

GENTLE ANARCHY IN THE
NOVELS OF ETHEL WILSON

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NOVELS OF ETHEL WILSON

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Ethel Wilson's five novels as works that question the organization of twentieth-century, western society, especially as that organization pertains to women. Each novel is dealt with in a separate chapter, and each chapter explores the author's gently anarchic treatment of social attitudes. The family, which is the central unit of organization in our society, is disrupted in Wilson's presentation of it. This disruption is the focal point of my discussion. Human commitment has most often been regarded by critics as Wilson's central concern. Wilson, however, is concerned not simply with human commitment, but with female response in the "web" of humankind. She writes stories about women -- their strengths, their weaknesses, their silences. This thesis gives voice to the feminist aspects of Wilson's that, to date, have been kept silent.

A KEY TO TEXTUAL REFERENCES

All references to primary source materials have been incorporated directly into the text. The abbreviated titles are as follows:

HD: Hetty Dorval
IT: The Innocent Traveller
SA: Swamp Angel
T&W: "Tuesday and Wednesday"
LS: "Lilly's Story"
LSW: Love and Salt Water

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To Doug Bray

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Introduction

The novels of Ethel Wilson deal with the lives of women in western culture. Women's milieu in this culture is patriarchy. Wilson's awareness of patriarchy and its inherent biases is revealed through the presentation of her female characters. Their active and passive roles emerge through their daily decisions, which are made in compliance with or resistance to social attitudes. Female experience is confined to a series of responses to society's structure. In Wilson's fiction, women who resist, or attempt to resist, the confines of their society practise gentle anarchy. They challenge the roles prescribed to them within a culture that privileges men.

Nell Severance, in Swamp Angel, introduces the concept of gentle anarchy. She, like many of Wilson's characters, rejects the traditional role of mother in the traditional family unit. Her rejection is an act of anarchy in that it defies the overwhelming rigidity of society that designates woman as wife, then mother. Nell's anarchy is, however, 'gentle' since she does to some extent fulfill the role of both wife and mother, but in her own resisting way. Nell Severance will be discussed at length in Chapter Three; nevertheless, the implications of what she represents, gentle anarchy, must be explained prior to any specific analyses of Wilson's texts.

Anarchy implies disorder. It usually suggests a challenge to

an existing power. If anarchy is successful, it is no longer anarchy.

It is the new power. This thesis will not move beyond a view of Wilson's novels as being anything more than a challenge to social confines. Radical change is never the result of the protagonists' endeavours. But the disorder of dissent is. Order or organization of society is questioned in Wilson's fiction. Chris Weedon, in her text Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory, asserts that

"[p]atriarchy implies a fundamental organization which ... is not natural and inevitable, but socially produced" (Weedon, 127). The initial site of organization within patriarchal society is the nuclear family, and it is this organization that the author most vehemently rejects. She does not promote the disintegration of the family unit, but neither does she reinforce the concept that the unit nurtures all of society's members. Wilson presents female characters who are unable or unwilling to maintain the nucleus of the patriarchal family.

Hetty Dorval, Wilson's first novel, exposes the ongoing destruction caused by a society which rejects a pregnant, unmarried woman. "Lilly's Story," in The Equations of Love, more directly deals with the isolation of a single mother. The motherless Ellen Cuppy, in Love and Salt Water, is reluctant to make a commitment in marriage.

She is raised in a home where the father is absent most of the time. His career fulfillments take precedence over familial obligations.

Swamp Angel destroys the image of the family most blatantly. Maggie Lloyd is haunted by the death of her husband, daughter and father as she lives an isolated life separate from her intolerable second

husband. Maggie's friend, Nell Severance, enhances but softens the theme of fragmented families by demonstrating the success in which such families can exist. The Innocent Traveller examines that same success. The list of aberrant families in Wilson's fiction is a long one. The subject itself and the progressively self-conscious narrative voice who delivers the subject are gentle anarchy.

