

MAJOR THEMES IN THE FICTION OF ANGUS WILSON

A CRITICAL STUDY OF MAJOR THEMES
IN THE FICTION OF
ANGUS WILSON

by

SUMANA BAGCHEE, M.A.

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AUTHOR: Sumana Bagchee, B.A. Hons. (Visva Bharati University)
M.A. (Visva Bharati University)

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ABSTRACT:

In this thesis I have examined some important themes in Wilson's fiction. These themes have been selected primarily because they figure significantly in all of Wilson's writing, from the earliest short stories (1946) to his latest novel No Laughing Matter (1967), and also because they have been recognised and frequently mentioned by him in his non-fictional works. I have attempted to assess these themes or patterns mainly from the point of view of Wilson's achievement as a moral satirist. Wilson's fiction has been studied particularly in the light of his own evaluation of them in The Wild Garden and with reference to his other critical essays, in order to ascertain his objectives and achievements as a literary artist. I have looked rather closely at the biographical/psychological aspects of the themes because Wilson himself has placed a great emphasis on them. Due to the limited scope of the thesis, and ^{also} because Wilson is ~~vehemently~~ against experimentalist tradition in modern fiction, I have not attempted any stylistic evaluation of Wilson's works. Nor does this thesis aim at 'placing' Wilson in the history of English fiction.

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I

INTRODUCTION

Although best known today as a novelist, reviewer and critic, Angus Wilson started his literary career, more than two decades back, as a writer of short stories. It should be noted that unlike most of his contemporary writers, Wilson did not enter this career with any definite purpose to fulfil and did not come with any innovative ideas of style and form. In fact, it was only as the result of an accident that he started writing. During 1944-1946 Wilson, then in his mid-thirties, went through a state of severe mental depression and creative writing was suggested to him as a therapeutic treatment. He began by joining a circle of amateur writers, but, as he mentions in The Wild Garden, his neurotic lethargy made him reluctant to participate and he decided to terminate his membership.¹ Wilson did not seriously take up writing until after the publication and success of his first collection of short stories in 1949. Most of these stories were started as a kind of weekend recreation and Wilson explained in an interview why he had selected this particular form: "I was living in the country and commuting to London then and I could only do it [writing] at weekends. That's why I started with short stories: this was something I could finish, realise completely in a weekend."¹ He also confesses that he "never had

¹ Angus Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 20.

any intention of becoming a writer. I'd always thought that far too many things were written."² Such statements apparently indicate that at this early stage Angus Wilson had not become really involved in his literary activities. There was no financial need to drive him because he already held a responsible position in the British Museum and the weekend occupation was, at best, only a secondary interest or, as he put it, a good way of diversifying his time.

But once he had actually started to write, his academic background at Oxford, his varied and keen interest in social history, politics, Freudian psychology, and his wide reading in the novels of Dostoevsky, Turghenev, Tolstoy, Dickens and others almost inevitably left significant marks upon his works. Over and above these influences Wilson's own careful observation of English society in its various aspects, and of oddities in men and women, were unmistakably evident in his stories. His friend, Robin Ironside the painter, saw some of these early stories and, recognising some talent in them, brought them to the attention of Cyril Connolly. As a result Wilson's first two stories were published in Horizon of which Connolly was then the editor.³

Among those who were first to notice the promise in this new writer was Frederic Warburg of Secker and Warburg who asked Wilson for twelve short stories to publish as a collection. This came out in 1949 as The Wrong Set and Other Stories and made an immediate and powerful

²Michael Willgate, "Angus Wilson" in Paris Review, No. 17 (Autumn-Winter 1957) p. 90.

³"Mother's Sense of Fun" in November 1947 and "Crazy Crowd" in April 1948.

impact, quite an unusual success for a collection of short stories. The stories were particularly marked by their savage characterisation of the contemporary world and by Wilson's mockery of hypocrisy and sham.

The English literary scene was strangely bare of new talents in 1949, and Wilson's debut was a conspicuous one. The prominent names in fiction, at this point, were C. P. Snow, Henry Green and Graham Greene, novelists who had been there for the previous two decades or more. Writers like Kingsley Amis, William Golding or Lawrence Durrell, who are now considered Wilson's contemporaries, did not begin to publish until the mid-fifties. Wilson, therefore, holds a curious position ~~in~~ between the prewar and the postwar generation of novelists. Born just before the First War, in 1913, he has first-hand memories of the inter-war years and much of the bitterness in his satire is derived from the great change he has observed from the England of his youth to the England of the welfare state.

About the same time as he was writing these stories on his weekends, Wilson was also trying his hand at reviews and criticism. Mostly reviews of novels, the first of these were published in the same year as The Wrong Set.⁴

But it was not until 1952 that he wrote a full-length study of any author; this was Emile Zola: an Introductory Study of His Novels. His next book of criticism is The Wild Garden (1963): a book about his own

⁴The following reviews by Wilson were published in New Statesman:
 1. "Novels by Anthony Rhodes and Others", 38 (Aug. 27, 1949) 226.
 2. "Novels by Arthur Miller and Ernest Frost", 38 (Sept. 24, 1949) 336.
 3. "The Mind of Proust, by F. C. Green", 38 (Dec. 24, 1949) 760.

novels and his experiences in novel-writing. Although published more than a decade after Emile Zola, it follows the same psychoanalytical type of criticism displayed in that work. The Wild Garden was originally conceived in 1960 when Wilson was invited to the University of California to deliver the Ewing lectures for which his subject was: "On Being a Novelist." The lecture was divided into three parts: 'The Source of the Novel,' 'The Process,' and 'The Purpose.' This book (together with various other critical articles by Wilson) provides us with a coherent theory of fiction that bears quite significantly on his own novels. In general the book is a study of the relationship between the general pattern of his life and the broad thematic concerns expressed in his fiction, and from this he proceeds to examine the particular incidents, characters and situations which, through a process of unconscious repetition, have become recurrent symbols in both his life and his works. In The Wild Garden Wilson attempts an analysis of his subconscious referring back, in particular, to his childhood visions and experiences. As a believer in Freudian psychology Wilson gives prime importance to the effect that subconscious memories of childhood have on a grown-up person's character and actions.

Childhood visions result from the experiences and mental conflicts of a child and are also influenced by such morals and values as he is capable of imbibing from his environment. Moreover Wilson maintains that the character of an adult is also determined by the unconscious workings of certain moral values that the individual had formulated as a child. These values are different from the morals the child passively imbibes because they are formed out of reaction to, rather

than absorption of, childhood environment. The novelist's imagination, in Wilson's opinion,ⁱ closely related to the child's: the novelist's maturer view supplements and organises his childhood visions. In his own stories and novels Wilson has attempted to do this -- to put into its right perspective the whimsies of a child's world.

The Wild Garden provides us with a fairly detailed description of Wilson's childhood;² at least it leaves the reader with suggestive gaps which he can fill in by easy inferences. Most of Wilson's early life was spent in the company of his middle-aged parents, of whom he was the last child, and there was a considerable difference in age between him and the brother nearest in age. Apart from being a lonely child Wilson also lacked the company of boys of his own age for a long time because he did not attend school until quite late. A child left to himself or mostly in the company of adults naturally becomes withdrawn, dwelling upon his own peculiar imaginings. Moreover, the financial difficulties of his parents and their constant moving from hotel to hotel, always trying to evade their creditors, left young Wilson with an impression of general insecurity. He was thus always trying to forget his fears and seeking protection against this instability by playing pretence games, or "clowning" as he calls it.⁵ His games not only made him happy but also succeeded in entertaining the pretentious, raffish company of adults around him. It must be mentioned here that both his parents and his brothers had a natural flair for invention,

⁵Angus Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 15.

which, as Wilson remembers with nostalgia, often prompted his parents to imagine and pretend to be people they never were: fortunate, successful and famous. This general fiction-making atmosphere in his family affected Wilson quite early and he achieved "a fairly high standard of impressionistic mimicry " that later turned out to be his "principal natural asset as a writer."⁶ Whether Wilson was directly translating his boyhood fantasies into those in his novels is not the main issue, but the fact that Wilson has consciously and carefully made use of what he calls his "uneducated" or "unconscious" memories is more important here.⁷ He believes in what many of his critics consider to be a new literary theory formed by him in his Ewing lectures: that the absence of this childhood vision and fantasy in any form in a fictional work will result in dryness and sterility, an overpurposeful maturity. He has tried to avoid these pitfalls himself and in nearly all his novels the fantasies return in some form or other and through them Wilson seems to be showing how predicaments of childhood or adolescence are highly significant in an individual's life.

Perhaps the consequences of such predicaments in his personal life give greater authenticity to this theory. In the years immediately preceding the Second War, Wilson began to take an active interest in the left-wing movement. The clever political talk and a feeling of comradeship^e seemed to fill in a great intellectual vacuum in his life and he found a certain moral gratification in his political activities.

⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁷ Ibid., p. 139.

It also provided him with the cosy sense of belonging to an exclusive and sheltered existence. Later when war broke out he went to work with an inter-services organisation and here he discovered a realistic and more difficult world than he had ever encountered. In order to cope with some of his colleagues he tried to win their approval by resorting to his accustomed childish approaches of humorous entertainment. But this proved to be naive in the face of a practical and adult world and it became obvious to Wilson that his defenses were really based on weak foundations, the realisation bringing about a total nervous collapse. The situation, which he describes as "the fragility of charm, sophistication, popularity . . . and above all of humorous fantasy [acting] as a solid lid for any one sitting on top of an emotional volcano"⁸ became as apparent to him as to his colleagues. To worsen the situation there was an unlucky love-affair which proved to him that he had "far too little capacity for anything except demanding in such a relationship."⁹ The nervous crisis proved to be the turning point in Wilson's life; with the collapse of the false security on which he had relied in past years came self-realisation and subsequently, but inevitably, self-pity and a total inability to communicate his feelings. Writing was prescribed to him as a therapy to recover from this mental paralysis.

Wilson overcame the neurotic lethargy to communicate quite successfully but the total experience had given a greater meaning to

⁸Ibid., pp. 15-16.

⁹Ibid., p. 19.

his life: the self-analysis that he had subjected himself to, during the crisis and afterwards, provided him with a pattern in life. This was to become the subject for his first three novels, all of them stories of individuals who, having lived sheltered lives, suddenly encounter some harsh realities and are overcome by the encounter. Wilson's protagonists, Bernard Sands (Hemlock and After), Gerald Middleton (Anglo-Saxon Attitudes) and Meg Eliot (The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot) are all successful in their respective lives: a reputed novelist, a famous historian, and a contented housewife with enough leisure and money to spend in collecting china or in charity. But whether it is the elite world of the creative artist, or the intellectual university atmosphere or even the gay sophistication of Meg Eliot's parties, the same spirit of false smugness that characterized Wilson's left-wing activities is also apparent in the lives of these protagonists. All these situations, in fact, deserve retribution and in each case it is the aim of the novelist to shatter the comfortable, complacent world and to throw the protagonist into a more realistic if alien world so that he attains self-realisation through this shock. This is the climax towards which each of these three novels moves in an attempt to uncover the moral truth of the whole situation. Therefore, following from the biographical facts supplied in The Wild Garden that he wishes to apply to any evaluation of his novels, the moral question in the lives of his characters becomes a major factor in his works.

Apart from the ethical significance, the breakdown theme has definitely affected Wilson's narrative style. During the war years

and particularly during his emotional crisis Wilson had experienced the horror and pain of self-communings which he could neither forget nor prevent from reappearing in his works. Analysing and justifying these intrusions Wilson remarks:

But what matters at this point is that this defeat finally forced me to rearrange my experiences of life in imaginative terms to try to make fictional patterns.¹⁰

As a result, similar self-analysis within the minds of his protagonists come out in long and often ponderous passages of interior monologue.

Wilson's moral concern, on the other hand, remains as a pervasive and powerful factor in all his writings. His first short story, "Raspberry Jam", was written with a definite moral urge. Even in this first story, which was written in the feverish excitement of one day, the moral statement seems to have been more important to him than the stylistic or artistic concerns. He says:

When I wrote the story I saw the two old women as the embodiment of that saintliness which the world seeks to destroy.¹¹

At the same time Wilson was also deeply concerned^{by} and interested in recording and observing the English social scene as it had changed since 1939.

This social aspect coloured the larger part of the stories that I wrote for my first two books in 1949 and 1950. I was struck then by the fact that a mild social revolution had taken place in England overnight, although its novelists had not yet noticed it.¹²

His claims for being the first English novelist to recognise the new

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹² Ibid., p. 26.

class that had emerged after the war, and to introduce these people for the first time as real and existing, in his writings, might very well be justified. He had indeed tried to sort out the new classifications in English society and to organise the chaos in post-1939 England within the framework of his social novels and stories. Of course his own family background had been a major factor in his interests because they themselves had belonged to that poor but genteel class which was striving to remain respectable despite the many economic threats to their existence. Besides, his past left-wing activities also prompted him in this social analysis, particularly in his early writings, that later earned him the name of a social satirist. Wilson feels that his attitude to this social revolution has always been quite ambivalent -- his sympathy with the déclassé people being rather strong and often coming into conflict with his reason which was apt to criticize them for their many foibles. There is, however, little ambivalence as far as the reader is concerned because in most of the short stories Wilson is positively on the side of this impoverished but genteel section of society. In spite of his attempts at satiric portrayals of these men and women, his secret affection for them always gains ground over his reason. At least in the earlier stories, he is still too involved on a personal level with them, to be able to dissociate himself (and the memories of his own family) from them and write about them from a distance. He does agree at one point that the strength of some of these stories "lies perhaps in the deeper more sympathetic overtones of wasted talents, lost hopes, unrealised dreams that I inevitably imparted to

a picture of people I knew so well. . . ."¹³ But while this philistine section of society had his emotional sympathy, it could not be the real targets of his criticism simply because it lacked that intellectual awareness that could give his satire a real edge. Therefore in his novels he turned to the more self-conscious world of middle-class values, and his protagonists were well-established, middle-aged people, all of them holding responsible positions in life. One notices the earliest appearance of such characters in one of Wilson's major short stories "Such Darling Dodos" which reflects very clearly the failures of the liberal-minded upper-middle-class supporters of left-wing causes. In the novels Wilson's satire was directed against the insufficient liberal standards adopted by people like Bernard Sands and Meg Eliot and the déclassé crowd are not ⁱⁿ the lime-light here, but they are deliberately placed alongside the upper-middle-class to serve as a contrast as well as to bring out the attitude of the latter towards the former.

Besides their significance from the social point of view, some of these characters are also fascinating and disturbing because of the evil that is closely interwoven with their poverty. Social documentary is combined with social criticism in Wilson's descriptions of these characters who create their own subworld of layabouts, homosexuals and lavatory attendants. Sometimes they are simply vulgar and foolish as are Mrs Wrigley (Hemlock and After) and Madame Houdet (Anglo-Saxon Attitudes). There are others again who are totally vicious like Mrs Curry and Hubert Rose in Hemlock and After. Of these, Wilson refers

¹³Ibid., p. 44.

to Hubert as "a fairly successful embodiment of evil"¹⁴ in his essay entitled "Evil in the English Novel." This essay, like The Wild Garden, was originally delivered in the form of a lecture, the Northcliffe lectures in 1961, and forms an important landmark in Wilson's critical writings. The idea of good and evil has become increasingly important to him since the Ewing lectures, and in the Northcliffe lectures, by tracing the history of the subject in English fiction from Richardson to the present day, he expresses his own attitude to the problem. In Wilson's view there has been a general tendency in English novelists (after Richardson) to either evade the issue or to reduce it to a 'domesticated' distinction between right and wrong. The pervasive nature of evil that gives a novel its peculiar sense of mystery and power is, in his view, conspicuously absent from most nineteenth-century novels, with the ... exception of those by Dickens. Of the other authors before him Wilson finds Henry James and E. M. Forster exceptional because of their concern for good and evil even though they broadly follow the pattern of novel of manners. This is particularly interesting because the treatment of right and wrong is usually a typical characteristic of this kind of novel. In the works of these two authors Wilson detects the humanistic fight against sterility, greed and treachery.

Regarding Dickens, whom he holds as his ideal, Wilson feels that not only does he deviate from the convention, but also achieves the sort of effect Wilson describes as 'shock-treatment'. The evil

¹⁴Wilson, "Evil in the English Novel", p. 192.

figures in Dickens's novels thrust themselves upon the domestic scene of right and wrong quite unexpectedly, just when the reader has become accustomed to the general amoral nature of a particular situation.

Since the revelation is so sudden, its impression on the reader is equally powerful. In his essay "The Dilemma of the Contemporary Novelist" (published 1967), Wilson expressed his desire to achieve a similar effect in his own works and also mentions the extent to which he succeeds in his efforts. As a novelist writing in the conventional narrative style he realises the handicaps of this mode. Its facility of movement ceases to hold the reader's interest or to offer him the necessary realisation of good and evil as forcefully as it is possible in various experimental forms of fiction. Wilson has a solution to this problem of the traditional novelist and goes on to suggest how

. . . he can woo the reader in, so that the reader really is enclosed in the little warm cocoon where they are both together sharing a feeling of being buddies, and then he can really smash him on the face and push him out again. You see he is in a specially good position to give the kind of shock treatment which is needed.¹⁵

Referring to the experimental forms used by Virginia Woolf or James Joyce he urges the contemporary traditional novelist to try the 'pastiche' as an experiment in form. This involves the combination of a popular mode, for instance the detective story, with a message that is more serious than what the external form suggests. He himself has accomplished this effect to some extent in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, a novel in which the central mystery is also intimately interwoven with

¹⁵Ibid., p. 125.

the central moral issue --- the fight between truth and untruth --- in Gerald Middleton's life.

