needs. Its positive function is to render society possible by allowing individuals to live together without too many conflicts. Separate groups of people may have entirely different concepts of harmony and needs and obligations necessitating widely different social or moral codes; polygamy, polyandry, promiscuity, anathema to the western christian concept of life and marriage, have long been sensible, workable, and happy conventions among people with less complicated social structures, more primitive needs, and, perhaps, a broader concept of the function of love and sex.

Collective conventions of moral and social behaviour also serve as protection for both the strong and
the weak. Is Lilly immoral because she sees and uses this collective morality in her own manner? Women are really born anarchists, much less scrupulous than men in their expedient manipulations of existing conventions. Is Lilly, then, simply a liar, her whole life being one prolonged falsehood? Whatever Lilly's other transgressions and personal ethic, should she be labelled a sinner for her invention of a husband, thereby assuring, with hurt to no one, both respectability and a chance at economic security for herself, and happiness for her innocent daughter in a mentally and physically healthy environment, the absence of which stunted Lilly's own early growth? Since the family unit provided no legitimate protection for Lilly as a child, is she not now illegitimately entitled to the benefits of the institutions of a culture to which she becomes an efficient and dependable contributor? Is she not, in a curious reversal, as much Mrs. Walter Hughes as Maggie is Mrs. Lloyd, or Hilda's mother is Mrs. Severance? Which is more beneficial to the development of a satisfying and evolving individuality and to society in general, and more in harmony with the accepted social ethic: ignorant, irresponsible Lilly Waller, drifting along on the shady side of the law; or Mrs. Walter Hughes, hard working, contented,

138 Lilly's Story.

139 Maggie is really Mrs. Vardoe, and Mrs. Severance was never legally married.
productive, expanding to her limited capacity in the responsibility of love? To make illusion turn to reality is difficult:

It must be admitted that years passed before Lilly felt secure in the Valley, and the reality of the edifice which she had built, of which Mrs. Walter Hughes was the culmination, wavered sometimes uncertainly before the pseudo-reality of what had really been her life.  

But Lilly becomes so thoroughly Mrs. Walter Hughes that after ten years of daily association with her, Matron "explains" her mother to Eleanor:

"I've thought of your mother," she continued as they went slowly along the road, "poor, yes, very poor, Eleanor, and ignorant - yes, you know it and I know it - fresh from the country, knowing nothing of the world, and friendless, with herself to support, and a small baby that was you, and no chance to think of herself and only her own health and courage to support you both...I've seen girls like that go out of the hospital.... "Don't mind that I said this, Eleanor, will you, but...well, your mother's a puritan" (oh Yow oh Ranny)....  

A very queer mixture of facts and fantasy blend into a true picture of Lilly, which is integrated with Eleanor's love for her mother into an understanding appreciation:

A faint new illumination in the girl's mind showed her mother to her not as an adult person,

\[\text{140} \text{Lilly's Story, pp.209-10.}\]
\[\text{141} \text{Ibid., p.232.}\]
not wise like Matron, not light of touch like Mrs. Sample, not even as clever as Eleanor, but as a puritan girl, grown old. Eleanor felt more experienced than her mother, but not as good, nor so true, nor so strong, nor so unselfish.142

Lilly's morality is individual and yet collective. "In the small change of daily living, Lilly gave and expected truth," but she never scrupled to lie "for expediency".143 Whereas Mrs. Severance and Maggie, both scrupulously honest in daily intercourse and hating the deceit forced upon them by circumstance, are nevertheless equally as guilty as Lilly in living a protracted lie. What Lilly illustrates negatively, the other women show positively - that every moral person is at times immoral, an inevitable result of the false dichotomy of good and evil, of right and wrong, that society of necessity forces upon the individual.

If Lilly escapes censure in spite of her selfish pragmatism, how much more justifiable, in a Christian culture, should be a social crime for the benefit of another, or others? One might argue that the Government is now the Robin Hood, and that laws and institutions evolve to absorb the changing concept of morality. That human mutations seem to outdistance the limiting imposed constrictions of conventional behaviour is why political and social sciences

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142 Lilly's Story, p.232.
143 Ibid., p.247.
must interpenetrate and interfertilize. Mrs. Wilson sees a compassionate subjective moral code grounded in human experience, with a flexible evolving ethic that recognizes the role of the self in the culture. As the self is a process, not an entity, so is truth a changing discovery, in which human agents play a creative role.