Western culture has for centuries enjoyed the apparent order derived from a society structured around the nuclear family. Our society constantly reinforces the 'normalcy' of living within this male-dominated group through, for example, the media, social institutions, and access to paid work. The underlying assumption of 'family life' is the assurance of general well-being for all. In recent years, the Women's Liberation Movement, to name only one group of dissenters, has challenged the values of patriarchal society, including the notion that the family is the accepted entity for communal living. General well-being obviously has not been assured for all. Wilson, writing well before the women's movement of the 1960's, is prophetically sensitive to the early concerns of the movement. Her compassion for single mothers, alienated women, financially dependent daughters, and humiliated wives constructs her literature. All of her female characters are fragments of patriarchal families that have somehow failed. I do not suggest that the family members are failures. They are not. But the concept of 'family' does not function for them. Instead, they live relatively untraditional lives that Wilson does not

idealize. Her female characters are survivors who experience unadorned but satisfying existences. Their well being finds its expression in individualism that cannot tolerate life within the norm of the nuclear family.

Ethel Wilson constructs a transformed society in her fiction by ignoring 'the family' and in doing so, she offers her protagonists relative freedom and mobility. The protagonists' lives, their assertion of individualism, are indeed the crux of the five novels. But their lives are not isolated. There are broad implications involved in the move from knowing one's self to living comfortably with the self, and the implications encompass all of society. The progression arising out of female self-assertion would transform society and the push toward that kind of transformation is anarchy. In the case of Wilson's novels, the push is quiet but steady and is, therefore, rendered gentle anarchy. The societal change that must ensue when women decline traditional roles is not a secondary aspect of Wilson's fiction, but a primary part of the individual lives of which she writes.

My approach to Ethel Wilson's novels is a new one. It is Wilson's insistent rejection of a traditionally structured society that urges me to read her novels as works of gentle anarchy. Ironic narration creates an infectious tension that enhances the author's challenge to the intolerance of society. Critical essays on her works do exist, but they are of limited scope. While many commentators are concerned with Wilson's sensitivity to human relationships, she is too

often regarded as a regional writer whose interest lies in character and place. Both perspectives are valid. But there is a vibrant political underpinning in her novels that cannot be disregarded. Her representation of aberrant families and her constant portrayal of resisting women places Wilson's fiction outside of British Columbia; her concerns are not regional but universal.

Chapter One

FAMILY SECRETS: CLEANING CLOSETS IN HETTY DORVAL

strong writer
(Hetty Dorval, Wilson's first novel, contrasts two families. The narrator, Frankie, is the only child of the Burnabys, a group that conforms, as closely as it can, to the family's traditional structure. Mrs. Broom and Hetty Dorval comprise the other family. Hetty and her mother are the antithesis of Frankie and her parents. *to be a person's life* Hetty's family lacks the societal sanctioning of marriage and the corresponding patriarchal surname. The disguise of the exact nature of their fragmented family prevents Hetty and Mrs. Broom, on one level, from being gentle anarchists. They attempt, poorly, to fit into society by not being a family at all. Mrs. Broom's eventual revelation of her relationship to Hetty is the beginning of her gentle anarchy. At the point of her admission, she starts to defy, openly, the structure of society. Narrative voice becomes increasingly defiant as well. Because of Mrs. Broom's confession, Frankie slowly begins to question the values she has been taught to uphold.

The novel explores the foundations and practices of both Frankie's and Hetty's family through the relationship of the two daughters. The result is the demonstration of rigid social attitudes that create smugness for compliant members of society and isolation for those who cannot or will not conform. Frankie's narration offers insight into the community's accepted authority, but more often her

insights question the inflexibility and the very existence of that authority.

The novel opens with the description of a constricting and boring atmosphere. Frankie Burnaby and her friend Ernestine await the arrival of the train in Lytton. They do this for entertainment. They do not expect a particular passenger, nor do they express any desire to move on with the train. Their action is obviously repetitive. With "experienced eyes," (HD, 1) they simply watch. The presence of Mrs. Broom and her dog momentarily disrupts the repetition. But the girls are not deterred by the otherwise stifling conditions:

It was a hot day. The heat of the sun burned down from above, it beat up from the ground and was reflected from the hot hills. Mr. Miles, the station agent, was in his shirt-sleeves; the station dog lay and panted, got up, moved away, lay down and panted again (HD, 1).

The young girls, as part of this scene, are as contained as the station itself. Their childish indifference to their restriction is their only freedom. In the course of the story, that freedom will disappear. The initial image of confinement sets the tone for the entire novel; it does, in fact, set the tone for all five of Wilson's novels.