In his short stories, on the other hand, he has very little opportunity for such structural innovations and his moral criticism is consequently direct and even extremely precise. It is also limited to satiric expositions of the peculiar lower middle-class vanities and hypocrisies and of the falsity of preserved innocence. Wilson sees the vanities and hypocrisies as evils born out of the social upheavals in postwar England when a vast number of people, his own family among them, were struggling to maintain a certain standard of life as well as values. But since their economic handicaps were too strong to allow this, Wilson's characters, the hotel-crowd in "Saturnalia", for instance, act the way they go. Among them, those like the Talfourd-Riches are the worst sort because their vanities are ^{more} deeper and they have sacrificed their scruples to their vanity. Similar situations can be seen frequently in various other short stories, 'Totentanz', 'Rex Imperator' and 'The Wrong Set' to name a few. Since the action in these stories is limited to the scope of the central situation, the inherent moral criticism ^{is} also limited to the disturbing revelation of human failings. In the novels, which incorporate a series of situations, Wilson can explore deeper into the causes and circumstances behind such moral failures as Ron, Mrs Craddock, Yves Houdet or Tom Pirie. On another level, he can also trace the development of a character like Bernard Sands or Gerald Middleton following a definite movement from self-deception by means of a protected innocence or ignorance, through

experience to the final self-realisation. Close analysis of this kind was quite beyond Wilson's objectives in the short stories where he was only creating a problematic situation and isolating the falsity of protected innocence as a significant threat to human relationship. Thus "Raspberry Jam" ends when it has shown how the friendship between Johnnie and the old ladies is brought to an abrupt stop when the latter suddenly realise their secret guilt and the violent final scene remains as Wilson's implied comment on the moral question here. "A Visit in Bad Taste", "Et Dona Ferentes" and "Crazy Crowd" are other short stories that deal with ethical questions in similar ways. What I am trying to point out is that the various situations, sketched only in outline, even if very sharply, in the short stories, do not undergo any radical change in the novels. The situation for Edwin in "Et Dona Ferentes" and for Bernard Sands in Hemlock and After are very alike, but that in the novel Wilson can exploit the moral and psychological possibilities to a greater extent. The sense of pervasive evil that Wilson tries to convey in both the short stories and the novels is frequently accompanied by the portrayal of violence, atrocities or death. Beginning with "Raspberry Jam", a number of stories "Rex Imperator", "Fresh Air Fiend", "Mother's Sense of Fun", "Totentanz" — to mention a few — illustrate how sudden unexpected scenes of violence are used by the author to bring home a certain feeling of evil. In the novels, scenes of physical violence and mental cruelty are employed to illustrate more fully a certain moral crisis at that point in the story. Thus in Hemlock and After, the arrest of the homosexual at Leicester Square

or the sight of a weasel sucking the brains out of a quivering rabbit, are descriptions effective in indicating Bernard's state of mind when he witnesses either scene. In Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, Larry Rourke's violent death in the car-accident lends a highly dramatic effect to the evil nature of his friendship with John Middleton. Similarly Gordon's deliberate massacre of his pets in The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot, becomes an implicit comment on Gordon's ethics and his sense of justice.

Sexual aberrations, like violence, form an important means in Wilson's writings to convey the author's sense of good and evil. Since his early short stories, Wilson has covered a wide range of this particular evil in relation to an individual's life and society. Deviations from the normal sexual pattern include incestuous overtones in "Crazy Crowd" and "Mother's Sense of Fun", lesbianism in "The Wrong Set", homosexuality in "Such Darling Dodos" and "Et Dona Ferentes" and bestiality and other perverse forms of sex in "A Visit in Bad Taste" or "A Story of Historical Interest". Of these homosexuality becomes a subsidiary subject of growing importance in most of Wilson's novels. The recurrent pattern is too obvious to be dismissed simply as another alienation or shock-treatment technique adopted by the author. One of Wilson's critics thinks that the homosexuals are there to manifest the conflict between the feminine and masculine natures that goes on within himself, "but it is significant that the nature of homosexuality itself -- apart from the various social problems that are connected with it -- has not yet received direct and intensive treatment" in Wilson's novels.¹⁶

¹⁶Jay L. Halio, Angus Wilson, p. 98.

Whatever the actual implication, homosexuals figure as major character in Hemlock and After (Bernard, Eric and Terence), The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot (David and Gordon), Anglo-Saxon Attitudes (John Middleton), and No Laughing Matter (Marcus), four noteworthy novels by Wilson, and therefore, it will be essential for us to examine these relations in each novel in some detail later on in this thesis.

Wilson sees his moral preoccupation as a part of the responsibility that every agnostic humanist like himself must bear. He feels that he shares with other agnostic humanists, like Graham Greene and William Golding, this 'nagging sense of good and evil.' Also, he believes that it is one of his aims to reveal "every kind of hideous implication" that manifests itself in the domestic situation.¹⁷ As in the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, Wilson too wishes to expose the sordidness that develops out of individual relationships within a family.

In the chapters that follow I shall examine, in the light of Wilson's biography and his professed theory of the novel, the various aspects of his fiction that I have mentioned in this chapter. Apart from this I will also attempt to indicate the manner in which certain significant themes in Wilson's writing -- social, moral and psychological -- undergo a subtle but perceptible change as he switches from the short story to the novel. In dealing with the short stories I shall refer mainly to the two collections that appeared before any of his novels, i.e. The Wrong Set and Such Darling Dodos. As I will point out

¹⁷Wilson, "Evil in the English Novel", p. 191.

in the relevant section of this thesis, Wilson's ideas have gone through considerable shifts in emphasis during the two decades of his writing career, as he has moved from the short story to the novel and achieved technical and ideological maturity.

II

CHILDHOOD AND THE FAMILY

"Childhood and the family forms the deepest autobiographical layer in Wilson's fiction."¹ This comment by K. W. Gransden succinctly brings together two major aspects of Wilson's fiction and is also true to a certain extent of novels by some of Wilson's contemporaries such as John Braine and Allan Sillitoe. In the 1950's the overall trend in novel writing was the documentary style, noteworthy exponents being Joyce Cary, C. P. Snow, Henry Green to mention only a few. Accurate observation and detailed portrayal of contemporary life and its social, economic and moral problems are some of the common concerns shared by these novelists. But over and above these areas of general interest, each novelist also dealt with subjects that were essentially determined by his own social or family background and education. In some cases academic or professional interests supersede the impact of family or social background, as with C. P. Snow, whose working-class family does not enter his novels at all while his public and academic life is powerfully portrayed. In the novels of Braine, Sillitoe and Wilson, on the other hand, family and social background turn out to be a major determining factor.

Both Braine and Sillitoe come from working-class families

¹K. W. Gransden, Angus Wilson, p. 5.

and their novels have been generally classified as genuine working-class protests. It is relatively difficult to classify Wilson's books because he is not writing about one class or one section of society to voice its protests. Whatever documentation of English life occurs in Wilson's novels is, as Gransden points out, on a very different level: relating particularly to his own childhood and family life.

A literary critic with a strong bias for tracing autobiographical elements in the works of other authors, Wilson believes that memory plays a significant role in his career as a novelist.² One of the aims of his book The Wild Garden is to illustrate the way in which his memories influence the form and content of all his novels and stories.

At this point it is worthwhile to recall some of the principal factors of his early life that had an appreciable influence over his later career. For Wilson, his childhood is almost invariably associated with the instability and insecurity of his family, which seldom had a permanent address but moved from hotel to hotel, and also with the constant predicament of being destitute and embarrassed by his father's prodigalities. Moreover he was a lonely child in an adult world, his parents being in their middle age when he was born and his brothers much older than him. None of these factors was exactly ideal for the young and impressionable mind of Wilson and he has, since the beginning of his writing career, never

²Wilson's first book of criticism on Emile Zola and his latest on Charles Dickens are both written with this psychological/biographical approach -- exploring the way in which experience is transformed into fiction.

tried to minimize the repercussions of such influences on his later life. He admits that he grew up as a spoilt, frightened and untruthful child and became proficient at inventing stories about himself and others; something he had picked up from the general "fiction making atmosphere"³ in his family.

These early experiences, and many others which had not left such obvious impressions, came into play directly or indirectly in his first short story, "Raspberry Jam". Written in 1946 and at the end of a crucial phase in Wilson's adult life, it is, however, the story of a small boy named Johnnie, who is created essentially out of the author's boyhood memories. One who is aware of Wilson's biography, particularly between the years 1940 to 1946, will find it interesting to note that Wilson did not construct his first story out of his immediate experience of the neurosis which had proved to be at once very disturbing and self-revelatory. Although there is an indirect reference to this in dealingⁿ with the two old ladies, the basic material for the story is drawn from his childhood.

Johnnie, one of Wilson's many lonesome child-characters, tries to ignore the realities in his life and finds his only delight in a world of fantasy, which he crowds with strange faces, names and voices; in fact anything odd fascinates him. While it would be an oversimplification to describe "Raspberry Jam" as merely the story of a highly imaginative boy, it is also true that such boys

³Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 14.

reappear significantly in a number of Wilson's subsequent works. One finds almost an identical character in Rodney in "Necessity's Child", another little boy isolated in a grown-up world who is almost forced into inventing lies about himself and his parents in order to compensate for his own sense of loss. Eric in Hemlock and After and Timothy Middleton in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes are somewhat older, but are nevertheless lonesome boys undecided about whether to enter the adult world or to confine themselves to their own world of books, ideas and imagination. And finally in No Laughing Matter Wilson took up the subject again, giving it a fuller treatment in describing the lives of the Matthews children as they go through adolescence and youth. Particularly in the characters of Rupert and Marcus, Wilson seems to have drawn heavily on his own memories of boyhood, and, by employing the techniques of interior monologue and flashback, tries to relate the past to the present, the boys to the men they grow up to be.

It may be said that Wilson's subjective memories are transformed into these objective figures of boyhood. As Wilson puts it, this "uneducated memory"⁴ in his case comes from an earlier part of his life and it is "what gives vitality to the novel, makes the words flow, the incidents happen."⁵ However, all his major child-characters are solitary figures, frequently unloved and uncared for. They crave for the attention of the adults, particularly of their

⁴Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 139.

⁵Ibid., p. 139.

parents, and since they cannot have it by being simple, natural and innocent, they are soon forced to adopt other means. It is usually this loss of innocence, and the ensuing attempts at conniving and inventing, that Wilson seeks to underscore in his child-figures.

In "Raspberry Jam" Johnnie is seen among his older relatives, who try to adopt a patronising attitude towards him which he detests intensely. They neglect him and presume that he is not able to grasp the meaning of the gossip they exchange in oblique terms. But this attitude among his family members has resulted in Johnnie becoming precocious very early. Wilson comments on the boy's predicament in such a situation in a rather direct manner:

The loss of this friendship was a very serious one to the boy. It had met so completely the needs and loneliness which are always great in a child isolated from other children and surrounded by unimaginative adults.⁶

Naturally he had been compelled to resort to his own fantasy-games, and his world is, therefore,

...a strange compound of the adult world in which he had always lived and a book world composed from Grimm, the Arabian Nights, Alice's adventure, natural history books, and more recently the novels of Dickens and Jane Austen.⁷

His own values and morals emerge in terms of this strange world of fantasy where he arranges and rearranges the words and actions of the adults to form a pattern that is coherent only to him.

⁶Wilson, "Raspberry Jam", The Wrong Set, p. 148.

⁷Ibid., p. 146.

In this world, the old Misses Swindale have ranked very high because they have given him the imaginative friendship he had so much needed. But suddenly, with the violent catastrophe at the end, when the two sisters get drunk and cruelly destroy the little bullfinch, the horror causes a turmoil in Johnnie's imaginative world of values and upsets his entire young life.

If Johnnie represents a boy who has built his own moral world which is shattered by accident, Rodney in "Necessity's Child" stands for the next stage in a boy's life when he has lost his innocence. In this post-lapsarian state, if it may be termed such, Rodney indulges himself in wild inventions about his parents and acquaintances. What is notable is that the inventions are not merely wild but also often vulgar and obscene. Rodney's imagination does not only divert and delight him as in Johnnie's case but it is also "closely related to the semi-conscious demands of the ego."⁸ First he pretends to be a brave young soul, trying to save the life of his parents, and then, satisfied with having deceived the old gentleman, proceeds to make up a shocking and vulgar story about him to his aunt. But basically, Wilson reminds the reader, in his reveries Johnnie remains the solitary child, yearning for love and attention:

But I am left alone, tied to the raft, numbed, frozen, choking with the cold, or again, as it sails relentlessly on towards the next floating green giant, dashing me to pieces against the ice as I fight with the ropes too securely tied.⁹

⁸Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 145.

⁹Wilson, "Necessity's Child", Such Darling Dodos, p. 120.

One realises of course that such wild fantasies are at once reflections of Rodney's extremely romantic nature and of his desperate desires to be noticed with affection and admiration.

Such a highly-imaginative and lonesome boy naturally grows up to be a young man like Eric Craddock in Hemlock and After. In his first appearance one sees Eric playing the role ^{cf} Lorenzo's page in exotic Florence and in this fantasy-world he sees himself as a beautiful, talented and much-loved young man with "a certain gentle grace, not only of movements and of manner, but of spirit, that distinguished him from the other pages."¹⁰

These fantasies provide him with the atmosphere and the type of people who would treat him the way he wants to be treated and thus, in spite of his age, fantasies are delightful in that they seek to compensate for the unhappiness in real life. Eric's passionate desire to be admired and loved finds satisfaction either in a dream-world or in homosexual relations with older men.

Whatever their objectives, Johnnie, Rodney and Eric all indulge in their secret reveries to fill in the vacuum created by loneliness and neglect in an adult world, and to that extent Wilson's own memories of childhood find objective representation.

Also, in The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot, memories of Meg's youth return to her again and again. She remembers vividly her own solitude and her mother's world, between which there was an ever-increasing

¹⁰Wilson, Hemlock and After, p. 32.

gulf. On the eve of her journey abroad she feels an undefinable fear of the unknown, which she had experienced earlier in life:

She had decided later that it stemmed from a child's sense of the insecurity of her home, and from her father's sudden disappearances from the scene. She had declared it hysteria communicated by her mother.¹¹

Her husband too analyses this peculiar fear as having born out of her mother's "constant moving from one place to another and the absurd enterprises that were bound to fail."¹² The frightening memories of an unstable past return to Meg with a rude shock, once again, when after her husband's death she becomes aware of her actual financial state. Meg Eliot's memories of a life lived mostly in hotels closely follows the pattern of Wilson's own life, and Wilson has acknowledged much of this novel to have been created directly from his own experiences.¹³ The near-parallel circumstances in both lives leave very little room for objectifying the character.

One has similar suspicions regarding Wilson's recent novel No Laughing Matter, and perhaps an even stronger case to believe that Wilson drew heavily upon the facts of his own life and family in writing this novel. He himself has not made any direct mention of this, to my knowledge, but from the facts supplied by him in The Wild Garden and from those available in Hallio's book, one can trace a close parallel in this novel to the general character of Wilson's

¹¹Wilson, The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot, pp. 40-41.

¹²Ibid., p. 51.

¹³Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 29.

boyhood and youth. Rupert and Marcus are both extremely intelligent, creative and inventive and, very much like Rodney or Johnnie, they play their own games, which in their case are not fantasies any longer but cleverly-structured satiric mimicry of their elders, especially their parents. As with Johnnie, the moral judgement or the ethical criteria the boys apply to their parents emerge prominently out of this almost childish game of play-acting. As they play the roles of their parents and grandparents, Wilson uses them to direct implicit as well as explicit criticism at the adults. Eventually, they learn to distinguish between Billy Pop the disreputable, unreliable, irresponsible man and father, and the tragic, unsuccessful but clever and ambitious author. They also try to understand the despair and sorrow that makes a beautiful, intelligent person like their mother, whom they jokingly call the Countess, succumb to a mean and vulgar life. The influence of the parents manifests itself in two ways in the lives of the two brothers. Rupert becomes the successful actor and the man of the world and has a happier family life than any he had known as a boy. He has not only inherited the talents that had been wasted in his parents' but with labour and integrity achieved something which neither of his parents could fulfil in life. Yet even in his career, there are such occasions when he submits to a deceitful act, flatters his aged co-actress by making love to her, all for the sake of success.