That truth is newly created every minute by even the humblest and most colourless of creatures is surprisingly illustrated by the anti-climax in *Tuesday and Wednesday*, in which Vicki's imaginary version of Mort's death is closer to the truth than the official report. Welling from the depths of her character and life

> - how easily it came; from the depth of the life that she lived in her dreamings and imaginings and the newspapers which were her fairy tales...

the lie became actuality, and as she repeats her story

> the picture of Morty's dive from the wharf was so real to her that she herself was deeply moved by it.\(^\text{145}\)

By her one glorious, assertive, and compassionate lie (which was based on truth) she had done Mort a service, had secured Myrt's self-esteem, and had ensured for

\[\text{144 P.122.}\]

\[\text{145 P.125.}\]
herself a glorious memory that was to sustain her in her loneliness for the rest of her life. It is a part of Mrs. Wilson's own realistic view that Vicki's life is essentially unaltered by her one "epiphany". Habit is the great destroyer. So, implicit in Vicki's situation is the realization that the untapped potential in even the most colourless and ungifted personage is withered by the prevalent anguish of not belonging. The problem of the modern age is to find fulfillment in the shifting social reality. Man cannot find truth in the abstract; the struggle must be defined in social terms. In Mrs. Wilson's fiction the tare that balances the philosophical structure with the development of the authentic and absorbing characters is the social reality. In a fascinating analysis of a novel's function, Lionel Trilling describes a complex culture as a continuing adjustment of the conflict engendered by the multiplicity of manners and the shifting of social classes. His thesis is that social classes and money produce as great differences of personality as do varied endowments of power and talents. The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are not sisters under the skin.

So much has been written about the personality

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and problems of the artist, that today most of the reading public recognize and compensate for this "queerness". But the very fundamental principles of the democratic way of life are a stumbling block to admitting that difference in social class and in wealth are real enough to manifest themselves in an observable variety of manners and morals. It is totally unreal, it is a delusion that mocks reason and observation, to assume that a wealthy lumber magnate, for instance, and a penniless gardener differ essentially only in their social commitments and material comfort. 147 Societies with a recognized and accepted class structure are marked by an easy familiarity and a mutual appreciation between the strata, but in a culture that wilfully blinds itself to either the fact or the possibility, that refuses to recognize the reality and power of class, all manner of pretence, resentment, and inverted snobbery and guilt disrupt the pursuit of happiness or even contentment, the dubious aim of democracy. There never has been or ever will be any guarantee of justice. Instead of recognizing the reality of snobbery, of the pressures at work in an increasingly complex society which impinge on the individual, setting the pattern for his personality, the "free" man continues to harbour the illusion of equality which results in bizarre and hilariously ridiculous social conditions.

147 Tuesday and Wednesday underlines the gulf between such people.
For instance, it is a stock situation in comedy that menials or domestics can reduce their affluent and intelligent superiors and employers to abject and fawning inferiors. What manner of illusion is it that can make a superior person feel guilty because of his position? Mrs. Wilson invites her reader to face social reality, and helps him laugh at his blindness, by demonstrating the absurdity perpetrated by a false conscience.

In "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," although the two women are intelligent, warm, interesting, bravely and successfully hiding or sublimating their own deep personal troubles in order to maintain a bearable equilibrium in their necessary daily intercourse with each other and with their segment of society, it takes only the voluble and energetic occasional servant to alter their whole demeanor, because they cannot see or will not acknowledge that pride of class is real and vital and that a blind denial of its existence is inverted snobbery: Miss Riley (the domestic)

advanced into the middle of the room bringing into the room with her some kind of dislocation or perhaps some kind of re-adjustment.... Mrs. Forrester paid more than wages to Miss Riley ....she could not be smiled with, and responded to, and lost (as is done at parties) with impunity, because Mrs. Forrester was in thrall to her.