Wilson creates sensitive descriptions of the beauty of British Columbia, which is the setting for all of her fiction. But her descriptions, like the one of the Lytton station, are far more sophisticated than simple guided tours. Indeed, the Lytton station that we read about is not inviting. To the contrary, it expresses Frankie's and Ernestine's distinct boundaries. William H. New

articulates Wilson's use of place in his essay, "The 'genius' of place and time: the fiction of Ethel Wilson." He notes that all Wilson's characters

are observed in relation to an environment that becomes their 'genius' and the author's balance of character with place becomes part of her exploration of man's relationship with himself, with others, and with the philosophical traps and supports which he invents to trouble and to comfort him (New, 39).

New's observations of characterization in Wilson are sound despite his phallogentric language that assumes that woman is included in the generic 'man'. However, New's argument is well supported when we read of Frankie standing on the bridge that overlooks the point where the Thompson River joins the Fraser River.

Frankie is an impressionable adolescent when she views the two rivers, but she is a woman as she narrates the story. The vulnerability of her youth often adds confusion to her experience as she moves toward adulthood, and that confusion remains evident as she recounts her girlhood. Wilson achieves the "balance of character with place" of which New writes by placing the young Frankie on the bridge, a transitory position that offers her at least two forward movements. Both the bridge and adolescence are pivotal: they are introductions to something new. But it is the older Frankie's metaphor for what she sees from the bridge that embodies New's "traps and comforts," and it is this embodiment that adds complexity to her narration:

Ever since I could remember, it was my

joy and the joy of all of us to stand on this strong iron bridge and look down at the line where the expanse of emerald and sapphire dancing water joins and is quite lost in the sullen Fraser. It is a marriage, where, as often in marriage, one overcomes the other, and one is lost in the other. The Fraser receives all the startling colour of the Thompson River and overcomes it, and flows on unchanged to look upon, but greater in size and quality than before (HD, 8).

It is vital to retrieve Wilson's point from this eloquent portrait. She is not solely interested in the flowing of two rivers. To overlook her comments on marriage would be to read as Hallvard Dahlie has done in his essay "Self-conscious Canadians." Dahlie accuses Wilson of becoming "an essayist" (Dahlie, 10) in her long, descriptive passages about Canadian landscape. He overlooks the subtleties of her writing, which, as New has argued, offer a balance of character with place that serves to enhance her underlying concern. Her subject here is marriage. It is the "hidden mine" (Gelfant, 119) in Wilson's landscape. Frankie conceives of marriage as an unequal partnership. In the course of her narration, Frankie will reveal that it is her mother, Ellen Burnaby, who, like the sparkling Thompson River, has been overcome in marriage.

The subordination of Ellen Burnaby surfaces in spite of the opinion of her friend, Sister Marie-Cecile, who considers that Frankie's "parents have between them the perfection of human love" (HD, 76,77). The perfection of human love seems to demand a yielding female as one of its partners, since Mrs. Burnaby's role is one of submission.

Her connection with Sister Marie-Cecile stems from her own formal education in Paris, at the Roman Catholic Sorbonne. Frankie, years later, is tutored by the Sister and she recalls that the "hours at the Convent were the direct if long-delayed result of the Sorbonne" (HD, 11). Frankie learns French, though, not Catholicism, from her tutor, as the child is "a wary and stubborn Protestant" (HD, 11) who will not be converted. A twelve year old girl does not by nature become wary and stubborn in her religion. She is undoubtedly forced into such an attitude. The implication is that Mrs. Burnaby succumbed to Protestantism in her marriage and that this religion became the religion of the Burnaby family. I regard the submission to be intense when I consider the rarity and determination involved in a Canadian girl, who, in approximately 1910, went to Paris to study at a Roman Catholic university. Ellen's religion would surely have been a source of vitality to her, and the forsaking of it, a definite loss of vitality.

Frankie is only vaguely aware of her mother's quiet past, but as an adult, she comments that

Mother and Father debated more than I knew, but the result was that when I was old enough ... I was sent to board with Mrs. Dunne in Lytton. ... Then during the week I went to public school, and twice a week I went after school to the small Convent-Hospital west of Lytton where there was a nun from Paris; she taught me French (HD, 10,11).

Wilson's choice of verbs is often enticing. That the parents "debated"

over the girl's schooling evokes a sense of stifling formality that is unhealthy in a marriage and a home. In this instance, I suggest that it discloses a tension arising out of Mrs. Burnaby's earlier submission to her husband, a submission that has not been forgotten.