Marcus is also successful but he cannot avoid the secret delights of the homosexual life he shares with a Jewish friend. While he too has made a considerable name as an art-critic and art-dealer

he is still at heart, and in practice, the 'pansy-boy'. The poverty and the miseries of his adolescent years had driven him to earn his living through this peculiar prostitution, but he continues to cling to this life even at a time when he has no longer any need for the money. What happens really is that Marcus, like Rodney and Eric, was yearning to be admired and loved, and, disappointed in his family in this respect, he has taken up dressing extravagantly to draw the attention of anybody and everybody. This craving to be admired and loved is at the root of the homosexual habits which gradually become compulsive. Gransden is justified in saying, "The Matthews grow older in each 'take', yet somehow never grow up and the author's awareness of this is part of the irony."¹⁴

With Timothy Middleton in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes the situation is rather different. Although he represents the third generation in the Middleton family, and is its youngest member, he does not appear to be as young as one expects. In fact, in contrast with his father, who gives the impression of an immature and helpless adult, Timothy appears to be a better-poised, independent individual, at first sight. Robin, his father, is not really attentive towards him and Marie-Hélène, his mother, guards him over-cautiously. She carefully plans his holidays and his recreations, takes him along to midnight masses (she is a Roman-Catholic and much of her earnestness about everything is implicitly attributed to her faith) and with equal

¹⁴Gransden, Angus Wilson, p. 28.

care watches for him to fall in love for the first time. Timothy usually hovers rather insignificantly in the background of the main action, and, when he does appear, comes out as a maturer individual than either of his parents. Like the Matthews children he, too, sees through the silliness and pettiness of the older generation but unlike them he is reticent about his opinions. The only time he comes out with any kind of remark is at his mother's party; both he and his girl-friend are thoroughly disgusted by their parents' behaviour:

Timothy was having a very familiar argument with Caroline Jevington. "My mother's quite as embarrassing as yours," he said. "Nonsense," said Caroline, "you just listen to Mummy now."

Mrs Jevington, large and blonde but dead and elegant -- the English version of Marie-Hélène -- was holding forth from another sofa. "Well, I think anyone who's experienced the creative process . . ." Timothy turned to Caroline, "Yes, you're right," he said.¹⁵

In the middle of the party he comes forward to rescue his father's mistress, Elvira Portway, from an embarrassing situation and proves himself more sensible than anyone else in his family.

He belongs to the class of young, middleclass intellectuals, and has a studied disdain for the mediocrity of his executive father, and his stupidly ambitious mother. But it would be a mistake to suppose that Timothy is merely priggish and smug in his criticism of his elders. He too is trying, like Rodney or Marcus or Johnnie to construct his own world of values and ideals. He is seeking for some

¹⁵Wilson, Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, p. 345.

criteria to depend upon because he feels that the ethical standards applied by his parents have failed. Unlike any of the other boys Timothy however has the advantage of growing up in a family where his mother, even if for the wrong reasons, cares for him, and his father also does: his affair with Elvira is never brought into the family life. In his quiet, non-interfering reserve, Timothy is thus very similar to his grandfather: they are keenly perceptive but not often verbally critical.

This tension between the generations -- particularly between parents and children -- has become an issue of increasing importance in Wilson's novels. Halio sees it as almost a leitmotif and we know that it takes on larger proportions in the total distrust and antipathy that builds up between Gerald and John Middleton and between Maurice and the zoo-authorities in The Old Men at the Zoo.

There is a certain unforgiving and relentless quality in this younger generation that also characterises the less-privileged and ~~the~~ under-dogs in Wilson's fiction, trying to eke out whatever they can from the few opportunities they get. And while the children and youth are drawn mainly from his unconscious memories of his own childhood, most of these older men and women are apparently created from conscious memories of his own family or similar people whom he had known. They are the people whom Wilson calls 'the raffish old sports' -- people frequently without definite homes and occupations, people who existed on the brink of poverty but nevertheless clung to their self-respect and their past. Looking back, he could see

himself as a solitary but sensitive child in the midst of these unhappy, pseudo-sophisticated, déclassé adults and as a creative writer he could not have ignored the literary possibilities of such a situation. In his own words:

The day to day social atmosphere in these hotels played a large part in conditioning the mood and setting of my early short stories . . . 16

In these stories, therefore, the two aspects mentioned by Gransden were combined with extraordinary success. This success was partially due to the fact that in postwar England Wilson was indeed a pioneer when he started writing about the shabby-genteel middle-class who had actually evolved as a class only in the inter-war years. As I have mentioned earlier, this subtle but definite revolution in the English social scene did not escape Wilson -- and in his stories, he wished to make it felt and noticed by his readers more clearly. With the appearance of his early short stories the English reading public recognised in him a careful observer of society and identified, in his books, characters and situations they had seen and known. It is this identifiable quality of Wilson's writings, this directness of his approach, that has, however, misrepresented him often as a second-class novelist. Bernard Bergonzi for instance sees this "cultural pre-occupation" in Wilson as guided by "personal predilection or even obsessions. He is a writer of middle brow appeal and

¹⁶Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 15.

true literary seriousness, a fact which enables him to elude confident critical placing."¹⁷

To examine how far such a criticism is true we must first consider the exact nature of Wilson's social criticism or documentation, whatever may be the case, in his fiction.

"Saturnalia", one of his earliest short stories included in The Wrong Set, opens with a party on New Year's Eve, 1931, in a hotel in South Kensington. The locale and the people are all very familiar to Wilson and to many of his readers too:

. . . there was no doubt that the Mendel Court was different to most other hotels in South Kensington -- it was brighter, more easy-going, less fusty, less stuffy. They hadn't so many old tabbies and crocks with one foot in the grave. There was a poker set as well as a bridge set. One half of the residents were divorced or separated. Lots of them did interesting jobs, like being mannequin or film extras, or even helping friends to run night clubs, only showing how splendidly the right class of people could turn to when they had to. If they failed to pay their bills it was not from any ashamed indigence but because they thought they could get away with it.¹⁸ /italics mine/

The last two sentences neatly convey Wilson's evaluation of 'the right class' who share what he calls his mother's 'pluck' and desperately hold on to their past respectability as a means of existence in the present. The irony inherent in such a deception, both of one's self and of others, is again made evident in the attitude of Claire Talfourd-Rich who plays the role of an injured wife and, even so early, anticipates the character of Clara Matthews, the Countess in No Laughing Matter:

¹⁷ Bergonzi, The Situation of the Novel, p. 151.

¹⁸ Wilson, "Saturnalia", The Wrong Set, p. 52.

. . . -- not that she no longer noticed his [her husband's] infidelities, her mind was too intent upon the cultivation of a Knights-bridge exterior with a Kensington purse, but a certain dull ache of self-pity at the lack of her consciousness made her hold to the marriage with sullen tenacity.¹⁹

The sheer emptiness of this aspiration for 'class' among people who had been rendered déclassé by the impact of the First War and the Depression, is what Wilson tries to capture in these characters. However, there is difference of opinion regarding Wilson's standpoint in this issue of social criticism and the déclassé, which I have mentioned earlier and which must be clarified at this point. Wilson himself does not wish to be marked as a 'social satirist' and he has reasons for wishing so. He believes that in depicting this new social class he has not always been able to hold an unprejudiced view. I believe he is not 'ambivalent', as he suggests, but his approach is obviously sympathetic. The satire, when it is there, is in the form of a mild irony that really tends to emphasise the lamentable aspect of such a situation as the one mentioned above. The minor hypocrisies of Claire or Sir Charles are not really unpardonable. One realises the compulsion of the situation that makes the Talfourd-Riches behave the way they do to keep up appearances. Bruce Talfourd-Rich who has lost his own class believes, somewhat like Billy Pop in No Laughing Matter, that he can still exercise his charms and "he prided himself in fitting in with all classes"²⁰ while he danced with the pretty waitress. Stella Hennessey, the manageress of the hotel also is, on the

¹⁹Ibid., p. 53.

²⁰Ibid., p. 54.

other hand, too conscious of the 'class' that she has acquired over the years and will not be ^{easily} flattered by Tom the porter; ~~and~~

. . . Stella had fought too hard to maintain her class position to have it obscured by poetic words. In any case with her sexual flirtation was far too closely bound up with social ambition.²¹

This game of class appears prominently in the party, and while some try to maintain their 'class', others, like the waitress and the porter, aspire for one they will never have. The extreme vulnerability of this déraciné class as it is emerges out of the Depression years is stressed as the servants and the superiors join hands to welcome the year 1932:

Gradually, as drink broke down the barriers of self-consciousness, the classes began to merge. The servility of the staff began to give way to the contempt that they felt for the pretentious raffishness of their superiors. To the residents the easy moral tone of the staff was more surprising, for how were they to know that conditions of work in the hotel could only attract the scum of that great tide of labour which the depression had rolled into London.²²

Wilson's tone here might be mistaken for scorn, on the surface, but it is surely one of regret and pity. Pity for women like Stella who must go through the miseries and humiliations of her profession only "to keep Paul [her son] at Malvern"²³ and pity for Sir Charles, who cannot forget his scholarship and background. To break down class barriers is something they least wish for, but the end of 1931 and

²¹ Ibid., p. 55.

²² Ibid., p. 57

²³ Ibid., p. 58

the beginning of 1932 seem to level all of them into one crazy crowd.

This hotel scene brings to mind Meg Eliot's life in the hotels in The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot. After her husband's accident she is suddenly reduced to the state of a working woman who had once had 'class' but is now on the verge of losing it. Around her we see her friends, in a similar condition, Lady Pirie, Poll and Jill and others like them. We have two contrasting descriptions: of the sort of life Meg Eliot had been accustomed to live while her husband lived, and the life to which she has been reduced in the second part of the book:

Suddenly she realized that she was standing there 'feeling like a successful hostess'. But if she was more self-conscious in this role than at other times it was a matter of amusement rather than for sharp self-censure. It was a part she had always so wished to play. She had hated the muddled, shabby-gentility of the occasional parties her mother had given in the intervals of a plucky inefficient struggle to live. She had always made excuses, had been late at the secretarial college, or had hidden upstairs in her bedroom with a book . . . It was not surprising when at last she was able to assume the role herself, that her sense of it should have been a shade literary, a touch . . . self-conscious.²⁴

The contrast here is not merely between what is to come and the present situation but also between Meg Eliot's own past and the present. She had tried, by a successful marriage, to escape the shabby-genteel poverty of her mother's life and had succeeded to some extent. But the irony of the situation is understood in the light of her future when she must once again succumb to the dreary

²⁴Wilson, The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot, p. 52.

life she had hated so much:

Meg wandered from room to room having dotty conversation with various people. She thought they were all rather ghastly -- most of them seemed to be pub or club pickups of Poll's, or people these pickups had brought along with them -- and when she thought of Poll and the amusing intelligent world she had once lived in she felt rather sad. But most of the time she also thought that the people were rather enchanting as well as ghastly -- at any rate for the purpose of a party -- . . . 25

Or again on the occasions when she meets the associates of Tom Pirie:

She couldn't say that she liked or disliked his 'friends', for she seldom learned more than that they were on the fringe of various occupations -- or more truly, though of course that was not their fault, unemployed. Their jobs ranged in scale of security from publishing and copy-writing, through all the creative acts (writing, painting, dancing, acting) to selling everything second hand.²⁶

Undoubtedly the events in this novel take place at a much later date than the hotel scene in "Saturnalia", but Wilson bridges the gap in years with frequent references to Meg's mother's life which was essentially the rootless existence of the hotel-ladies, and of Poll or Jill. While in the early short stories he had tried to organise, for himself, the chaotic condition of the English social life by holding up the 'nouveau pauvre' of the 30's as a class by themselves, in a later novel like The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot Wilson is trying to show how that class had come to take a permanent place in English life. But what is more significant is that, unlike Meg Eliot, callous and unreasonably critical of her shabby friends as she is represented in the earlier part of the book, Wilson did not always view this life

²⁵ Ibid., p. 253.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 245.

with censorious or unkind eyes, in fact there is a definite touch of pathos in the documentation of these helpless lives.

The new-poor, the shabby-genteel class, continued to dominate the scene in Wilson's fiction until the publication of his second collection of stories, Such Darling Dodos. "Christmas Day in the Workhouse", a story in this collection, closely resembles "Saturnalia" in the setting and the occasion when a festive-scene is chosen to bring about a temporary reconciliation between the classes. Thea, another widow like Meg Eliot, finds a sudden companionship in Stephanie, the girl who seems to have some vestige of the 'right class' that Thea herself misses. She is comforted by the fact that they share common experiences and joys, and in their dreary life at the workhouse this comes to her as a positive happiness:

It was amazing, she reflected, how one person of the right sort could help to make life tolerable. All the vulgarity, the intrigue, the anxiety that surrounded her life at the Bureau seemed to vanish in Stephanie's presence; but that, of course, was because she was so detached, so completely above them. Breeding did make a difference, there was no doubt about it.²⁷

But this happiness does not last long because Stephanie, like the rest of the world, does not seem to care for the impoverished widow and Thea is left with her isolation and bitterness only to succumb to the vulgarity that she hates. This total inability to preserve oneself from vulgarity and meanness when one has been reduced to the new-poor state is another theme for many of Wilson's other stories. In "Rex Imperator" old Mr. Nicholson, Gwen Rutherford

²⁷Wilson, "Christmas Day in the Workhouse", Such Darling Dodos, p. 129.

and Basil, all depend on Rex for their living and amusements, and the disgrace and humiliation of this state of financial dependence have broken down their moral integrity as well. They resort to lies, hypocrisy, cruelty and violence without any scruples whatsoever. The same evaluation applies to Maurice in "What Do Hippos Eat?" as he tries to cheat and exploit Greta who owns the boarding-house he lives in. Memories of a better past embolden him and he tries to dominate the girl of whom he is in fact a dependent. These characters are all, basically, drawn from Wilson's memories of his own father, as he describes him in The Wild Garden:

An inveterate borrower, he was learned in the act of invention. Most of this invention was brilliantly ad hoc In general . . . it included along with all its personal claims . . . a certain claim to social superiority which was more justified by his past than by his present.²⁸

Billy Pop, in No Laughing Matter, comes closest to this description of the destitute, but artful, inventive male figure in Wilson's fiction.

The déclassé social scene had been conveyed in the short stories in a sharp but sketch-like reproduction that was altogether highly suggestive. In No Laughing Matter Wilson took up the subject again and this time worked on a wider canvas using a variety of techniques. This novel has often been classified as a 'Family Saga' and covers six decades of the present century, opening with the years preceding the First World War. Mr and Mrs Matthews, better known as Billy Pop and the Countess, represent the irresponsible, gay, untruthful and immoral side of the shabby-genteel poverty of the English

²⁸Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 14.

middle-class. The father, an unsuccessful author, and the mother, a former actress, continue to live through the trying war years demanding the comforts and luxuries that they had been accustomed to. They have little or no concern for the lives of their six children and in their gay abandon often indulge in sexual promiscuity that shocks and gradually hardens their children at an early age. Nevertheless the children dream their separate dreams and play mocking games about their elder's absurd pretensions. They finally grow out of this despicable atmosphere of their home and earn names for themselves in a wealthier and happier world. They try to rescue their parents from the vulgarity of their past life by financial help and even succeed in putting them into a respectable old people's home. But here again there is a moral issue involved in the situation: the poverty and despairing rootlessness of the past years have so weakened and demoralised Mr and Mrs Matthews that they are not really able to return to a stronger, better life, devoid of pretensions, hypocrisies and theatricality in general.

I consider the scene of their death to be one of the best executed ironies in the whole range of Wilson's writings. The essential frivolity of their lives is worked out until the end and this is presented in a dramatic form effectively titled: "French Windows: An Interrupted Play" and the final scene subtitled "Pop and Motor: A Catastrophe". There is a highly ingenious setting and Billy Pop is described "swathed like a mummy in his wheel chair," while

"around him prowls Motor like an old caged, mangy tiger."²⁹ They go on with their lighthearted pompous talk, not really communicating with each other, but indulging in a delightful verbosity, until the site is bombed and the curtain comes down.

As I mentioned earlier, in this novel Wilson has, with renewed vigour, taken up the theme of social documentation after a gap of many years. In the intervening years the 'raffish old sports' kept reappearing in his works, but since Wilson's chief preoccupation in Hemlock and After or Anglo-Saxon Attitudes had been very different, social satire had been pushed to the background of these novels. Another reason was that the central figures in both the novels belong to the well-established upper middle-class, and the lower middle-class or the poor are always seen as the minor characters in these novels. Thus in Hemlock and After, Eric, Ron and Bill Pendlebury come into focus only to the extent that they demonstrate the absolute demoralisation of an entire class of people. Of these Eric and Ron are the worst victims because they exploit their physical attractiveness as a bait for the homosexual novelist Bernard Sands. Terence Lambert also falls into the same category. While Bill and Mrs Craddock are not guilty of sexual aberrations directly, they are still easy preys to the temptations of money and comfort. Thus there is a two-fold criticism of the society where one class of people like Bernard Sands and Hubert Rose is immoral by choice and there is another, like Ron, Eric and others who are forced into evil by circumstances

²⁹Wilson, No Laughing Matter, p. 428.

and society.

In Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, Mrs Salad and her grandson Vin live on the fringes of the life of Gerald Middleton and it is only inevitable that they should exploit the rich around them and take advantage of them. The same applies to the vicious attitude of Mrs Gresset who tries to guard the truth about ^{the} Melpham excavations from Gerald Middleton.

It is this general atmosphere of tension between the generations and a sense of hostility existing between the old and the young, the rich and the poor, that makes Frank Kermodé wrongly consider all Wilson's young people as "nasty and dreary petty criminals, homosexual prostitutes, espresso layabouts and the betrayed."³⁰ This is not so, and with the exception of Larry Rourke in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, none of these young people is really evil. But Kermodé is right in saying that it is out of this war between the old and the young that Wilson creates his "nightmare images of family life"³¹ and the decadent society of the inter-war years. The poverty, the squalor, the meanness and the selfish fears and above all the weakened moral structure of the middle-class that tries to put up a shaky defence or else submit itself to the inevitable is a real world; it is the world of Wilson's own childhood.

³⁰ Kermodé, Puzzles and Epiphanies, p. 193.

³¹ Ibid., p. 194.