On entering the room Miss Riley became at once the principal character in it, and Laura and Mrs. Forrester soon lost their identities
as two women conversing as they pleased in a slightly superior and literary and independent manner; they became as two spaniels, sitting and gazing upon Miss. Riley while she spun her cocoon of words - two cigarette-smoking spaniels.148

Similarly Myrt and Mrs. Lemoyne seem to have their roles interchanged:

Mrs. H.X.Lemoyne apologized for all of this and felt she was not paying Myrtle enough for coming and then said she had the dessert ready and what else would Myrt like her to do.149

Both ridiculous situations are due to a false conception of social reality.

One of Mrs. Wilson's strengths is that from her impartial observation of the manners of individuals she has built, not an abstract model of society, but a realistic edifice of typical people whose differences although exaggerated somewhat, are never idealized or sentimentalized. Her gentle and comical satire prods the reader into an analysis of the social reality of Canadian or Western culture in which values and truth vary not only according to the individual but also to his status in the community. No false moral indignation is permitted to smoulder; the

149 Tuesday and Wednesday, p.11.
middle class reading public is invited to question its own motives which often lurk undiscovered under an altruistic front. It is perhaps no accident that in Mrs. Wilson's fiction, the only totally unselfish actions are attributed to people outside the recognized social classes: Vicki is an outcast from all levels; Captain Crabbe is unclassified; Annie Hastings would be unique in any culture; Maggie tries to renounce civilization. When Myrt justifies her bad temper and slovenly habits by rationalizing about the uselessness and unpleasantness of society women, when Mrs. Severance excuses her own selfishness on the ground that humanity is not her concern, when even Frankie condemns Hetty only when her own interests are threatened, the reader is being asked to examine his own beliefs and motivation to try and discern the truth behind his lofty and often illusory abstractions.

For truth is exposed, not by stripping away masks as is often propounded, but by recognizing that each different facet or aspect contributes to the overall reality. The essence of a thing is derived from a distillation of all its attributes; it is not discoverable by peeling off its functional or protective layers hoping to arrive at some ultimate magic kernel. Take away the various and contradictory views of Mort and there would remain - nothing. This ordinary man is a complex amalgam of a "superior type
of husband" and a "lazy undependable," a "little boy" and a "kindly, chivalrous, handsome male," a "good-humoured gardener" and an "unreasonably mad man," a "no-good who died a drunken death in poor company" and "a man who died the death of a hero," and so on. The complex dependability of Morgan Peake eludes analysis because his various sides are manifest only in a specialized climate; whereas the relative instability of Vera Gunnarsen makes her personality a palimpsest, obscure only because of its shallowness and inconstancy.

So what is Mrs. Wilson's overall view of truth or reality? As it must be with existential thinkers, her own open-mindedness thwarts any absolute certainty about truth. This does not mean that she regards the world as merely a projection of individual interpretation with no independent reality. Perhaps an ultimate truth lies beyond man's limited cognition and comprehension, as is suggested in her mystical scenes and stories, but she favours an intelligent, flexible acceptance and enjoyment of the natural, social, and individual worlds in which modern man - or rather woman - must fashion her own truth.

The reality of things, of people, of life, is an adding together - no, it is an inter-relationship of

150 Morgan is Ellen's brother-in-law in Love and Salt Water.
multitudinous elements "moving, cleaving, closing, sliding," ever changing, ever presenting some new synthesis. Such is the unobtrusive buoyancy that supports Mrs. Wilson's particular vision of reality. Like society and nature, man is always more than he appears to be, and in this very all-encompassing lies the possibility of being or doing more. Mankind catches only fleeting glimpses of the greater glory that can be his, but, as Mrs. Wilson observes,

when the mountains beyond the city are covered with snow to their base, the late afternoon light falling obliquely from the west upon the long slopes discloses new contours. For a few moments of time the austerity vanishes, and the mountains appear innocently folded in furry white. Their daily look has gone. For those few moments the slanting rays curiously discover each separate tree behind each separate tree in the infinite white forests. Then the light fades, and the familiar mountains resume their daily look again. The light has gone, but those who have seen it will remember.151