The question of religion as an organized institution surfaces frequently in Wilson's novels, and for Frankie Burnaby it is one of many sources of confusion. During Frankie's first meeting with Hetty Dorval, the two young women are interrupted by the Reverend Mr. Thompson and the interruption reveals to Frankie a hypocrisy that exists among Mr. Thompson's parishioners. After his unsuccessful attempt to bring Mrs. Dorval into his fold, the Reverend leaves her, but not without a word of prayer. Frankie comments while she observes the scene:

I knew what Mr. Thompson was doing. I had seen it many times. When Mr. Thompson said, 'And now shall we have a word of prayer?' all of us who were assembled in the room rose, turned round, dropped upon our knees, put our elbows on our chair seats, folded our hands, and closed our eyes. Mr. Thompson did the same. Then he prayed out loud. We didn't like doing it very much but we all liked Mr. Thompson, so of course we did it (HD, 24).

The mechanical actions that Frankie describes recall the image of the panting dog at the Lytton station. They lack enthusiasm. The religious fervour involved in this kind of communal prayer exists entirely in Mr. Thompson, if it exists at all. The congregation goes through the motions to please the minister, and not as a show of faith. The redundancy of group prayer is taken to comical ends in The Innocent

Traveller, where Topaz Edgeworth and her family are reduced to active jack-in-the-boxes as they constantly rise and fall in invocation to their loved ones "in the Promised Land" (IT, 139). The comedy finds its expression in irony, since the Edgeworth family commemorates its loved ones daily in kind words and fond memories. Their gentility is thwarted by the crassness of the Reverend Elmer Pratt's thundering sermon. Yet, like Mr. Thompson's flock, the Edgeworths go through the unsatisfying motions of demonstrative prayer.

Hetty Dorval declines such outward show. Upon seeing Mr. Thompson get down on his knees, Hetty says, "'Do I have to do that too, or would it be all right if I just did this?' and she clasped her hands and closed her eyes and looked like a saint in ecstasy" (HD, 24). The rules of religion that have been instilled in Frankie cause her to think that "there was something somewhere that was not quite right" (HD, 25) about Mrs. Dorval's "disposal" of Mr. Thompson. Indeed, there is something that is not quite right if 'right' describes the standards by which Frankie has been raised. Prior to the meeting with Mr. Thompson, Hetty inadvertently makes Frankie aware that the girl has been subjected to gender-based behaviour standards in her upbringing. As Frankie and Hetty make their way into Lytton on horseback, they are awed by the flight of the wild geese. Hetty breaks the silence of their speechless delight: "'God,'" said Mrs. Dorval. Then, "'What a sight!'" (HD, 19). Her comment causes Frankie to forget the geese, and she remarks:

I was brought shockingly back to earth. I was quite used to hearing the men round Mr. Rossignol's stable, and other men too, say 'God' for no reason at all. And it goes without saying that the Rev. Mr. Thompson said 'God' in church, as it were officially, and that we all sang about God with nothing more than ordinary church-going emotion. But never, never, in our house (except once or twice, Father) or in Ernestine's house or at Mrs. Dunne's or in any of our friends' houses (unless we were saying our prayers) did people ever mention God. It would have seemed an unnatural thing to do, which, come to think of it, is strange. So when I heard Mrs. Dorval say 'God' in that way, it took her out of the likelihood of Mrs. Dunne's house or Ernestine's mother's, and probably out of the church, and somehow peculiarly connected her with Mr. Rossignol's stable (HD, 19).

Hetty's language greatly reduces her status in the young girl's mind, but more importantly it conjures in Frankie a confused but valid notion that men have a privileged place within the community.

Realization of such a privilege recalls the junction of the two rivers and puts them into perspective with regard to marriage and society. The yielding Ellen Burnaby supports this perspective. The Thompson River, which "pours itself into" the Fraser, connotes inevitable female submission. While the revelation to Frankie of male privilege is only an isolated incident, it will become increasingly clear that male privilege is in fact a symptom of male domination of the society in which she lives. Language plays only one part in depicting male freedom. The implications of Frankie's thoughts go much further than a concern with words. I do not imagine that men who say

"God" in any capacity would be denied access to Ernestine's house, for example. Surely Frankie's father, who has said 'God' "once or twice," is an avid church-goer, since he has, I suggest, nurtured a stubborn Protestantism in his daughter. Yet Frankie is quite sure that Hetty's masculine language would impose barriers for her in Lytton. By twelve years of age, the girl is sensitive to a gender-regulated life style, which she vaguely considers to be "strange" as she relates the experience years later.