III

BREAKDOWN AND AFTER

While the broad background of Wilson's fiction is strongly coloured by what he calls his 'unconscious memories' of his family and childhood, thematically many of his stories and novels derive from conscious memories of more recent experiences in his adult life. This concerns particularly his nervous breakdown during 1944-1945 and his use of this experience as an important event in the lives of several of his characters. As a highly conscious artist Wilson is always aware of a tendency in his writing to render objectively significant subjective experiences. And as a critic with a strong psychoanalytical bias, he has in The Wild Garden sought to compare this phenomenon with the autobiographical elements in the novels of Dickens and Zola. Of the two, he has a deeper admiration for Dickens; in a conversation with Frank Kermode, he said, referring to the presence of autobiographical material in his own works, that his writing consists of "a great lump of Dickensianism."¹

Elsewhere he mentions Dickens's experiences in the blacking factory as one of the most traumatic in his life and goes on to show how Dickens overcame this trauma, as well as his deep resentment against the aristocracy, by reliving his early experiences over and over again

¹Frank Kermode in Partisan Review, 30 (Spring, 1963), p. 77.

in the process of writing.² The traumatic experience in Wilson's life, which he undoubtedly seeks to overcome in similar manner, was of a different nature: in the first place his breakdown was no childhood or adolescent experience and then it was not inflicted on him by outward forces, but was born of circumstances within his own life, circumstances which he himself had created to a great extent. I have dealt with this period of nervous crisis in Wilson's life, in some detail in the opening chapter.

In the early short stories, whose chief aim was social critical criticism, there is little use of any other theme as such, but some of the characters do undergo nervous breakdowns similar to Wilson's own and also to those described in the subsequent novels. It is important to remember that in all these cases a significant moral problem is at the root. Through years of self-deception and deception of others by setting up a protective and false facade of innocence and/or ignorance, the individual makes himself peculiarly vulnerable so that when sudden external forces break his defensive barriers, leaving him exposed both to himself and to the world, the person inevitably goes through a state of nervous shock. This is roughly the process that Wilson has described, rather sketchily in the short stories, and more elaborately in the novels.

In order to maintain a chronological order and also to indicate the gradual development of the theme I shall first briefly consider

²Wilson, "The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens", Review of English Literature, II, (July, 1961), pp. 7-18.

the early short stories and then the novels in greater detail.

Wilson's first short story "Raspberry Jam" reflected the dilemma of the Misses Swindale who tried to meet their village-community with sincere kindness and liberal ideas only to receive harsh criticism that gradually led them to their breakdown in the final scene. But these are only the apparent circumstances in the story; over and above what the village does to them, the two old ladies are themselves blameworthy. The older sister deliberately lives in a past dominated by the figure of her father, ignoring the present or simply disclaiming it. Such an unnatural attitude is liable to be judged cruelly, particularly in the gossipy atmosphere of the village. Her younger sister is even more vulnerable because beneath all her aesthetic refinement she is a discontented spinster, who tries to deceive herself and every one else by her clever talk and what she believes to be her physical charm. At one point, both of them realise how futile their self-deceptions have been -- the older sister's false pretensions about her father's high ideals and the younger sister's fruitless amorous adventures -- and with this realisation their only source of self-reliance is lost. In the final scene, their total breakdown and the violence and cruelty they indulge in, seem to be the retributive reaction against their entire past.

In "Fresh Air Friend" Elspeth Eccles and Miranda Scarle are both victims of self-deception and false attitude. Miranda Searle seeks refuge from unwanted sympathy in her bereavement by making herself known as a dipsomaniac and a whimsical person. But her grief

has not really affected her in such a way and inwardly she has remained the same sharp intelligent individual whom people admired. Elspeth, her husband's student, however, does not realise the actual situation, and because she believes herself to be a liberal-humanist, tries to improve the situation in the Searle home by severely criticising Miranda. Miranda loses complete control over herself and goes into hysterics in a scene very similar to the climax in "Raspberry Jam". Elspeth's realisation comes implicitly at the end of the story when she finds out that instead of being an indispensable friend she has caused more harm than good, and that Professor Searle's nervous breakdown was actually a result of her misplaced enthusiasm to set things right.

"A Visit in Bad Taste" is a continuation of this theme: the affected liberalism of the semi-educated middle-class that is bound to fail even in the first test. The sister's false sophisticated ideas and her vanity prevent her from accepting a brother with an inglorious past and this is what makes the situation sordid.

With the title story in the second volume, Such Darling Dodos, Wilson has moved away considerably from the raffish world of the nouveau-pauvre into the lives of a university don and his wife. Priscilla and Robin stand for defunct liberal ideals that do not impress their modern left-wing students and though they do not realise it, they gradually cease to impress anyone but themselves. This unawareness in the characters might simply mean that it was an integral part of their self-deceptive armour. Or, it might also mean that Wilson had found

it difficult to explicate, within the scope of the short story, the intricacies evolving from their self-realisation and has therefore avoided further development of the situation. Moreover, both Priscilla and Robin, compared to Bernard Sands or Ella, seem to be inadequate as characters for the exploration of the dramatic theme of self-realisation and self-knowledge.

This inadequacy does not, however, suggest that Wilson was incapable of producing a better persona. His initial aim in the early stories was to document the new post-war social revolution in England and he was more concerned with sorting out the peculiar problems that were a part of this new social stratum. As such his stories came out vivid and brilliant as social documentaries but although they are usually stories about hypocrisy, deception, defeated optimism and moral irresponsibility, they lack adequate psychological motivation. This might be because of the restrictive scope of the stories; nevertheless, it is surprising considering Wilson's knowledge and interest in Freud and his usual psychoanalytical approach. But the short stories were not meant to be psychological in the same way as his later writings, particularly the novels, were. Although there is frequent suggestive reference to motivation and abnormalities as in "Raspberry Jam" or "Fresh Air Fiend" there is hardly any carefully planned 'psychological' plot. I disagree with John Mander who classified the stories into three distinct groups -- the 'psychological', the 'social' and the 'social-psychological' -- and finds the first group of stories mostly inadequate ("the analyst's casebook") and concludes that as

Wilson's main intention is an analysis of society he has only weakened the stories by confusing the two issues.³ Primarily I think such a classification of the stories is in itself a mistaken approach to Wilson's technique, which is certainly not a confusion of two issues but a combination of them that results in the kind of 'Englishness' pointed out by Gransden. As Rabinovitz mentions, there is no such social-psychological tension simply because Wilson did not try to incorporate Freudian analysis in fiction, at least not at such an early stage. The stories in the first two volumes are the works of a social and moral satirist making "an attack on the false standards of the new poor."⁴ When undertones of psychoanalysis are found at all, these apply not to the raffish crowd but the sophisticated and introvert people like Miranda Searle, the Swindale sisters, Priscilla and Robin -- types that Wilson looks more closely at in his later fiction.

With his first novel, Hemlock and After, Wilson has come a long way from his déclassé boarding-house characters, waitresses and social misfits, through the world of university students and dons, to enter the sophisticated world of the elite.

As I have noted earlier, from this point in Wilson's fiction, the Mrs Salads, Mrs Wrigleys, the hotel-porters and pianists recede into the background, existing at the edges of the lives of the successful brilliant folk who now come into lime-light. Along with this shift

³John Mander, The Writer and Commitment, pp. 126-127.

⁴Rubin Rabinovitz, The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, p. 93.

there is an equally noticeable change in Wilson's protagonists, who are, without exception, all middle-aged men and women. As Edelstein so aptly puts it, "they are all late calls, these novels."⁵ Moreover, they are all people who have successfully established themselves in society, and this is one of the reasons for the greater effect of their subsequent failure and breakdown.

Bernard Sands is Wilson's first fully drawn character and there has been much controversy about Wilson's success in this initial attempt. Frederick Karl in his essay, "A Question of Morality: Angus Wilson", says:

. . . Wilson tried to convey the inner experiences of an ageing novelist whose work had been acclaimed . . . but probes none of [the] momentous changes in Sands, and the ageing novelist, despite the long comments about him by the author and other characters, remains shadowy and unexplained.⁶

What Wilson lacks, in Karl's opinion, is the insight into inner human motives necessary for him to analyse from within. Ian Scott-Kilvert sees Bernard Sands simply as the embodiment of Wilson's own distaste for, and realisation of the unfitness of, the liberal intellectual who cannot make his ideals effective and who has lapsed into 'moral inertia'.⁷ Still more vehement comments come from A. O. J. Cockshut who considers

⁵ Author Edelstein, "Angus Wilson: The Territory Behind", in Contemporary British Novelists, p. 144.

⁶ Frederick R. Karl, A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel, p. 245.

⁷ Ian Scott-Kilvert, "Angus Wilson", in Review of English Literature, I (April, 1960), p. 47.

both Bernard Sands and Gerald Middleton (the protagonist of Anglo-Saxon Attitudes) as Wilson's favoured sons who stride through the stories with the accompaniment of their author's obvious admiration. Cockshut's main argument is that Wilson has deliberately constructed both novels so that his otherwise blameworthy heroes escape the severe moral scrutiny that most of his other characters must go through. In short, Wilson has failed to achieve the objectivity that is required of any successful artist. Cockshut also concludes, from the vindication of Sands in spite of his weakness and failing, that Wilson is trying to glorify a cause, namely humanism, that is definitely dying.⁸

Undoubtedly, humanism and its related problems are important issues for this and other novels of Wilson -- but it would be a serious mistake to consider all the principal characters as symbolisation of humanism and its fate.

To be exact, Hemlock and After is the story of two breakdowns, the first victim being Sands' wife, Ella. She has already experienced a nervous breakdown when the novel begins and is seen fighting against the strange fears that constantly threaten her sanity. Bernard's crisis comes much later in the novel and, his fears being more explicit, Wilson is able to describe and analyse the gradual stages of his anguish in greater detail. Ella's crisis, in medical terms, is over but she is still a lonely person unable to share her strange visions -- which are again the products of a rather sophisticated perversely imaginative

⁸ A. O. J. Cockshut, "Favoured Sons; The Moral World of Angus Wilson", Essays in Criticism, IX, 1959, pp. 50-51.

mind --- with anyone.

The cause of her neurosis is never clearly explained but she is frequently haunted by bleak and desolate scenes of ice, waste and water - a kind of waste-land effect that leaves her with a strange inability to communicate with the world around her. At her daughter-in-law's party she suddenly drifts into one of these strange visions while speaking to another woman and tries vainly to carry on the conversation. But this compulsive symbolic foreboding of evil has a firmer grip on her and all she can muster are vague, fascinating phrases like: "very, very deep waters" and "arches . . . like the vaults of the cave,"⁹ She can hardly control her bizarre fancies and her words gush, encouraged by Mrs Rankine's sympathetic audience:

What about the noise of the water washing against the sides of the caves? . . . Did you drop a stone into the water. The ripples must stretch endlessly.¹⁰

The words, one notices, are not entirely incoherent and often echo similar passages in Virginia Woolf -- a similarity Wilson was well aware of and had noted in the book itself.¹¹ But more interesting is the fact that the same words which would have signified a world of true, deep sensibility in a novel by Virginia Woolf, here express the disintegrated vision of a neurotic woman. In the world Wilson is depicting, where Sonia Sands directs life with a 'neo-Victorian discipline' --

⁹Wilson, Hemlock and After, p. 30.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 30.

¹¹Mrs Rankine to whom Ella speaks, "was a great reader of Virginia Woolf, and she saw the conversation as an important interchange by two women on a significant level." Ibid., p. 30.

this is a failure in communication and Mrs Rankine finds "her interesting feminine contact a failure."¹²

Ella's problems in communication and her sense of isolation bear obvious resemblance to those in Wilson's life: "In all quarters, with the community, in love . . . I found an impossibility of communication."¹³ But for Ella her horrors never relate to any despairing fear that she might never regain her sanity. In fact her constant effects are to remain as normal as she can and not even for a moment does she doubt her basic sanity. Wilson's intended message is that a person who would rather believe in herself and her sanity than succumb to despair still has the chance to recover. Therefore, in her better days she is seen working or gardening, trying to return to the normal routine of life.

In Wilson's view gardening is an important symbol in his novels, of refuge, of an engagement that by its very nature allows for the release of tensions caused by every-day life. He looks upon it as an occupational therapy for a nervous mind, like any other constructive work. Tirelessly Ella strives to regain normality and her mind is always engaged in organising into meaningful patterns her otherwise disintegrated world. This is something Bernard is unable to do: face to face with parallel problems in his life he cannot make an effort like Ella to sort things out. Both of them discover that the right

¹²Ibid., p. 31.

¹³Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 21.

moral order in their respective worlds is out of balance but while Bernard only sinks into deeper despair, Ella gropes her way through her nightmarish visions. She keeps thinking that:

. . . the dangers were not really for her but for all around her . . . She sometimes thought that it was her selfishness that had made her cloak her evil in these concrete forms of rock and ice.¹⁴ *[italics mine]*

Ella's fight is against the evil, whereas the rest of the people around her choose not to notice its threats. It is here that the important question of moral responsibility comes in. In "Fresh Air Fiend", we should recall Miranda Searle feels that the gardener is in "a god-like position of judgement, deciding upon what should live and what should be cast into outer darkness, delivering moral judgement and analogies."¹⁵ And we compare this with the conversation between Ella and Bernard where she says she feels committed even to the sick clematis, not because it is worth saving but because it is meant to live. But she judges the weeds differently which in her world stop the right things from growing. Bernard is not so sure whether to preserve life by making an honest effort or to push it on its way to the rubbish heap now that he has seen disasters in life that make him afraid of living. Ella's choice, on the other hand, is a moral one: she excludes something entirely and commits herself to one purpose.

Cockshut has argued ~~in his essay~~ that Ella is restored to life by the saving goodness in Bernard's character which has a prevailing

¹⁴Wilson, Hemlock and After, p. 50.

¹⁵Wilson, "Fresh Air Fiend", The Wrong Set, p. 3.

influence upon the rest even after his death. He feels that it was Wilson's aim to uphold Bernard as the Socratic figure, the beneficial effect of whose personality remains even when he is gone. But Ella's recovery and her self-assertion for the right moral cause is not a gift from Bernard's spirit, as Cockshut tries to impute. Ella had always made the effort to take the right decisions and her husband's breakdown had given her the opportunity to assume a responsibility, to be concerned about someone, so that she gradually feels confident enough to take the necessary action against Mrs Curry. On the other hand Bernard cannot, as his friend Charles Murley points out to him, on some occasions exercise his authority. His assumed role as an anarchic humanist makes it difficult for him to take up moral issues.

The central pattern for the breakdown of Wilson's protagonists involves the shattering of what he calls the 'cosy warmth' of an individual's personal prejudices leaving him to encounter actual realities. In Bernard's case the 'cosy warmth' is his respectable career as a novelist and his utopian ideas about a Writer's Home. At the beginning of the novel he is busy with this project and has little concern about his wife's mental state or his family relationships. There is a certain smugness about his situation, comparable to those of Meg Eliot and Gerald Middleton, that asks for retribution. In addition, he has developed homosexual relations, information that comes to the reader early in the novel when Elizabeth (Bernard's daughter) accuses him of this. Although the situation comes to him as a great shock Bernard tries to defend his innocence by telling Elizabeth:

Harm to others is after all implicit in most decisions we

take. and has to be weighed up when taking them. In this case, I thought that apart from prejudice, and that I'd already decided not to consider, the dangers to my family were not as great as the importance of my new life to me. A selfish but to me a necessary decision.¹⁶ [*italics mine*]

For him his explanation might conform to his liberal views, but he fails to see that in relation to his daughter, it can only be a theoretical one at best. Thus instead of turning out to be an encounter resulting in understanding after all those years of 'failed contact and resentment' the meeting fails because Bernard's myopic view of humanism does not allow him to see the situation in personal context.

The same attitude in his relationship with Terence and Eric, his homosexual friends, results in disaster and this for him is even harder to bear than misunderstandings in his own family. Nevertheless, his role as a benefactor and his tone of superior moralising is resented by both his friends and after this rejection by his family and his homosexual partners, Bernard is faced with the third and major shock in his life. If he is not really a hypocrite Bernard is guilty of self-deception and he realises this on an evening at Leicester Square when he experiences a peculiar sadistic thrill watching the police hound another homosexual. His horror and bitterness at this realisation stun him for a while.

. . . it was neither compassion nor fear that had frozen Bernard. He could only remember the intense, the violent excitement that he had felt . . . the tension with which he had watched for the disintegration of a once confident human being. He had been ready to join the hounds in the kill then.¹⁷

¹⁶Wilson, Hemlock and After, p. 58.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 107.

In a much later part of the novel, after the Vardon Hall episode, when Bernard like Ella is left 'communing' with himself, he tries again to analyse his real attitude towards Eric and Terence. Just as he had tried to build up a false comradeship with his children, wishing to be helpful but never affectionate, so also with his 'lovers' his candour was really another name for his secret sadism. He can recall his secret delight in exposing Eric's ignorance and Terence's vulgarity -- and their embarrassed faces merge in his guilt-laden vision with the face of the man in Leicester Square.

Bernard Sands' hell is a more frightening place than Ella's waste land: Ella does not always realise the nature of her own predicament, but for a man like Bernard self-recognition comes rather late but with such a sudden clarity that it leaves no room for doubts. If he had been a person less aware of the complexities of the human mind, if his convictions had been less sincere and if he had not been the creative artist he was, his perception of the truth might have been less destructive in his life. But he has always claimed to have been all these and more, and had also been extremely analytical about everyone around him. Yet he has avoided a self-scrutiny, until the end, perhaps because he has been aware of his own vulnerability. Ella, a contrast to him in so many ways, proves a greater fighter in this respect; she has never surrendered her will to the forces of life and, unlike Bernard, she has been exploring ceaselessly within herself.