151 "Hurry, hurry," p.106.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

It is readily observable that Mrs. Wilson's themes are really just strands of her overall philosophy of life. Rarely, except in a few of her less successful stories, does she impose on her story line any consciously formulated argument for reform in manners, morals or attitude. But, more than a mere story-teller, her personality suffuses her work, which imports an indefinable vitality that stimulates the reader to see, to feel, and so to think, and her personal integrity projects her ideas into her writing which shines with complete honesty. When a writer has to manipulate the story, plot, or characters, bending and distorting them to illustrate his ideas, not only is the credibility stretched too far, but the reader loses confidence and the vitality is dissipated. Mrs. Wilson's ideas are seldom obtrusive but act like latent hormones to control all the other elements adding

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152 Love and Salt Water, which is discussed later, is a less successful story, as is "Fog," and "Beware the Jabberwock, my son," to a degree.

153 In Canadian fiction, Hugh MacLennan's Two Solitudes is an example of an idea or argument being imposed on the narrative to the detriment (in the last section) of the credibility of both characters and story.
significance and energy without being themselves visible to the casual observer.

Embracing life in general, her modified existential philosophy postulates specific theorems which are manifest in her treatment of plot, story, character, and setting. Usually when the theme and ideas in a work of fiction are allowed to dominate and smother the story, one's enjoyment slowly expires; conversely, should the story completely obscure the supporting philosophy, the novel dies as the book is closed, for then no provocative complexity of vision, no disturbing resonance of the profundity of life reverberates in the memory, pushing the soul or consciousness to an expanded awareness. In Mrs. Wilson's best books the plot, characters, and incorporated ideas blend into a harmonious and pleasing artistic whole. The meaningful structure and the sensitive and full characterization in *Tuesday and Wednesday*, for example, embody the existential theme with an economic precision that elevates a commonplace story of a universal situation into a superb artistic masterpiece. Henry James maintained that if readers "...don't care about your ideas they won't 'a fortiori' care about your treatment."^154

But this is not quite true. This novella, at least, seems to refute such a thesis. Her existential philosophy, repellent, as such, to some people, is so interwoven into the substance of her novella that the underlying ideas are accepted almost unconsciously in the overwhelming delight at the humorous revelation of human foibles. In this brief work, the suggestion that self-assertion determines personal fulfillment rises by an almost invisible osmosis through the pleasantly lingering impression of rather ironic humour, stimulating a sharper concern with the meaning of life.

Probably never has anyone succeeded in grasping, or even imagining, any tangible idea of the meaning or value of life, but for millenia not only thinkers and artists but also common men have been obsessed with this eternal quest. It is the interminable search for truth, for reality, for an end to illusion. But as has been postulated in this thesis, the meaning of illusion and reality as they are used in ordinary everyday life is unsatisfactory and very misleading in portraying a comprehensive and integrated vision of being. What actually happens to people, what people do, is reality. If they live with illusions, or dreams, this too is reality and is not necessarily analogous with incompetence and inability to lead a fruitful life. Self-deception and
day-dreaming are often necessary. The realistic novelist is not one that merely portrays the horrors and delights of existence, but one who is aware that the human consciousness is totally inadequate to grasp the potential inherent in living. "All art is a protest at the limitation of human consciousness." Mrs. Wilson's books are graphic illustrations of the various ways in which the human consciousness manifests its poverty. The Equations of Love, which proposes to answer or discuss Mr. Chadband's query, "what is this Terewth...firstly (in a spirit of love) what is the common sort of Terewth," is an exploration of the kind of love of which people of limited consciousness (which includes everybody) are capable, but the lingering impression of both stories is that even the shallowest personality can transcend its apparent limitations, briefly and occasionally.