The Burnaby family in Hetty Dorval is the first family that we are introduced to in Wilson's novels. They are also the most complete family of whom Wilson writes. But even the Burnabys do not maintain their structure -- Mr. Burnaby dies violently in a crash in the Fraser Canyon. He leaves behind him a wife and child to form a smaller family comprised of mother and daughter, which ironically reminds me of the most striking mother/daughter relationship in all of Wilson's fiction: Hetty Dorval and Mrs. Broom. The irony lies in the circumstances that surround the creation of both fragmented families. Ellen and Frankie lose Mr. Burnaby through accidental death, which has no logical explanation, and for which the wife and daughter cannot be held accountable. Mrs. Broom and Hetty are deprived of their husband/father through socially created and imposed restrictions that have no more basis in logic than accidental death does. Mrs. Broom is not married to Hetty's father and the result of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy is disastrous for both mother and daughter. In a scene provoked by Hetty's protective austerity, and Frankie's tyrannical smugness, Mrs.

Broom painfully reveals that she is not Hetty's guardian as she has always pretended to be, but that she is actually Hetty's mother. It is Frankie's arrogant complacency that further provokes Mrs. Broom to disclose the conditions that brought about her denial of motherhood.

Frankie's complacency surfaces and provokes Mrs. Broom's disclosure about her daughter. Frankie has been raised in an atmosphere that assumes self-righteousness. When Hetty moves to the Lytton area, she is followed by rumours about sexual scandal, and the rumours render her the subject of community gossip. The gossip, however, has no grounds, but it is threatening enough to disturb Mr. and Mrs. Burnaby greatly when they discover that their daughter has paid several secret visits to Mrs. Dorval. Mr. Burnaby disciplines his daughter for her association with Hetty, whom he labels "The Menace," and his disciplinary action presents him as the patriarch. His masculine language enhances his role. In anger, he exclaims "My God!" (HD, 41) (Frankie is not shocked by his outburst) and then he takes control of the corrective situation. He has to tell Frankie exactly what the problem is because it is a problem created by male privilege. Therefore, it is a problem that he best understands. He describes Hetty as "a woman of no reputation" (HD, 42) and Frankie "naturally ... knew" (HD, 42) what he meant since these 'types' of women had been the subject of neighbourhood gossip before. The whore in literature, the "femme-fatale" (Pacey, 56) that Desmond Pacey labels Hetty as being, is a damaging stereotype and one that ignores the male

counterpart who creates and defines the denigrated position.

Frankie is deeply troubled by her father's angry aggression and understandably so. She has been elated by her meetings with Hetty and she has eagerly entered in a private and thoroughly enjoyable relationship with her. Naturally, she wants to defend her new friend against her father's accusations and she suggests that "'[m]aybe it's all lies that you've heard'" (HD, 42). Frankie's parents make no response to her defense. Their minds securely cling to the rumour they have heard, so much so that they adopt the hearsay as truth, and their daughter's valid defense is reduced to childish naivete. Frankie accommodates Mr. Burnaby's request -- she ends her relationship with Hetty. This is to be expected. She is a trusting twelve year old child who unquestioningly follows the rule of the father. But what is extremely surprising is Frankie's ultimate appropriation of the same rumours. She takes as truth what she hears about Hetty and this 'truth' becomes Frankie's impetus for action. Frankie, like her father, comes to regard Hetty as The Menace and her mistrust of the woman leads her to the apartment of Hetty and Mrs. Broom, where Mrs. Broom discloses the predicament of her youth. The childish naivete that offers Frankie comfortable indifference initially at the stifling station in Lytton also gives her some much needed dignity as she is subjected to her parents' self-righteousness regarding Hetty. But her freedom in naivete dissolves as she matures and adopts the attitudes of those, like her parents, who are at the centre of society.