However, the encounter with Elizabeth, Terence's refusal to live with him and the incident at Leicester Square have a cumulative

effect in Bernard's life as so many failures, and his sense of guilt become so pervasive that finally at the opening of Vardon Hall he can speak only about the failure of humanism. His audience is perplexed by his statements about secret motivations behind a benevolent attitude, his references to hypocrisy, cruelty, deception and ethics. Bernard's sense of guilt is so enormous that he cannot really go through a more inward and personal self-examination. His attempts at self-analysis, just before the Vardon Hall scene, have left him with an atrophied will. He has resigned himself to the belief that he must now expect retribution for his conduct for being a coward, a hypocrite and a sadist. In his insecurity Bernard resigns himself to despondency, and although he knows theoretically "a little positive affirmation, a few decisive actions"¹⁸ would rescue him, he exerts himself only in one thing: self-torture. Wilson adds violence to the already sordid situation by making Bernard watch a weasel suck the brains out of a quivering rabbit only to see in this his own emotional tumult.

Cockshut's argument that Wilson creates a new kind of martyrdom is not wholly justified. Bernard is not the phoenix figure that Cockshut makes him out to be. Wilson sees him, after Bernard's encounter with Hubert Rose, as a man exhausted of his will power, "a sick old wreck" rather than a resurrected and revitalized person.¹⁹ As in "Raspberry Jam" this breaking down of preserved innocence, this sort of exposure of a person who was not really 'evil', is a situation

¹⁸Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 218.

that asks for sympathy rather than admiration of a heroic-tragic figure.

C. B. Cox in his essay "Angus Wilson: Studies in Depression" considers the author's final attitude to be ambiguous in Hemlock and After. Referring to Ella's last words:

. . . doing doesn't last, even if one knows what one's doing, which one usually doesn't. But Bernard was something to people . . . me, for example -- and that has its effect in life.²⁰

Cox thinks that if Ella's view, an emotional one, is taken for Wilson's, then Bernard was wrong to suspect his own motives. But then the intellectual progression of the novel is towards Bernard's self-realisation. Cox's view is that in this first novel, a brilliant and experimental one, Wilson is trying to clarify his own conception of humanism.

Bernard's final effort to redeem himself is his meeting with Hubert Rose, and there, for once, Bernard is not moralising for its own sake as he had done with Eric or Terence or Elizabeth. For the first time perhaps, Bernard is genuinely concerned about a person's welfare. Commenting on Hubert's statement that "if he [Bernard] was to claim Eric from the net, he must release the other rabbit first," Cockshut argues that the "net here is the possessiveness of Eric's mother, and the other rabbit is Elsie Black, herself."²¹ But Bernard is not making any discrimination about the two similar situations -- in fact he has already written the letter to Eric, setting him free from his influence, before he visits Hubert Rose.

In the light of Bernard's character Wilson's own verdict on

²⁰Ibid., p. 246.

²¹Cockshut, "Angus Wilson", p. 57.

the novel seems to me a very valid one, that in writing this novel he had realised:

At the depths of this chasm between the liberal intention in personal relationship and its actual failure . . . the existence side by side of constant intellectual self-inquiry and emotional blindness.²²

With the hero of Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, Gerald Middleton, Wilson begins with a personality who bears a striking resemblance to Bernard Sands; in fact the continuity of spirit and tone is so marked it can hardly be missed. It is rather surprising that Arthur Edelstein who detects the same note of waste and depression in the protagonists of Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot, and Late Call, should fail to notice the same in Wilson's first novel.²³

The theme begun with the first novel could not receive a full treatment in Bernard Sands' character and so in the second novel Wilson feels he had tried to "prepare the crisis more fully to show it as the result of a life pattern."²⁴

The novel opens with a rather startling statement about the hero, "Gerald Middleton was a man of mildly but persistently depressing temperament."²⁵ The chapters that follow tell us more and more about his depression. In spite of his public success and his position as Professor Emeritus of medieval history, Gerald has much in common with the private

²²Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 43.

²³Arthur Edelstein in "Angus Wilson: The Territory Behind", Contemporary British Novelists.

²⁴Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 32.

²⁵Wilson, Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, p. 3.

failures of Bernard Sands; like him he has failed as a husband, lover and father and like Bernard in the first part of the novel, Gerald also tries to cope with his defeats by evasion. But because Anglo-Saxon Attitudes is the work of a novelist who has improved upon his techniques and has overcome the limitations of his first novel, the predicaments Gerald faces seem more real than those Bernard faced. (Anglo-Saxon Attitudes appeared in 1956, a year after Wilson's resignation from the British Museum. Wilson feels that the superiority of this novel is largely due to the fact that having given up his full-time job he was able to pay greater attention to the writing of the novel.²⁶) For one thing, Gerald is placed in the midst of a large crowd, ranging from lavatory-attendants to ex-suffragate ladies and university professors and stretching back in history to the mysterious seventh-century bishop, Eorpwald. The span in time as well as the variegated nature of characters crowded into it, gives the novel a great vitality. The strength of the novel lies in the fact that most of these diverse characters are vitally linked with the hero's problem. As a result the problem achieves a kind of concrete dramatic quality that is more than, say, the abstract, psychological-spiritual unease of Bernard Sands. To resolve Middleton's dilemma, Wilson makes a fine use of the pastiche technique. He introduces something of the detective novel into Book II and sends the hero out to piece together the mystery surrounding Melpham and in the process brings together all the significant and insignificant characters.

²⁶Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 32.

Middleton's depressions lead him into a persistent mood of withdrawal and evasion. The first few pages of the novel give us significant insight into his personality without revealing the root cause of his suffering. (This, as I will point out shortly, is revealed only at a later stage in the novel --- a technique by which Wilson is able to maintain the suspense.) Middleton, we learn, is separated from his Scandinavian wife, Ingeborg, and her invitation to the family Christmas gathering meets with deep resentment from him, because he is reluctant to meet the family, with whom he has no affectionate bonds. His children, like Bernard's, have lost all contacts with him and his mild attempts to reach for them are stopped midway by their cold, hard attitude. Apparently this has not concerned him so deeply in the earlier years, as it does now, when in his late middle-age his sense of loss is so great that he only wishes to evade these issues.

That the unfortunate relationship with his family is not the main problem in Gerald's life becomes clear very early in the novel. During the course of a single morning several people, historians, scholars and writers approach Middleton for information on the Melpham excavations, about which he is the only person to have any first-hand experience. The excavations which had taken place some forty years prior to this date, had revealed the presence of a pagan fertility symbol in the tomb of Bishop Eorpwald. This discovery, for which the late Lionel Stokesay, Gerald's teacher, was primarily responsible, had significantly altered the study of early medieval church history. To the reader's amazement Gerald refuses to answer the questions and his reaction mounts from

direct dismissal, to irritation, anger and disgust. There is no doubt that his past is his sore spot:

. . . Dollie and Melpham! The two forbidden subjects of his thoughts, the constant underlying preoccupation of his depression.²⁷

Middleton's relationship with Dollie becomes clearer because in the same page, he remembers her as the "only really happy passion of his life," whom he had lost through his own ineptitude and cowardice. But in Middleton's memory, Dollie is also inevitably associated with her husband, his friend Gilbert, who died in the war, a person Middleton would rather forget.

Evasive about personal issues, Middleton at sixty-four wishes to retire totally from academic activities, for which he has no regard. If the historian's profession means a quest for the truth, "who was he to dabble in truth-telling when he had evaded the truth, past and present, for most of his life?"²⁸

The mysterious shadow of guilt surrounding Middleton is gradually disclosed to the reader at the family gathering. The larger part of Book I constitutes this gradual development of Middleton's personality from a broken-down, guilt-ridden and despondent man, to a person who learns to accept the challenge of life, to act honestly even if it hurts others. With the use of flash-back and word-echoes Wilson succeeds in moving Gerald's mind, and the reader's attention, back and forth between the past and the present, relating the semi-conscious and the deliberately forgotten incidents of his life to make a coherent

²⁷Wilson, Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, p. 7.

²⁸Ibid., p. 9.

pattern.

At the family gathering, Middleton realises once more he is an alien in this world of his wife and children -- they have no love for him and he has little interest in their lives.

. . . the failure of his family life added to his preoccupation with his professional death and closed him around in a dense fog of self-disgust. It seemed to him that his whole life had grown pale and futile because it was rooted in evasion.²⁹

Unlike Bernard, Gerald is not prepared to give up the spiritual battle as he had given up his family and career. His is a more complex situation and as Halio comments, "many intertwining strands of the 'tor-tured web' of his depression and despair must be unravelled and then tested each separately, before he is completely free."³⁰

Gerald's self-analysis however goes on in a reverie, and in this state he debates with himself, searches through the past, identifies his mistakes, sinks into self-pity and then finally rises up a restored man. He goes back in memory to his meeting with Professor Stokesay in 1938, when he had resented the historian's political activities. He had vainly tried to dissuade him and the meeting had resulted in his loss of faith in a man and a profession for which he had the highest regard. This in turn leads to memories of his relation with Dollie and her refusal to marry him after Gilbert's death. Middleton had then married Ingeborg, the attractive and exotic girl in whom he thought he would find the comfort and peace he was seeking. But his

²⁹Ibid., p. 108.

³⁰Jay L. Halio, Angus Wilson, p. 42.

marriage had proved to be the greatest disaster, mainly because of Ingeborg's inordinate sentimentality, which had become distasteful to him, and also because he had met Dollie again. He had not been prepared to give up his family for Dollie and therefore had to lead a kind of double life between them. But Dollie had soon become exasperated with playing the part of a family friend because it hurt her self-respect and when she had finally broken her relationship with Middleton, it had proved to be an end to all his chances of happiness. Because, on going back to his family, he had found that in the interim his wife had taken over the family and monopolised the love of their children, who sympathised and identified with her eccentricities more readily than they tried to understand his sensibility. Middleton remembers how his wife had caused a burn and permanent damage to their daughter's hand and how he had failed to exert himself, laden as he was with his own guilt and self-pity, to probe into the matter, thus neglecting his duties as a father. He was afraid of hurting either Inge or his daughter Kay by referring to the incident and had chosen not to interfere. On the other side he had deluded himself into believing that his love for Dollie was subsidiary to his duties to the family and yet, unable to live with this deception, he could not act responsibly in relation to his family. Self-deception, in this case again as in the other novels, calls for retribution, the result being his increasing depression and total lack of interest in life. But this state of self-pity does not endure long, particularly after the Christmas gathering.

Halio analyses the situation very well by pointing out that

the guilt that motivates his actions, his deceptions, "is a function of the same mental attribute that in other ways is unusually perceptive."³¹

The fraud in his own life, which he has protected so far from exposition, to himself, because he has feared the anguish it would cause him, gives him an insight into the historical fraud, the knowledge of which he has mutely carried until this point in the novel. He argues with himself about what the revelation of truth or untruth -- for the two words have become almost interchangeable in his world -- would mean in the context of history. His lack of confidence is evident because he cannot rely on his past convictions that Gilbert Stokesay had told him the truth. Relapsing into his memories he sees the drunk, hysterical, cynical Gilbert Stokesay revealing to him that he had deliberately put the pagan idol into the bishop's tomb as a kind of "mammoth practical joke" on his father.³² For a while Gerald had been convinced but then he had heard Gilbert's tirades against his father too often and his change of attitude later when he was sober, prevented Gerald from taking it as anything but a brilliant fabrication. But at this point in the story, Gerald is prepared to believe that even Stokesay might have shut his eyes against this deception; his overwhelming love for his son, particularly after Gilbert's death in the war, makes him all the more suspect in Gerald's eyes.

Waking up from his reverie Middleton is left with the reality (if not the 'truth') of things in life, Inge's comment at the end of

³¹Ibid., p. 44.

³²Wilson, Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, p. 165.

Book I is not only sarcastic in tone but is also ironic as a kind of double entendre, . . . "We have been talking about truth. But you are the one who can tell us . . . You know all about the truth, don't you, Gerald."

Gerald's knowledge of the truth is not, however, related to his recognition of the truth or at least this had not been so till the last section of Book I. Because Gerald, like Bernard, has been painfully aware of the actual situation in his life, and like Bernard, he too has shirked his moral responsibility. But unlike Sands, Gerald, the author indicates, had gone through "a life riddled with scrupulosity and weighed decisions."³³ Or in other words, like Ella Gerald had tried to sort out the right and the wrong in his world but instead of taking a firm decision to act towards the truth he had decided to evade the issue. His neurosis does not manifest itself so obviously as Ella's, but he goes through a state of persistent depression because he cannot live at peace with his own deceptions. In his professional life, he had waited too long, out of rational (Gilbert was drunk and could not be trusted), sentimental (because he cared for Stokesay's and Dollie's reputation) and practical (the lack of sufficient evidence) considerations before he exercised his proper authority. In personal life, his insincerity in love and his lack of concern about his family are born of similar indecision. He hesitates to do what seems to be right to him only because he is not prepared to face the consequences of any decisive action.

³³Ibid., p. 164.

His recherche through his own crisis proves to him that he can survive the anguish that he had all along feared and this process of self-deception, self-revelation and self-pity does not end in his case by surrendering to a mental and physical death like Bernard. Middleton's vision, as he comes out of his reverie, is strongly optimistic and he is once more prepared to take up the life of action that he has long forsaken.

Book II describes the exact nature of his activities, his investigations about the Melpham excavations until he is convinced that Stokesay and his associate Reginald Portway had known about the fraud but did not have the courage to make it known publicly. This comes as a shock to Gerald and his respect for his late teacher is vastly reduced. In his personal life he receives another blow when Dollie refuses to renew their friendship -- but Gerald survives these succeeding shocks by learning to accept them as a part of life. The last few pages of the novel, however, do not leave the strong impression that the end of Book I carries. Book I began with the self-recriminations of "a family man who had neither the courage to walk out of the marriage he hated nor the resolution to sustain the role of father decently. An ex-professor . . . who has not fulfilled the scholarly promise of studies, whose general value he now doubted A sixty-year old failure, in fact and of that the most boring kind, a failure with a conscience."³⁴

And it ends with this affirmative note in his own voice:

³⁴Ibid., p. 5.

So that, he thought, was the whole of it. Suspicions engendered by the words of a drunkard and the actions of a hysterical woman. He had never dared to confront Gilbert with his words again nor face Inge with his suspicions about Kay's hand. And from these slender foundations it seemed he had woven a great web of depression and despair to convince himself that his chosen study of history was a lie and the family life he had made a deception. Even if these suspicions had proved true -- and he had carefully let them lie in the hinterland of his mind until it was too late to test them -- what then? An odd freak of Anglo-Saxon history was faked. What did that matter to the general study of the subject? An hysterical, unhappy woman had been guilty of an act of cruelty to a small child. It had not made the adoration of the girl and young woman for her mother any less. It seemed to him suddenly as though he had come out of a dark narrow tunnel, where movement was cramped to a feeble crawl, into the broad daylight where he could once more walk or run if he chose.³⁵

The comparative success of Book I proves partially that Wilson is still not as skillful with the large form of the novels; had it been a short story with loose ends to be tied in Book II it would have been more successful stylistically.

Of the three protagonists who objectify the nervous crisis in Wilson's own life, Bernard does not survive the overwhelming shock of encountering reality, while Gerald Middleton's realisation comes to him over long years of suffering, which ends the day he is prepared to accept life at its own terms. But Meg Eliot in The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot faces the revival of an earlier trauma simultaneously with the horror of facing life alone as a widow, and yet, says Wilson, "by her honesty and toughness [she is] able to resume life in the world on a level of self-knowledge."³⁶

The earlier trauma in Meg Eliot's life involves an insecurity

³⁵ Ibid., pp.183-184.

³⁶ Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 35.

in the shabby-genteel existence of her mother, constantly threatened and upset by unexpected accidents. Apart from her natural disgust for her mother's 'plucky' but futile ventures in life, she has also developed an inexplicable horror of looking forward to anything in life. The expectations of her early life have almost invariably dwindled into nothing, leaving her with this fear, and in spite of the material security of her married life, she cannot overcome this nervousness.

Her life as Mrs William Eliot has been smooth and unruffled; her husband's career as a barrister has given her pride and satisfaction, her interest in art and literature has thrived in the worry-free comforts of her home, but her nagging doubts have always remained with her, underlying her contentment. At the opening of the novel we find her in the midst of her "social work, porcelain, books, etcetera" which she claims "were not just fill ups, . . . they were objects of real absorption."³⁷ It is the eve of their journey to the Far East and simultaneously with her excited hopes about the journey, her old fear of any kind of travel returns to her. In the clasp of this neurotic superstition she tries to tell herself that in her new life with Bill she has nothing to fear.

She recited carefully to herself their personal beatitudes. . . good health, energy, a proper income, a decent social conscience, wide interests, humour shared . . . and through it all, complete happiness together. It was simply superstitious fear of hubris that threatened to grow through such a fabric.³⁸

But a sense of security built on such a fragile foundation as apparent domestic stability and happiness is not as reliable as Meg Eliot supposes.

³⁷Wilson, The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot, p. 32.

³⁸Ibid., P. 35.