Most critics concur in their appraisal that while her deliberately restricted scope achieves an effective and poignant concentration of interest, Mrs. Wilson's avoidance of any exploration into the "heart of darkness" precludes


156 Equations of Love, Frontpiece.
the achievement of a well-articulated novel.\textsuperscript{157} In the first place her vision is far wider than a cursory reading of her fiction suggests (as this thesis has attempted to demonstrate): an almost poetic compression intimates endless vistas of human suffering:

some little bird flew into this familiar reflection and dashed himself against the real glass and fell, with its mouth split and its bones broken by the passion of its flight. And yesterday I had bashed my head against the reality that was waiting for me, invisible, and had nearly broken my neck.
The thought of the merry birds and the birds in the years to be, falling outside the window sickened me. A bird is so free;\textsuperscript{158}

and of sin and guilt:

the man who had killed her reached the cover of the hedge, out of sight of that woman with the dogs. When he reached the cover of the hedge he began to run across the tussocky fields, stumbling, half-blind, sobbing, crying out loud.\textsuperscript{159}

Perhaps the vagaries of human conduct viewed from the outside do spin too tenuous a thread to support


\textsuperscript{158} "The Birds," p.64.

\textsuperscript{159} "Hurry, hurry," p.110.
the weight of a longer, more comprehensive work. Consider her latest novel, *Love and Salt Water*. In this too discursive book, Mrs. Wilson attempts to stretch the reader's perception in time and space by chronicling the emotional development of a sensitive and intelligent girl, from a happy and sheltered childhood, through an awakening to the meaninglessness of life, into an affirmative acceptance of individual responsibility with its concomitant pain and pleasure. The novel is divided into three blocks, the central chapters entitled "A Few Years" purporting to record the "years of elision" which differ from the years of "reality" and which seem to be "of no true significance".160

No doubt the prosaic dullness of the narration is intended as an objectification of Ellen's doldrums, but the scheme backfires as Mrs. Wilson's keen and analytical mind seems to refuse the imposition and wanders into irrelevant byways. Instead of allowing Ellen to speak and wonder and agonize for herself, Mrs. Wilson calmly philosophizes about the unique characters spawned in the atmosphere of small towns; about the vastness of the Canadian scene and the peculiar temperament of people living on the fringe of this spaciousness; about the artistic appropriateness of Mr. Platt's death; which are all very interesting subjects

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*Love and Salt Water*, p.60.
and included to demonstrate the fragmented and superficial nature of Ellen's thinking at this time, but rather destructive to the unity and life of the novel as a whole. For although Ellen is more intelligent, more sensitive, more analytical than most of Mrs. Wilson's "heroines" - almost a projection of her own personality - Mrs. Wilson seems almost afraid to let Ellen's thought take over the story. Which is a pity. To appreciate and enjoy the more commonplace characters such as Vicki and Lilly, it is enough to observe and interpret their actions, because they have so little consciousness, so little imagination, that a deeper probing would uncover nothing of further significance. Which is Mrs. Wilson's point, surely. However interesting and intriguing are most people to observe, they are not worth delving into very deeply. But Ellen would be.

However, had Mrs. Wilson begun publishing in her youth, it is probable that the problems of sin, of the nature of evil, of the search for the self, and the forces of environment and human passions might have been finely probed and questioned, elaborated, and analyzed into a more detailed, explicit, and comprehensive exposition of her insight. At the time of her first appearance in print, Mrs. Wilson had lived a full life and had formulated her own satifying credo. Is it not a tribute to her own intellect and to her unflagging and compassionate interest
in humanity that her vision remains so direct and so piercing, and her imagination so fruitful? Once the peak of creativeness has been passed - and students of geriatrics place this at about forty years of age - many artists lapse into monotonous repetition or a sloppy vagueness. But, as Marion Smith says, "...there is a strength underlying its [Mrs. Wilson's fiction's] delicacy - it is to be sipped and savoured." And whatever her limitations she is never boring.

In the second place, it is extremely difficult to assess what dimensions of reality are necessary in a significant novel. Current critical evaluation might seem to suggest that the brevity of modern literary writings - contemporary poetry, for instance, or the genre labelled Theatre of the Absurd - derives from the destructive premise that in this barren age there is little or nothing to communicate. So brevity is the meaning. The keynote of these modern lyrics of doom is the hopelessness

161 John Wain in *Essays on Literature and Ideas*, London, MacMillan, 1963, p.43, says: "All writers [contemporary]...become more idiosyncratic as they move into middle age;" For instance, he says, Graham Greene is now preoccupied with religious and sexual matters, Waugh with history, etc.

and despair of modern man, including the writers themselves. But Mrs. Wilson's economy stems from an entirely different source. What critics seem to be implying is that, did Mrs. Wilson allow her imagination to roam and expand into the remote abysses of being, the resultant more detailed rendering of the human predicament would mitigate the wholesome ray of hope that flickers unashamedly in the bleakest situation and in the most barren, insensitive, and unattractive human being. Moments of insight are sporadic and evanescent, and their intangible significance or meaning cannot be conveyed or communicated by mere words. So Mrs. Wilson's dramatic talent for showing "an inner and spiritual conceit" by a characteristic action or trait (such as Myrtle's eyelids, or Mort's rolling gait), though at least as old as Chaucer, is still a most effective device where suggestion says more than exposition.

What Desmond Pacey calls her "innocent eye" and what less sympathetic critics might label her naivete conveys an honest and comprehensive apprehension of man's condition. Without becoming regional, Mrs. Wilson writes in, and of, a new society and endows her characters with a capacity for wonder, a lustful vigour, and a ruthless
determination that seem common to all pioneers. Comparatively uncorrupted by the perversions that appear to invade all decadent cultures (in contemporary terms exemplified by the glittering falsity of the great centres of commerce in eastern America), Mrs. Wilson's fictional world looks forward with hope and energy to an amelioration of human distress and an enlargement of human dignity and, perhaps, consciousness. A repudiation of this viewpoint is viable only from the pen of a critic immersed in an older and more sophisticated society, mesmerized by the contemporary novel's compulsive picture of a moral decay that festers beneath the prevalent despair gathering into eruptive carbuncles of hate and violence.

Wallace Stenger in a clear and comprehensive defence of the Western writer's philosophy and presentation of life says:

his novel had a hero, or at least a respect for the heroic virtues, - fortitude, resolution, magnanimity.... Their story did not question or deplore life's difficult struggle, but celebrated it.

163 Desmond Pacey in Creative Writing in Canada, Toronto, 1961, p.258, says "...innocence in conflict with experience, is her main theme." He calls it the unspoiled vision of a child. The above thesis calls it the vision of a pioneer, which perhaps is the same thing.
Our Westerner, writing what he knew...had filled his book with a lot of naive belief in health and effort...and the fact of individual responsibility....He had been so concerned with a simple but difficult Becoming that he had taken no thought of Being.

Any Western writer may ultimately be grateful to his Western upbringing for convincing him, beyond all chance of conversion, that man, even Modern Man, has some dignity if he will assume it, and that most lives are worth living even when they are lives of quiet desperation.164

The reader might well be as grateful to these unspoiled (naive) writers for orienting their outlook towards a positive view of life. Though routine and commonplace are the lives of most of Mrs. Wilson's characters, they do proclaim an unquenchable and hearty delight in the simple act of living. Since all literature is connected, albeit sometimes obscurely, with the problem of how men should live, there is a value judgement implicit in every fictional character, which explains why the reader is unable to laugh at Mort and Myrt however foolish they appear and behave; why Lilly's shallow love does not arouse contempt; why Nora's cool detachment fails to repel; why Vera's humiliation is almost unbearable: to jeer at any of these frail specimens of humanity would be to mock oneself.

For the majority of mankind are foolish, shallow creatures who instinctively protect themselves from the nothingness of life by wrapping themselves in illusions. Because few have enough imagination to see beyond the surface reality, they are forced to indulge in escapist day-dreams; but even these people are sometimes able to transcend the mundane movie-star idealizing and let their imagination soar for a few precious moments to a new dimension of awareness. Vicki has her night of glory when she achieves this short cut to reality, when she sees into the heart of things, if only for one unforgettable hour. Although it is not likely, it could happen again, is what Mrs. Wilson implies. The enormous amount of effort required for Vicki to wrench herself out of her rut and assert the glory of life is generally impossible to summon in this self-conscious age.