Her fears that force her to construct this weak defenses are so strong that they continue to over-power her throughout her journey. On the plane, she finds herself brooding over the question of her true identity, an identity other than the familiar Mrs William Eliot. All this self-questioning and foreboding in long stretches of interior monologues have their purpose in Wilson's story because en route Bill Eliot is accidentally killed in a foreign airport and Meg's terrors and premonitions seem to materialize into the greatest misfortune in her life. The interim between Bill's death and her return to England is spent in Srem Panh with the British consul and his wife. For the first time Meg must now fight her own battle in a world of strangers, for whom she is only an honestly pitiable creature. It is a painful lesson but she learns now that situations have reversed and she is now in a class with those lonely widows, Viola, Poll and Jill, persons for whom she had never felt anything but a tolerant and amused pity.

The catastrophe at Srem Panh has brought about dual losses in her life: she has lost Bill who had recompensed her for everything she had ever missed in life; and she has lost the financial security that Bill had 'given' her. The financial loss is revealed to her, when she arrives home, by her brother David and Bill's barrister friend, Donald. Both these losses bring about a grief that is as insurmountable as it is crushing. All her undefined terrors now take on a palpable shape before her: if she had dreaded anything in her mother's life it was the insecure existence from hotel to hotel and all the unpleasant memories associated with it. Nemesis in Meg Eliot's life seems relentless; she resolutely refuses all offers of financial help from David

and Donald, and having sold all her property, finds herself with no other place to go but one of those dreary obscure hotels which had always been to her emblematic of reduced gentility and ugly sordidness. But Meg's determination remains unshaken; she has discovered, like other protagonists in Wilson, that "Action alone could fight the inrush of this destructive guilt."³⁹ She knows that she must overcome her fears by living through them and she has come to this decision rather early in her crisis, in much the same way as Gerald Middleton, during her waking-dreams in *Srem Panh*. Also, like Middleton, she is now prepared to take life on its own terms, leaving behind her old prejudices. Her choice of the hotel life marks her first victory over her own neurosis and, in a sense, this is comparable to a parallel effort in Wilson's personal life where his objective portrayal of his crisis through the medium of these three novels marks the overcoming of his breakdown. Her next triumph over herself comes when she decides to maintain friendship only with the three old friends, Viola, Poll and Jill -- people she had called her 'three lame ducks' in her better days. It should be marked here that the early part of this novel reflects a social circle where Poll and Jill are intruders, and this world of cocktail parties in Wilson's own words also reflects:

...the hell of the human failure to communicate (a sort of blasphemy against life, mocking a communion feast); here the damned are the social climbers, those wanting to be loved, the unloved women who push people around.⁴⁰

³⁹Ibid., p. 105

⁴⁰Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 53.

Meg's new allegiance to these unwanted women, at the same time denotes her renunciation of the social 'hell' and is, therefore, another means for her redemption from her neurosis. She has analysed her friends and found them sincerely affectionate in spite of their oddities, and to the new Meg Eliot oddities are no longer objects of sarcasm. Besides, in their individual experience of widowhood, they have all tried to share and understand Meg's problems. Meg's recognition of this and her final choice, essentially a moral one, redeems her from her past error. Like Ella's fight against Mrs Curry and 'evil', this is Meg's fight against her former self and former prejudices which she can no longer condone.

Even if Meg can cope with the failures in the material world, by learning to submit to them, she still finds a vast void in her life which nothing but Bill's presence could have filled. Her personal loss, is more than she had imagined.

All her distress and guilt about their life together had now fallen away to be replaced by a simple . . . but continual physical aching . . . She wondered at times if she could have reconciled herself more easily if the tearing apart had not been so sudden.⁴¹

Realising how self-centered her life with Bill had been, demanding and expecting from him, without knowing his true feelings, she is now overwhelmed with a guilt that all her positive actions cannot wipe away. At this point her brother David also goes through the agonizing experience of watching his closest friend slowly succumb to a painful and fatal cancer. David's letters to Meg are full of resignation and she suddenly realises that she must draw herself away from self-pity and

⁴¹Wilson, The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot, p. 243

blame, and stand by David. She goes to live with David in his quiet country home. In his country home David keeps himself occupied with gardening, hoping this act would help him out of his despondency. However, the reader can see that, unlike Ella Sands in Hemlock and After, for David gardening is not a creative and therapeutic act, but a turning away from life. His return to nature is a perversion because it involves self-deception. He is not capable of the efforts Gerald or Meg make to know themselves and Meg soon finds his is a life of "vegetable ease," self-repression and above all atrophied will. These are not the ideals she is seeking. The final phase in her life comes when she leaves David, attaches herself deliberately to a stranger, and finds a different kind of succour from new relationships. She discovers that she can retrieve her identity in a world of action and involvement rather than in resignation.

Within the framework of my analysis here, it is possible to consider the books thematically as a trilogy, the central theme roughly following the pattern of material success, instability, crisis and attempts at resolving the crisis.

While Bernard fails to achieve any positive goals, Ella strives and succeeds to some extent, though how stable her restoration is we are not told. The stories of Gerald Middleton and Meg Eliot are very alike; both demonstrate that readjustments in moral and social values are still possible and there is a reaffirmation of their joy and hope in life at the end of both novels. Gerald tells Clarissa Crane before he leaves for Mexico, "My motives are pure pleasure."⁴² He is no longer

⁴²Wilson, Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, p. 396.

wavering about his motives and nor is Meg Eliot in her last letter to her brother, which carries the same note of optimism.

IV

MORAL CONCERNS

During the twenty odd years of his career as a fiction writer Wilson has moved considerably from his initial position as a social satirist to that of a moralist critic. His early works, the short stories, are characterised by a vigorous satire and a touch of Dickensian wit which often gives the initial impression of caricature though serious undertones are discernible. In 1946, when he began writing "Raspberry Jam", Wilson was recovering from his nervous crisis. But it appears he had not quite lost his childhood habit of caricaturing the oddities of people; a means by which he had often sought to win love and approval, and which had failed when he had applied it to his social life, consequently bringing about his breakdown. During his recovery, however, he adapted this old habit of mimicry to the principal tools in his new role of the satirist. His stories are thus peopled by interesting caricatures of men and women he had known in actual life. This allows him to make important social and ethical statements about their behaviour.

This method, however, has its drawbacks and often tends to reduce all individuals to types. In fact, G. S. Fraser presumes that "when he meets a new person he does not so much respond as classify him in a very elaborate and exact system of mental pigeon-holes; in a sense he has met everybody already."¹ But habitual as it might seem, this classification

¹G. S. Fraser, The Modern Writer and His World, p. 152.

is based on various, social educational and ethical assessments of the person involved and is seldom a superficial evaluation.

In "Raspberry Jam", for instance, the vivid if slightly exaggerated portrayal of the village gossips, or the quaintness of the two old ladies, or the peculiar lonely fantasies of Johnnie, do not constitute everything. I would like to point out that even in this first story he was not merely documenting facts or describing a highly dramatic situation but also trying to create a valid moral pattern out of the situation.²

This urge to create a moral pattern has grown stronger with Wilson and he has acknowledged in a radio interview (quoted by John Mander in The Writer and Commitment) that he can not understand,

. . . any novel, any work of art created out of human feelings, which does not reflect the moral standpoint of the author . . . I would even go so far as to say that the authors I admire have always shown an unconscious ethic running through their work which is something other than the conscious ethic which is shown in the novels themselves.³

In the same interview Wilson also admitted that he believes that the novel is "primarily a moral statement."

In the opening chapter I have mentioned Wilson's essay entitled "Evil in the English Novel". It is interesting that early in this essay he makes a definite distinction between right and wrong, and good and evil --- a distinction that was also made by Graham Greene in Brighton Rock, where Ida, the sensual but mediocre heroine, talks about right and

² Although in The Wild Garden pp. 24-26, he admits that the pattern, as he saw it initially, went through a total change by the time the story was completed. Instead of looking at the old ladies as being victimised by a cruel misjudging world, he could now see through the vulnerability and unnaturalness of the false innocence of the sisters.

³ John Mander, The Writer and Commitment, p. 113.

wrong while Pinky, the young gangster finds a great magnetism in the power of pure evil. As novelists, Greene and Wilson have rather different approaches to their ideas of good and evil but both -- Greene in his novels and Wilson in this essay -- recognise evil as a pervasive element in life. Both of them also recognise that since the novel deals with real human problems, the threat of evil in human life should be a very significant element in the novel.

As I have mentioned earlier the principal concerns in Wilson's stories and novels remain basically the same but on closer examination it becomes clear that there is a definite change in treatment of the themes from the early stories to the novels. But in either case, Wilson writes in the traditional style which allows him to examine people in the context of society as well as ^{being} individuals in their relationship with other individuals. There are, of course, the specific types as Hallie points out--"the raffish old sport", "the widow who copes" -- yet they are not as flat as these names might suggest. Whether it is Johnnie in "Raspberry Jam", or Trevor in "The Wrong Set" or Stella Hennessey in "Saturnalia" or Rex in "Rex Imperator" -- their characters operate simultaneously in a social as well as moral context. It should be remembered that Wilson was still painfully conscious of the deceptions in his own life and the experience had considerably affected his outlook of other men. His criticism is directed mainly against the false façades, the hypocrisies and self-deceptions of his characters. He tries to emphasise the deeper moral implications of these attitudes. But in some cases, in "Raspberry Jam" as I have mentioned, he himself was not quite certain of the exact moral idea at the time of writing the particular story.

He says:

The moral truth of the story was still deep in my unconscious; the conscious mind was soothed with fact unconsciously rearranged to propose a more flattering, untrue moral thesis. But the shape of the narrative defies this falsification.⁴

He mentions a few other characters, Vi, the night-club pianist in "The Wrong Set", and Peter in "Crazy Crowd" as instances of this 'falsification'.

The extraordinary variety of people who crowd Wilson's fictional world range from the petty criminals, homosexuals and layabouts to the betrayed children of middle-class 'ladies' and 'gentlemen', and this young generation is characterised by what Frank Kermode describes as:

. . . an unreasoning though not baseless contempt for their elders, with their obsolete kind of guilt . . . self-deceived and unprincipled, priggishly hating the intellectual and social ideas that gave a dowdy interest to the lives of their parents.⁵

This is precisely the situation in "Such Darling Dodos." Priscilla and Robin, the leftwing intellectuals, had been at the forefront of all social and political movements in the thirties, but in the forties they are too outmoded, yet too wrapped in the cocoons of their own idealism, to realise the situation. This is what Wilson has very aptly called a "blinkerred innocence". Priscilla herself had taken refuge in these activities, whether the Swaraj or the Basque Relief, as so many means to express her "dominating sensation" --- pathos. She feels pathos even towards her cousin Tony, because in her blinkered vision Tony is pitiable as a homosexual and as a "lonely ageing, snobbish old man."⁶ In Tony's sophisti-

⁴Ibid., p. 26.

⁵Frank Kermode, Puzzles and Epiphanies, p. 193.

⁶Wilson, "Such Darling Dodos", p. 82.

cated view Priscilla's society is the land of invincible ignorance -- because it is an essentially mediocre narrow university world. This is the issue apparently seen, but on a second reading it seems that Tony's resentment against Priscilla and Robin really amounts to a vengeful hatred. His memories of days spent with these cousins are of humiliation, of a sense of having missed something essential, petty jealousies that now make him determined to hurt them out of their blinkered innocence. Wilson's criticism here is double-edged: he cannot condone Priscilla and Robin's attitude, and at the same time ^{he} strongly disapproves of Tony and the younger couple who fail to show any tolerance for an idealism that they do not share. This indifference and intolerance of the younger generation for the older is frequently noticed in Wilson's stories and although C. B. Cox refers to it as Wilson's "arraignment of the new post-war generation,"* one finds this comment applicable even in relation to later generations, Timothy Middleton in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes and the younger crowd in No Laughing Matter for instance. Miss Eccles in "Fresh Air Fiend" also belongs to this class but acquires a certain sinister colouring because of the enormity of her callousness. Too presumptuous to see her own inadequacies, she does not try to understand Miranda Searle's problems and only creates an antagonism which finally explodes into a violent scene between the two women, that ultimately leaves Professor Searle with a severe breakdown. While Elspeth Eccles decided "it was her duty to aid him in fighting the incubus" and had seen only "the crabbed irony and soured ill natured malice" in his wife, Professor Searle, by contrast, tried to realise his share in his wife's tragedy, without really inter-

* Cox, The Free Spirit, P. 124-125.

fering."⁷ Obviously Elspeth is incapable of making the right decisions about her moral duties, as Bernard Sands or Gerald Middleton are in later novels.

The scene of physical violence in this story is a fine instance of Wilson's use of this particular alienation technique. In stories like "Rex Imperator" and "Totentanz" scenes of similar nature bring about a climactic effect. In "Rex Imperator" one feels the tension of the situation mounting gradually until it reaches the point where Rex Palmer can no longer stand the pressures of his demanding egotism. When he realises that he can no longer have his dependent relatives under his control, his frustration is overpowering and he goes into a manic fit, hitting his brother and destroying everything around him.

"Totentanz" ends with a series of shocking deaths, all of them reflecting on the protagonist Isobel Capper's inordinate ambition for social success. With the help of her friends she gives a macabre party in which everyone and everything is meant to represent death. After the party is over three of Isobel's best friends die unexpectedly; Lady Maude is murdered, Professor Cadaver has a fatal accident and Guy Price commits suicide. The description of the party in itself is gruesome and it is evidently meant to indicate the abnormal acts some people are likely to indulge in -- in this case abnormality becoming synonymous with evil because Isobel is mostly prompted by her lust for social position and her vanity. Her three friends partially share her guilt with her and their violent deaths, which leave Isobel stunned, seem to come as a re-

⁷Wilson, "Fresh Air Fiend", pp. 8-9.

tribution from an unseen force.

Neither of these stories may be said to be the best instance of Wilson's use of violence as the external manifestation of a transcending evil and although there are comparable situations in several early short stories, they still indicate that there is a wide discrepancy between what Wilson really implies and the effect he achieves. Violence in these stories does not appear to be intrinsically associated with the nature of evil it is meant to represent and remains as an external element in the story. In the novels, one notices, Wilson has overcome this discrepancy and atrocities are now seen essentially associated with the turmoils within a character.

Two incidents in Hemlock and After are interesting instances.

The first, at Leicester Square, I have mentioned in some detail earlier, and it helps to reveal the secret viciousness within Bernard Sands as he watches with satisfaction the policemen arrest another homosexual. The terror in the arrested man's face fills Bernard with a peculiar excitement and in an instant he recognises this, for the first time, as his innate sadism. For the reader, the scene helps to reveal the central issue in the novel: the question of moral responsibility. Along with Bernard, the reader is in a position to judge what should have been Bernard's response to the incident as the liberal humanist that he claims to be.

The next is a brief scene in which Bernard witnesses a weasel suck the brains out of a quivering rabbit. He tries to make the humanist's habitual gesture to save the suffering animal but fails. To him the weasel becomes one with his own cruel self and his paederastic tastes. His overpowering cynicism comes into focus more than anything else because

he reflects ironically that the dying rabbit like the victims of his own sadistic lust is not cause enough to arouse his pity.

In The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot Gordon Paget's decision to destroy all his pets before his death strikes one as a ghastly and ruthless act. For Gordon, however, this is a humane decision because the animals could not have survived without his affection, and once again it is the question of moral responsibility: whether Gordon was exercising his authority or abusing it by killing the animals. In his conscious effort to avoid creating the sort of middlebrow art that is "always sweetening everything, always turning the really significant and vital, fierce and tense and conflicting things into what is called a resolution"; Wilson has introduced physical and psychological violence in his works.⁸

It is often remarked that in Wilson's works the evil and the condemnable are often associated with ugliness or physical repulsiveness. A. O. J. Cockshutt says, "Wilson's fiercest moral condemnations are mingled with aesthetic and intellectual distaste."⁹ Cox agrees with this and comments,

There is a revulsion from the body in all his writing and this saps his work of full vitality . . . the frequency with which such details occur suggests a squeamish refinement in Wilson.¹⁰

Grandsen also notices these references to people's vulgarity and crudity. But it is not difficult to understand why Wilson is equally critical of a character's coarseness of speech or lack of taste displayed in his clothes and surroundings, as he is of the morals. For him, these external

⁸Wilson, "The Artist as Your Enemy is Your Only Friend", p. 110.

⁹A. O. J. Cockshutt, "Favoured Sons: The Moral World of Angus Wilson", p. 59.

¹⁰Cox, The Free Spirit, p. 117.

niceties or the lack of them are intimately related to a person's taste as well as his morals. Wilson's humanism does not make him a blind admirer of humanity as Rabinovitz has pointed out: "his disgust grows out of the fragments of shattered optimism; his thought of what man could be leads to his disgust with man now."¹¹

Thus the chaos inside the Swindale home reflects the absence of order and harmony within the sisters' mind. Details of the strange clothes they wear and their eccentric habits are recounted for the same effect. Similarly in "A Story of Historical Interest" repulsive details of sickness serve to increase the reader's repugnance for the sick man who eventually appears to be a profligate old man. Vulgarity of speech and behaviour give even better indications of a person's moral character; for instance, Arthur, the exconvict in "A Visit in Bad Taste", tries to regain his poise and self-confidence but reveals himself in tactless statements like, "Sorry to have been so long . . . Nature's call, you know."¹²

Mrs Salad in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes with her repeated references to lavatories, or Mrs Curry's silly-obscene prattle in Hemlock and After, and the indecent tone of conversation in Poll's party in The Middle-Age of Mrs Eliot, are some of the best instances where the idiom gives an indication of the moral attitude of the person or persons involved. It may also be remarked here that these are some of the occasions where Wilson makes good use of his remarkable ear for language. Words and language can betray the real nature of an individual, but social gatherings often bring

¹¹R. Rabinovitz, The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960, p. 85.