Mrs. Wilson does not deny that since pain is more frequent and more visible than is pleasure, it is much easier to be fully conscious of evil, or sorrow, or futility, of the tragedy of human existence, than of any reason for rejoicing. Mesmerized by the intensity of their grief at the human condition, many existential artists merely highlight the absurdity of living, denying any forward progress in the evolution of the human consciousness, concluding
naturally on a totally nihilistic note. It requires enormous strength and self-discipline to liberate the power of the urge to live, as Mrs. Wilson illustrates in Swamp Angel. Maggie's is truly a life of quiet desperation (as is Haldar's) but her endowment of courage and imagination is liberal enough to sense the value of "... health and effort...and the fact of individual responsibility...in the simple but difficult Becoming." Being of a different calibre than Vicki or Lilly, Maggie is visited by no fleeting and sudden spiritual insight as when Lilly

saw Eleanor come up to her husband with her face raised and on her face a revealed look that Lilly had never seen on Eleanor's face or on any face.... What was it all about? All that had happened was that Paul had come home to dinner. Was there some special secret life that these two led together, of which other people had no knowledge? There was.... She sat down on the bed, shaken by her daughter's look. She had lived for nearly fifty years, and she had never seen this thing before.... She was outside it.

Most people are only awakened to the polarities of life, or rather the affirmative pole, in a moment of relief from

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165 For example, Jean Paul Sartre's Les Jeux sont Faits is not satisfying. Neither is Beckett's Waiting for Godot, or Endgame. The impression is one of unrelieved pessimism.

166 Lilly's Story, p.239.
anxiety or a sudden joy, or conversely, when death seems imminent. Only the very sensitive like Maggie and Ellen (and of course the true artist) are constantly and almost unconsciously sensible of the "...visible pole of human misery and futility, and the invisible strength of the powerhouse," and can endure the former by the support of the latter.

It may seem illogical to end with an illustration from Mrs. Wilson's least impressive novel, *Love and Salt Water*, but her last published fictional words are reasonably optimistic about man's slow progress:

> It was of no consequence. They resumed walking very slowly, and this was the actual beginning of their happy and chequered life together.168

Near the beginning of the story, having lost her gay and adored mother, Ellen is also soon bereft of the comfort and support of her father when he remarries. The succeeding years are uneventful, making little impression on this imaginative girl who begins to question the validity and worth of mere existence, but as she matures into a

167 Colin Wilson, *The Strength to Dream*, p.207.

168 P.203.
sensitive and lovely woman she intuitively knows that the answer can only be found within herself. In the scene previously noted, Ellen realizes that she can never formulate a reason for living as long as she remains ignorant of the stature of man and the heights and depths he can reach.\textsuperscript{169} Whether or not she can ever know why she is alive, she instinctively senses that one cannot randomly impose a pattern on life, which accounts for her resentment when George sends her a list of maxims for living, and follows with some carefully chosen books. Intellectual abstractions are impotent, for Ellen's imagination dictates that only her emotions are reliable sources of meaning, and as she lacks as yet the ability of interpretation, she has no right to begin living.\textsuperscript{170} So her life is dull, meaningless, barren. She offers little resistance to the twentieth century nihilism which hypnotizes the will into a somnolent paralysis. But instinctively receptive to supra-rational, non-imposed meanings, Ellen's insight into a reason for existence flashes across her consciousness when she receives a simple telegram from George, and she

\textsuperscript{169}The scene referred to is on page 29 of this essay.

\textsuperscript{170}Lionel Trilling says, in "Sherwood Anderson," \textit{The Liberal Imagination}, New York, Doubleday, 1957, p.24, "... a moment of enlightenment must be developed so that what begins as an act of will becomes an act of intelligence."
sees that life consists in choosing an arbitrary purpose and living with the consequences. From that moment she quickens and becomes involved in the good and the bad. For the first time she appreciates the character of Morgan Peake, and begins to sense the tragedy that stalks his family. The aftermath of Johnny's accident demonstrates to her that she can never solve the riddle of life, but she now has faith that her intuition and emotional maturity can interpret and weather whatever befalls, allowing her a life of courage, dignity - and enjoyment.

Life, to Mrs. Wilson, is positive, like a river interminably flowing, from diverse sources gathering greatness and beauty within itself. This forward-looking vision is inherent in the themes and style of her best works which, although confined within the banks of artistic selectivity and discipline, never flooding the irrelevant terrain in a wanton or diffuse frustration, surge always forward unrestricted in intensity and meaning.
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