¹²Wilson, "A Visit in Bad Taste", p. 153.

out the secret weaknesses of people even more conspicuously. Thus in "Saturnalia" the New Year's Eve party not only offers a glimpse of the contemporary social changes but is also effective in revealing some disturbing truths about human nature. There is Stella Hennessey, the hotel-manageress, in whose life values are strangely muddled. On the one hand she is a self-sacrificing mother, prepared to go through the hardships of her profession only to give her son a decent schooling. On the other hand she is a beautiful and sensual woman who feels sexually attracted towards various men and cannot really surrender herself to any of them. But when Bruce Talfourd-Rich approaches her she deceives herself into believing that he admires her. She receives a great shock when she discovers Bruce fondling Gloria, the waitress, and overhears them abusing her. She realises her own stupid self-deception and is at first deeply remorseful and then in a fit of jealousy and hatred, orders Gloria to leave the hotel. In spite of her 'grit and determination' Stella fails because she cannot bring about a happy balance between her stubborn class snobberies and her secret sensuality. Prompted by her class-consciousness she snubs Tom the porter, only to be deceived by Bruce's sham gallantry and passion. Her realisation, however, does not lead to any good; she appears even worse in her malice against Gloria: "like a baby possessed by a malevolent devil."¹³

Bruce, unlike Stella, is aware of his real purpose: ^{he} flatters Stella by flirting with her in order to gain her favour and soon after to switch over to Gloria, whose physical charms are more attractive to him. He

¹³Wilson, "Saturnalia", The Wrong Set, p. 77.

is absolutely devoid of any scruples when his own interests are at stake. He can shift cleverly from cautious flirtation to open vulgarity -- something Tom the porter, in spite of the similarity of their motivations, can never do because of his basic rusticity. Between the two, Bruce is the greater evil, because he is one of those flat characters like Mrs Curry who seem to be committed to evil.

His wife Claire is equally unscrupulous and as a social climber she seeks glamour and excitement, unconcerned with how it is gained. When Tom the porter approaches her, she encourages his advances telling herself:

After all there was nothing socially wrong about Lady Chatterley or Potipher's wife, so why not?¹⁴

In Tom's company she experiences a peculiar self-realisation:

Breaking through the layers of social snobbery and imitated sophistication, dissipating even the thick clouds of self-pity which had covered her for so many years, physical desires began to awake in Claire.¹⁵

But the awakening is transient and at the end of the story she is once again fooled by her husband to believe that they can still restore their lost marriage. She has been in the clutches of self-deception too long to realise how futile the attempt is. Affecting and cultivating a fashionable appearance she actually convinces herself that she might, after all, encourage a person like Tom, following Lady Chatterley's instance. Even at this point, it is the question of status that she is more concerned with than the ethical considerations. As in the case of Stella, values in

¹⁴Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 76.

Claire's world are also peculiarly confused. Claire is 'unnatural' because she has deliberately suppressed her normal sexual desires; Bertha the bandy-legged kitchen maid is unnatural and evil because years of unfulfilled desires have made her into a figure of undisguised lewdness. She is so repulsive that the young student whom she forcibly seduces is literally sick after the incident. It is not quite clear in this story which of the two evils disturbs Wilson more deeply: the shrewd, deceptive, disguised evil of the pseudo-sophisticated class or the more open, unconcerned immorality in the lower classes. But it becomes increasingly evident, on an analysis of other stories and some of the novels, that Wilson is more critical of evils of a cerebral nature; vanity, affectation, deliberate self-deception rather than evils of a passional nature such as Bertha indulges in.

Thus in stories like "Christmas Day in the Workhouse", "A Visit in Bad Taste", and "Et Dona Ferentes", the subsidiary issues like lesbianism, child molestation, and homosexuality, although they are related to the main characters, are overlooked. Rather, Wilson's moral criticism is directed pointedly against ^{the} snobberies and false facades of the middle class. In the first of these stories Thea's physical attraction for her coworker Stephanie is clearly indicated, but no moral judgement is made on that score. Instead Thea's pretensions about herself and the 'right class', particularly her notion that "nothing in her education had ever allowed her to bridge the gap between the material and the cultural" is sharply satirised.¹⁶ When Stephanie, who comes from a more

¹⁶Wilson, "Christmas Day in the Workhouse", Such Darling Dodos, p. 130.

respectable social background, turns down her friendship, Thea seems to recognise her own position, but like Stella in "Saturnalia", can retaliate only with bitterness. In "A Visit in Bad Taste", the brother who is an ex-convict and a child molestor is not portrayed sympathetically and yet his crime is not the real target for Wilson's condemnation. Wilson is more intent upon exposing the hypocrisies and petty selfishness (of the sister, in this case) that can intervene between, and destroy, relationships even within the same family. I do not wish to imply that Wilson condones sexual aberrations anywhere but that he is relatively more disgusted with moral failures that concern a person's judgement and sensibility.

In a few other situations one also notices a peculiar ambivalence in Wilson's moral standpoint -- an ambivalence that may well be related to the convictions and experiences of his early life. Instead of indignation one senses a peculiar pathos in his treatment of some of these characters and although he is still as unrelenting in unmasking hypocrisies he does not reject these people as being totally vicious. I feel that this owes both to his earlier belief in the values of liberal humanism and to his sympathetic memories of such people in actual life. Thus he seems to be really justifying a raffish character like Maurice in "What Do Hippos Eat" by impressing upon the reader the fact that although Maurice has lost much of his moral integrity along with his economic stability, he is still at heart a gentleman -- "old and tired now, but unmistakably a gentleman for all the doubtful shifts into which life had forced him."¹⁷ In order to preserve this image for himself, and for

¹⁷Wilson, "What Do Hippos Eat", Such Darling Dodos, p. 176.

the world, Maurice resorts to deceptions -- for him they are wishful reveries in which the unreal becomes authentic, and for others they are false anecdotes of a colourful past. He is an incurable self-deceiver but the worst effects of this side of his nature come out in his deception and exploitation of his companion Greta. And yet Wilson seems to persuade the reader to sympathise with Maurice for having "a certain hard core of determination to survive" even when his life is hopelessly full of "anxiety, imagined grandeur and sticky sentiment."¹⁸ Wilson's admiration for this kind of 'pluck' seriously disturbs the moral balance and emphasis of the story. Greta, on the other hand, in spite of being the victim of this sycophant, is not spared by Wilson and is represented as a vain woman, aspiring to associate with the 'right class'. This equivocal approach becomes a serious threat to Wilson's intention of conveying a sense of transcending evil and, contrary to his own aims, softens the impression of evil. Thus in the last scene of the story when Maurice attempts to throw Greta into the hippopotamus pool, Wilson as the sympathetic author has to intervene and prevent Maurice from such a criminal act, only to have him conform to his earlier image of the gentleman.

But there are again other instances where Wilson's criticism takes the form of an inexplicably relentless retributive force issuing from somewhere outside the story's immediate content, almost as a symbolic form of evil itself. There is little in the relevant aberrations or failures to suggest the presence of such a force which, nevertheless, is

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 176.

significantly felt in a story like "Totentanz". Isobel Capper, conscious of her intellectual superiority over the rest of the university residents, is weary of the dull backwater quality of the isolated northern university. A sudden legacy and her husband's London appointment give her the long awaited opportunity to shine in a really sophisticated society. Arrogant and pretentious, Isobel is also shrewd and carefully plans her London debut. This constitutes the first part of the tale ; in the second and crucial part, which begins some six months later, there is a short scene in which Miss Thurkill, the French teacher, announces to the Master's wife that strange and decisive clause in Isobel's uncle's will which requires them to have two statues of the dead relatives in their house. The Master's wife, convinced of her psychic powers, suddenly feels aware of an impending evil in Isobel's life -- and they are described standing "outlined against the grey stormy sky, the Master's wife, her great black mackintosh cape billowing out behind like an evil bat, Miss Thurkill sharp and thin like a barking jackal."¹⁹ From this point on 'evil' becomes the mood of the story even to the point of exaggeration sometimes as in Professor Cadaver's name and his interest in tombs and graves. In keeping with this perversion, Isobel's friend Guy Rice's elaborate plans for a Totentanz (literally meaning 'dance macabre' or 'death dance') bring together 'everything morbid and ghastly.'²⁰ But somehow this implied association of the evil with the horrid, as exhibited in the Totentanz does not have the moral force and significance

¹⁹Wilson, "Totentanz", The Wrong Set, p. 28.

²⁰Ibid., p. 37.

expected of it. What might have been an excellent Gothic story becomes a rather weak satire of human vanities and ambitions.

The overall morbidity of the situation, however, reaches its climax at the end of the party, when of the three main revellers, Guy Price parading as suicide of Chatterton actually kills himself, Lady Maude dressed as Marie Antoinette is fittingly beheaded by a prowler, and Professor Cadaver is discovered dead in a freshly dug grave. Isobel receives the worst blow because all her chances as a social climber vanish after this catastrophe. Total retribution comes to her as she is left in constant companionship of the two ugly statues she had done everything to avoid having around.

There are no 'metaphysical' overtones in the story — John Mander suggests ~~here are~~ but the sense of doom is obvious and the presence of evil is suggested by images and words. The frequent use of animal imagery suggestive of perversion, hatred and malice is very effective. Thus Brian's gum recession has given him an equine look, Lady Maude has myopic pig's eyes, Miss Thurkill has a quivering red foxterrier nose. In the 'prophecy' scene mentioned above, the Master's wife resembles an evil bat, Miss Thurkill a jackal, and in the final scene, the former is compared to a fat bulldog and a huge squat toad, while the latter is described as a malicious snake.

Another story classified by Mander as being 'metaphysical' is "A Bit off the Map". It reveals the distorted cerebral processes in a retarded youth, Kennie, in his misdirected quest for Truth. The crowd he associated with, a group of snobbish intellectuals, are affected by

an evil Wilson has described as "the hell of a society that has lost the power of communication."²¹ Misunderstood and thwarted by these people Kennie is suddenly enraged by the insane blabbering of a mad colonel and kills him in a frenzied fit. The evil manifested here is of a social system to which Kennie, his friends and even the colonel are subjected: a system that renders them unable to understand each other and to be understood.

There is another set of stories in which Wilson depends on the family setting to provide an equally interesting situation for moral problems. As Frank Kermode puts it: "[the] horrid modern war between old and young provides Mr. Wilson with his nightmare images of family life -- the mean, loveless loyalties, the fumbling anxieties of parental tenderness, the distortion of sex, all the myriad middleclass defensive poses, all the peculiar terrors and queernesses."²²

"Loveless loyalties," to borrow Kermode's phrase, is the theme of two of Wilson's most disturbing stories, "A Story of Historical Interest" and "Mother's Sense of Fun", both written at about the same time, the end of 1946. In the first, Lois Gorringe dutifully attends her father at his sick bed, and in spite of all her disturbing memories of his dissolute, debauched past, tries to be affectionate to him, in return expecting his love. But past experiences intrude disturbingly upon the present, reminding her of his scandalous behaviour with kitchen maids and nursemaids, or his accosting a prostitute in her own presence.

²¹Wilson, The Wild Garden, p. 31.

²²Kermode, Puzzles and Epiphanies, p. 194.

The telescoping of time is carried out very effectively --- and Lois is left vacillating between forced love and pathos for the sick, helpless man, and an uncontrolled disgust for the vulgarity and obscenity the man represents to her. On the other hand she wishes to have complete mastery over her father, without being obliged to her brother in any way. Lois tries to adopt a more liberal attitude, in a very limited sense of course, against her brother and sister-in-law's sensible intolerance of their father's debauched habits. But this self-deceiving does not continue for long and in the last section of the story Lois's uncertainty is over: her secret contempt for her father expresses itself in a cryptic sentence, "It's really only of historical interest." At last she seems to be able to break the bonds of her loveless loyalty.

Similarly in "Mother's Sense of Fun" Donald Corrington reluctantly but almost hypnotically submits himself to his mother's clever fastidiousness, all the while hating her with deep, slow hatred. Mrs Corrington, in trying to occupy her son's life absolutely, is one of Wilson's best studies in 'bitchery', as John Mander would say. Afraid of physical relationships with her husband, she had tried to establish a relation of emotional flirtation and anxious care that appears strikingly incestuous. Donald is too weak to come out of this tyranny and although he can find no real love for her, he is left with a sense of terrifying isolation after her sudden death. The essential pattern in this situation is repeated in a more intricate and magnified form in Inge's crippling domination over her children in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, where one sees parental love at its unhealthiest and as having a totally evil influence upon the children.

In another story, "Union Reunion", also with a family setting,

the action takes place in South Africa, the scene of ^{part of} Wilson's childhood and much of the story is based on actual incidents. Laura and Harry revisit their home in the colonial town, but instead of happiness the reunion brings out old jealousies, hatred, snobberies and secret brutalities of the family members. A life of ease and affluence has rendered these people weak and they are not even capable of clever deceptions. Their viciousness is hardly concealed and with a little provocation a cousin reveals to Laura that her sister Flo, pretending to be so affectionate, had in truth neglected Laura's dying son. Besides the malice within the family itself, the cruel hatred for the Africans that these colonials betray cannot be explained by political theories alone. Wilson's analysis of the situation fits in with the situation of any person in possession of such cruel powers:

They sensed the brutal nature of their power, yet realised that if it was for a moment relaxed the answer would be swift yet more brutal. The thought of violence and the force upon which their lives rested excited them all, helping the gin and the whiskey to thaw the gentility and pretension which ordinarily froze them, allowing the common crudity of their minds and feelings to flow freely. . . 23

On a domesticated level, the situation is quite similar to that of Rex in "Rex Imperator". In the beginning Rex appears as the victim of merciless extortions of his brother, sister and his raffish father-in-law, Mr Nicholson. His sister, living on alimony, is viciously jealous of Rex's wife and deliberately upsets the neat order of the house. His brother, lazy and irresponsible, is a typical 'layabout' relative, reminding one of Bill Pendlebury in Hemlock and After. Mr Nicholson is the typical destitute old man and a compulsive gambler. All of them are resentful

²³Wilson, "Union Reunion," The Wrong Set, p. 53.

yet afraid of Rex and just when their attitudes have led us to a sympathetic view of Rex, Wilson shocks the reader in a climactic scene. Exactly at the point when it seems there is an end to the exploitation and each of the dependents receive letters of hope and aid from elsewhere, Rex becomes suddenly enraged. So far his role as the benefactor had been rather passive, but this likelihood of his losing his authority over these dependents, disgusting as they are, maddens him unknowingly even to himself he has grown to love his power and his ability to make them tools of his own will. He actually enjoys his tyrannical game of playing with their hopes and fears and is afraid to lose them. Destroying their cheques and their letters, he seeks to prove his position as the Emperor.

Mr Brunton in "Learning's Little Tribute" plays a role similar to Rex when he proposes to help the family of his deceased employee, and is finally refused by the widow.

. . . brutal sentiments surged up in him as he saw his offer rejected in this offhand manner by a person of absolutely no importance. To lose his bargain through the obstinacy of a fool, to have his patronage overlooked by a subordinate, choked him with rage . . . 24

This wish to domineer is of course closely related to a mistaken sense of superiority. In "A Visit in Bad Taste" (another story in the family setting) Wilson exposes the hypocritical notions of a couple who take pride in their liberal ideals. For both Margaret and Malcolm the application of such high ideals is entirely limited to sophisticated drawing-room conversation in the company of other hypocritical people like themselves. But when their ex-convict child molester brother Arthur comes to visit

²⁴Wilson, "Learning's Little Tribute", Such Darling Dodos, p. 63.

them their ideals are faced with a genuine problem. Theirs is a carefully built but extremely vulnerable world full of "the taste, the tolerance the ease of living, the lack of dogmatism."²⁵ Wilson's carefully chosen words underscore the hollowness and futility of their kind of liberalism. Margaret's intolerance for Arthur and his wife ("dreadful, vulgar little, Fascist minded creature"²⁶) and for the working class in general, make her an easy target for Wilson's satire. She bears a striking resemblance to the early Meg Eliot in her secret contempt for the unprivileged. Her husband Malcolm would like to think of Arthur as a sick person, yet in spite of all his awareness and progressive ideas he still agrees with his wife about Arthur's rottenness. But he is also a blinkered person; although he admires his wife's outright rejection of Arthur and although he believes in their own social progressivism "all the realism of her view . . . somehow did not satisfy him. He remained vaguely uneasy the whole evening."²⁷ Over and above their hypocrisy and moral inadequacy Wilson is intolerant of these people who vaguely perceive yet do not fully realize their own predicament. Bernard Sands is a better individual because he goes all the way through self-doubtings, self-realizations and self-condemnation, but Malcolm can only overlook his self-doubtings.

Bernard Sands unlike Malcolm realizes that liberal ideals or even the basic integrity of a person's character are endangered if one fails to carry out one's moral responsibility, 'the proper exercise of authority'

²⁵Wilson, "A Visit in Bad Taste", p. 152.

²⁶Ibid., p. 149.

²⁷Ibid., p. 156.

as he calls it. It is a difficult decision, as it is with Ella Sands; no absolute judgement may be made, and yet one must commit oneself to a certain cause to the exclusion of the others. Bernard's realisation that he is not genuinely committed to his ideals, that he is hypocritical with others, coming to him through the Leicester Square incident, gives him the opportunity of knowing himself. As some point in their respective novels, all Wilson's protagonists -- Bernard, Ella, Gerald and Meg Eliot -- face this question of moral choice, but unlike the minor characters, Malcolm, Priscilla or Robin, they do not try to evade the issue. Why there should be such a classification is best explained by Wilson in an interview:

. . . my characters [in the novels] have a Calvinist conscience . . . The heroism of my people, again, is in their success in making a relationship with other human beings, in a humanistic way, and their willingness to accept some sort of pleasure in life as against the gnawings of a Calvinist conscience . . . These people are fully self-conscious and the only ones who are at all evil -- apart from Mrs Curry, who is something quite different, a kind of embodiment of evil -- are those like Marie Helene and Ingeborg who substitute for self-awareness and self-criticism a simple way of living, Marie Helene's hard and practical, Ingeborg's soft and cosy. They accept a pattern of behaviour and morality instead of self-awareness.²⁸

Thus there are three distinct moral divisions: the first consisting of the self-aware protagonists who are willing to see their own failings, and then the in-between, constituting the evasive type, and finally the those who are totally evil. Or as Rabinovitz sees them, "evil on three moral planes -- intrinsic evil, unconscious evil, and conscious, reluctant evil."²⁹ The last two categories are the major ones in Wilson's subworld

²⁸ Michael Millgate, "Interview with Wilson", The Paris Review, XVIII (1957), p. 99.

²⁹ Rabinovitz, The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, p. 83.

of 'layabouts', 'spivs', and camp characters, living on the periphery of middle-class life, although one can find an occasional figure of absolute evil even in the upper-class as in Herbert Rose in Hemlock and After. Herbert's perversions in sex forces him even into criminal acts of abduction and prostitution. His accomplice Mrs Curry, of course, belongs to a different category. In addition to her own sexual perversions -- for she lives perpetually in an atmosphere of obscene words, pictures, games and fantasies -- she is also a great potential danger to the society. Professing to spread 'love' she is actually a dirty-minded procuress for men like Hubert. As G. S. Fraser describes her, this "cosy, vulgar, horrible procuress seems to have stepped out of some unwritten, because unprintable, Victorian masterpiece . . ." ³⁰ There is a strange 'double motif' in her values and in her surroundings -- whatever she says or does is either sweet and pretty or so extremely vulgar that is altogether repugnant. She has gathered round her a set of degenerate vulgar people like herself and with mutual help they create a sordid ring of trafficking in human lust.

Yet this ring of evil with Mrs Curry's obese figure in the middle has a strange but striking parallel in the homosexual society with Bernard Sands as its central figure, this is particularly noticeable in the part entitled 'Camp Fire Cameos'. The camp-characters are indeed more refined than Mrs Curry's friends but they are all homosexuals and 'the catty interchange' between them reveal a group of demoralised men who have permanently adopted an effeminate 'pansy' manner. ³¹ Even among

³⁰G. S. Fraser, The Modern Writer and His World, p. 154.

³¹Gardner, Post-War British Fiction, p. 152.

these there are two groups, the 'amusing camp' who retain an intricate web of personal values and esoteric morality and there are the 'golden spivs' with whom social success is more valuable than anything human. The latter are more calculating as social-climbers, trying to protect each other but even in friendship they are afraid to be sincere. To Bernard this "particular borderland between respectability and loucherie" was of special interest during his preoccupation with the nature of evil.³² (It is not difficult to assume at this point in the novel that Bernard's vision has merged with that of Wilson's.) The homosexuals, particularly the ambitious ones among them, are seen as shrewd and hard but afflicted by a peculiar 'moral anaemia'. They lack the energy and strength that could have made relationships between themselves richer and more meaningful. The total lack of any moral pattern in their lives, the absence of honesty, loyalty or trust, make it impossible for any relationship to become really intimate.

This analysis along with subsequent descriptions of habits and weaknesses of the homosexuals, combine to make Wilson's first novel a major study of this sub-section of society. However, it is not his first treatment of the subject, which has appeared frequently in his stories too. Tony in "Such Darling Dodos" is an older version of Sands, and Guy Price in "Totentanz" is one of those 'golden spivs'. Lesbians in "The Wrong Set" inextricably caught in their own petty jealousies and meanness, have relations similar to those of the 'golden spivs'. There are women like

³²Wilson, Hemlock and After, p. 102.

Thea with lesbian tendencies and men like Edwin Newman in whom the desire for beautiful young men has remained suppressed through the long years of married life, but suddenly becomes active in his middle age. It is difficult to determine whether these frequent allusions to homosexuality are in themselves a criticism of a way of life that is considered abnormal by a normal social standard. Wilson certainly does not consider homosexuality an evil in itself, except perhaps, in "Et Dona Ferentes", where there is a vague sense of evil surrounding the visit of the Swedish houseguest Sven, although there is nothing in his conduct as such to give this impression. But to his wife Monica, Edwin Newman's lust for Sven is a threat to their married life and to the atmosphere of decency and propriety that she has created in her home. She has helped Edwin overcome his homosexual tendencies but with Sven's intrusion she realises that he holds an irresistible attraction for Edwin that is quite beyond her control. Her daughter Elizabeth too feels in her own naive way that Sven has an undefinable evil influence upon their home. Finally, concerned by the rift between him and his family, Edwin decides that Sven must leave. He realises that Sven's visit had been like a suffocating fog weighing over the house. His gesture of opening the window to set in fresh air speaks clearly of his exact feelings as they are at the end of the story.

In most cases, however, Wilson's genuine attempt has been to understand homosexuality as a social phenomenon and he has tried to explain the incurably vicious characters like Larry Rourke, Ron Wrigley and Guy Price in a moral as well as a broad social framework. They are as much the victims of their own atrophied moral will as of the social system

where they belong in the lower and, therefore, under-privileged sections. In their homosexual relations they attach themselves to affluent men who offer them the coveted financial and social security with little effort on their part, and this, in turn, only adds to their general moral inertia. If and when they do exert themselves they resort to corrupt and devious means: Ron tries to abduct a girl and Larry becomes a petty thief. On the other hand, homosexual characters belonging to the middle class or upper-middle class are usually seen in a more agreeable light. John Middleton in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, who feels that it is his duty to reform social injustice, becomes involved with a delinquent boy like Larry Rourke mostly because of a sense of sympathy. In their homosexual relations this is reflected in John's protective attitude towards Larry even when he turns out to be a criminal. John's real intentions are honest and sincere: to give Larry a chance to succeed, but he is thwarted by his own blind affection for the boy. Among all the homosexual characters Gordon Paget and David Parker (The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot) create the most successful life out of their friendship, a relationship that also satisfies and enriches their spiritual life. By contrast, Marcus in No Laughing Matter, in spite of his fine sensitivity, endures much indignity and shame in his early relationships, because these contacts seldom fulfilled his emotional need for love and admiration. In his maturer years, even as a successful man of the world, he could not really forget or forgive the men who had treated him so harshly and callously never realising his peculiar predicaments. It is to this that Wilson attributes Marcus's subsequent sense of insecurity and his lack of consideration for others. In writing about homosexuality Wilson's approach has been markedly different

from other modern novelists' dealing with the same subject. It has not been his principal aim to explore the psychological or emotional complexities of the homosexual situation but he has tried to view it in a social and moral perspective in a non-committal but balanced manner.

The other personæ who crowd some of the party-scenes are usually exaggerated caricatures but they do succeed in conveying a disturbing sense of evil. The two parties in The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot bring together a variety of characters. In the first, there are the respectable barrister friends of Bill and the 'lame ducks', Meg's déclassé friends, perhaps the only troublesome character being Tom Pirie who is considered somewhat bohemian. In the second party, thrown by Poll, Meg is the only stable person among a group of bohemians who lead a superficial, meaningless existence, for whom sexuality has been reduced to the level of obscenity lacking the vigour and mystery of a healthy sexual relationship. They have nothing to conceal from the public and this makes them essentially vulgar and grotesque. Marie-Hélène's "dos", as Wilson calls them, bring together a very different set of people -- the representatives of various learned councils, French and English artists and writers and television personalities, with an odd rich sculptress or two. Impressed and impressive, they never betray themselves into saying something that can make them 'trivial or tedious'. But even in this atmosphere there are clashes between various individuals. For example, in the fight between Robin, Donald and Kay, subtle ethical issues are at stake. The situation is faintly reminiscent of "Rex Imperator" in that Robin as the director of the family business has long been the obligator figure. Donald, on the other hand, has been obliged by circumstances to depend on Robin financially.

This situation reaches its climax when Donald refuses to tolerate Robin's patronisations. His words to Robin form a sharp analysis of Robin's attitude as well as a fine comment on human weakness:

"Egotism tempered with benevolence is likely to break down as an ethic of conduct; and when it does, it's liable to appear as hypocrisy, as the Victorian exponents of so-called individual morality found to their cost."³³

Amidst the parade of fake geniuses at the party Yves Houdet, with his French background and his professed acquaintance with celebrities, turns out to be the most despicable because of his essential vulgarity. He and his mother are both self-seeking but he lacks the two redeeming qualities of his mother: sincerity and a basic honesty. He is ^{as} unscrupulous as the Ron Wrigleys, Mrs Cressets and Mr Barkers who make their living solely by black mailing and by fraud.

Rabinovitz makes an accurate assessment when he points out that the novels usually have an important moral issue at the centre with lesser moral problems occurring in the subplots, and also that Wilson's short stories end with a direct moral revelation. However, neither the novels nor the short stories suffer from a prescriptive quality, for Wilson is fully aware of the restrictions of a didactic story. He resents the way in which critics like Leavis would have the novelist write with "some dogmatic view of moral health . . . [thus destroying] the true life in the work of art."³⁴ Elsewhere he states: "I don't believe as Snow does . . . in the didactic novel."³⁵ In fact with years of authority and experience Wilson's novels have lost more and more their moral and ethical

³³Wilson, Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, p. 346.

³⁴New York Times Book Review, July 2, 1961, p. 12.

³⁵Interview with Frank Kermode, Partisan Review, p. 69.

flavour. In the last three novels, The Old Men At the Zoo, Late Call and No Laughing Matter, the question of morality is woven into the pattern of the narrative and the distinctly separable 'moral pattern' of the earlier works is seldom found. Even his last volume of short stories, A Bit Off the Map, is considerably different from the earlier ones in this respect.

Wilson's story of the Zoo, for example, is a parable in which the physical violence really stands for the violence within modern man. He feels that the modern psychological experimentation in the novel has failed in its treatment of the theme of transcendent evil because in psychoanalytical terms all our known symbols of innocence can also be seen as symbols of evil. In this context it is interesting to note Wilson's own evaluation of his latest novel:

Now . . . I have tried a more ribald, farcical treatment of evil . . . in the hope that, by removing a certain solemnity or portentousness from the subject, I may have acclimatized horror more satisfactorily to the novel form.³⁶

Though analogies in literary matters are seldom completely satisfactory -- specially when they are about different kinds of art forms -- I feel that Wilson's technical assurance and artistic maturity is reminiscent of Yeats's Last Poems.

³⁶Wilson, "Evil in the English Novel", p. 193.

CONCLUSION

In the prefatorial remarks to The Wild Garden Wilson had strongly advocated the usefulness and validity of the biographical/psychoanalytical form of criticism in spite of the modern trend of 'pure' criticism. He has claimed that to the novelist-critic the first method comes more naturally, and is often more effective, because provided with biographical data it is easier for him to ascertain the actual creative process. The Wild Garden, evolving from the Ewing Lectures, purports to be a book about his own experiences of the process of novel-writing: he mentions in the preface that his principal aim is to draw a parallel between the patterns in his life and the themes in his novels. But much of The Wild Garden is, in fact, devoted to (a) an analysis of the use of gardens, flowers and animals as symbols in Wilson's fiction, and (b) a detailed study of the external atmosphere and geographical locations of his works. The themes that I have examined in the previous chapters are, indeed, also recognised and mentioned by Wilson in this book but it becomes evident that though he began with a discussion of the themes he gradually became more involved in a discussion of symbols. Since a study of symbols was not my principal aim here, I have not found it necessary to refer to them except in a few cases where I have felt they help to illustrate a theme more clearly. Thus in a discussion of Wilson's moral concerns I have found his use of violence and of animal

imagery strikingly effective in producing the desired impression.

Apart from a study of symbols Wilson also provides the reader of The Wild Garden with considerable information about his personal experiences which can be applied usefully in interpreting some of his works. As a matter of fact Wilson shows us how this can be done by indicating the manner in which his childhood experiences had gone into the making of the two stories, "Raspberry Jam" and "Necessity's Child". It seems to me that Wilson's method of analysis can be much more profitably used in understanding the highly intricate biographical/psychological patterns that underlie the novels. One important aim of this thesis has been to explore the complex manner in which Wilson's creative process involved his own biographical material which have sometimes appeared as the recurrent themes, situations or as 'prototype' characters. At the fictional and thematic levels the novels reflect the transformation from an adolescent to an adult: the way in which a child encounters the world, reacts to it and finally formulates his own values. But more significantly, for our purposes, the novels demonstrate the extent of the novelist's achievement in translating his own childhood visions by organising them and interpreting them from his own maturer viewpoint. The question before us is: how far is Wilson successful in employing his 'uneducated' or 'unconscious' memory, and in avoiding that sense of 'overpurposeful maturity' which makes a novel 'sterile'. Among the three earlier novels The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot comes closest to the actual circumstances in Wilson's life -- the insecurity of the heroine's adolescence, the protected ignorance and the breakdown, and the details of the hotel scenes. In a thematic evaluation the novel shows a steady and

convincing development of Meg Eliot's mental make-up. Her early impressions are deep enough to affect her aesthetic, moral and social values so that everything reminiscent of her mother's way of life is ugly and ominous to her. In his latest novel, No Laughing Matter, the effectiveness of childhood visions is illustrated in the lives of all the Matthews children who never seem to outgrow the childish game of mimicking their elders thus perpetually reliving their adolescence and reviving the atmosphere and even the dialogue of past years. Wilson's success in both these novels is mainly due to the manner in which he has recreated and rearranged his personal childhood visions by offering the reader the children's view of the domestic setting, of the failure of their parents and of the overall sordidness of their lives; he has altogether excluded his own personality as the novelist from making any overt comments but has allowed his 'unconscious' memories to create the atmosphere of his novels through the medium of his characters. The artistic success of the two novels is a proof of the validity of Wilson's theory about 'unconscious memories'. But at this point, we are tempted to ask if the free memories -- that are woven into these novels are there without any conscious effort on the part of the author. If they are unconsciously there then they indicate how deeply these recurring moral and psychological issues are embedded in Wilson's mind. If on the other hand, Wilson has deliberately used his memories to pattern these novels then we must admit that he has achieved admirable artistic maturity. I have pointed out earlier in this thesis that in these novels, specially in No Laughing Matter, there is no obvious moral commentary or authorial intrusion. It seems then that Wilson is able to master and manipulate autobiographical elements

and to introduce them into his fiction without letting his 'personality' stand in the way. We have already seen that this was not the case in the early short stories where both the biographical situations and their moral implications are present in an obvious manner. Even though Wilson sets out the theory of 'memory' in The Wild Garden, it seems to me he was not quite aware how successfully the theory has been used in his mature fiction. Had he known this he would surely have mentioned The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot rather than the two early short stories. It is quite likely that the even greater success of No Laughing Matter is due largely to the very act of verbalizing the theory in The Wild Garden.

Wilson's frequent assertions regarding the use of childhood visions are often accompanied by references to Dickens who, in Wilson's opinion, has achieved considerable success in this respect, and also in resolving the many neurotic conflicts of personal life by dealing with them in the novels. The recurrent use of the breakdown themes in Wilson's novels is an attempt on Wilson's part to try and solve on an intellectual level the crisis in his own life. The situation in these novels have been generally defined by critics as the failure of liberal ideals, because this is one of the important issues in his first novel, Hemlock and After. But, as I have indicated earlier, this novel is a story of two breakdowns, only one of which (Bernard's) is related to the failure of liberal humanism. None of the other novels relate very directly to the question of humanism. As such I have been more interested in analysing the exact pattern of each breakdown and relating it to the author's own; I have shown how in each case the protagonist's predicament is resolved through a change in character as a result of self-realisation rather than through the adoption

of set actions, codes of conduct or pre-formulated 'therapeutic' measures as, for example, gardening.

The central moral problem in these novels -- the evasion of proper moral authority -- is also integrally related to this theme of breakdown. Thus in the mature works, Wilson's portrayal of a sense of pervasive evil is conveyed not only in such isolated figures of evil like Mrs Curry or Hubert Rose (in the early novel Hemlock and After) but also by the tendency in his protagonists to submit to a life of self-deceptions. Deception in any form, particularly self-deception is considered to be destructive to life and hence evil. Unlike the early short stories the problem of evil is difficult to isolate and pinpoint in terms of individual characters and incidents in the novels because it is organically embedded in the whole work and more particularly the overall themes of self-deception and breakdown.

In the final analysis it seems to me that though Wilson is not an exceptionally significant theorist of the novel yet his theories do go a long way in explaining his own novels. It is the novels and their moral-satiric emphasis which are more important as Wilson's contribution to contemporary British literature.

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