Mrs. Broom must consider those at the centre of society, and

her relationship to them, in her decision to raise Hetty as a charge rather than a daughter. The strength of that centre is alarming when we see how it transforms Frankie's young, open mind into a tyrannical mentality. Frankie directly confronts Hetty, and challenges the woman's behaviour as a result of third hand information about a woman, of whom the gossip "said she didn't think Dorval was the name but it must have been the same because [Mrs. Burnaby] described her'" (HD, 90). Frankie assumes the patriarchal, self-righteousness of her father. She plans to spare her young friend Molly from a dangerous association with a "woman of no reputation," a reputation that is wholly constructed from a few precariously related observations. Frankie's intervention is patriarchal -- her goal is to protect the values of the centre, the perpetuation of the family unit (in this case, the family consists of simply a brother and sister) from infiltration by a woman whom she deems not to cherish those values. Frankie places her 'noble' values at the centre of existence, thus marginalizing the "complete selfishness" (HD, 93) that she ascribes to Hetty. What Frankie labels as complete selfishness, I have already described as protective austerity. Hetty is talked about far more than she talks. Evasive silence or half sentences are her most frequent response, and they often mistakenly render her uncertainty as arrogance. Hetty's behaviour is learned. It is a direct result of the isolation she has known as Mrs. Broom's charge.

Mrs. Broom is a victim in a world whose values Frankie upholds.

The younger woman's actions against Hetty demonstrate her complacent acceptance of standards that exclude the pregnant, unmarried woman. There is compassion in Frankie's tone as she explains that "Richard and Molly are brother and sister born with years between them of parents who died when Molly was five years old and Richard a boy of eighteen" (HD, 72). But she is void of compassion when she confronts Mrs. Broom's handling of a fragmentary family. The danger of her attitude surfaces when she states that Mrs. Broom should have faced her situation and raised Hetty within a mother/daughter relationship. Accusingly, Frankie blurts out "Oh, Mrs. Broom, ... why did you do this to Hetty now? Why did you let her grow up like this, all in the dark ... ? If you'd brought her up like a mother and daughter maybe she'd ... '" (HD, 103). Frankie is not given the opportunity to finish her accusation because she elicits a quick and angry reaction from Mrs. Broom. But Wilson's use of ellipses at the end of Frankie's speech implies that the girl is becoming vaguely aware of what she is suggesting. Frankie stops speaking slightly before Mrs. Broom starts. She should be asking herself where one would find a community that would welcome a mother with an "illegitimate" daughter. I use quotation marks to emphasize the imposition of a structured legal system that designates a child to be legal only if he or she is born within the contract of marriage. While feminists, among others, accept families that are not sanctioned by law, Lytton would surely not have welcomed Mrs. Broom and her bastard into its tightly knit community. The Lyttoners are a group who actively ostracize Hetty. In spite of

Hetty's self-imposed sequestered existence in the town, the Lyttoners "extorted" (HD, 13) information about her, which they wrongly use to judge her. Even her name, Dorval, is different when one considers the British Columbian place names like Burnaby and Thompson that Wilson employs to signify established members of society; thus, the author demonstrates the immense difficulty for those new or different people in being accepted. It is no wonder that the young Frankie places Hetty at Mr. Rossignol's stable upon hearing her utter "God." The name Rossignol, like Dorval, probably designates a non-British Columbian. Hetty, as an outsider, can be compared to "the fair people [who] lived in their vans or trailers" (HD, 45) because they are denied lodgings in Lytton based on their status as "[t]hem show people" (HD, 45). Ironically, Hetty is even more like the native British Columbian "Indians [who] in small groups, moved always together, as by some inner self-protective compulsion, like certain birds, with their own kind of awareness" (HD, 45). The Indians' awareness surely includes a disdain for their enclosed lives "at the rancheree near Lytton" (HD, 10), and a disgust for Mr. Burnaby, who "had established a claim, years earlier, on the families" (HD, 9) of two local Indians. The questionable authority of names and people like Burnaby and Thompson conveniently overlooks the Indians' initial claim on the land. My digression about the marginalization of the Indians and the show people enhances Hetty's dilemma in Lytton and further demonstrates the futility of Frankie's censure of Mrs. Broom.

Above, I referred to Frankie's attitude as a dangerous one. In assuming that Mrs. Broom ought to have revealed her child's illegitimacy, Frankie not only suggests to the reader the doom involved in such a revelation, but she exposes herself as being wholly entrenched in the values of her society that she fails to see how those values could destroy a family like Mrs. Broom and Hetty, and furthermore, how those values forced Mrs. Broom to create the guardian/ward relationship in the first place. The ultimate victimization falls upon Frankie, who matures into a state of ignorance where she is unaware of the patriarchal dominance that she is promulgating. Mrs. Broom's unwed pregnancy makes her uncomfortably cognizant of those values that Frankie regards as universal, and she articulates her discomfort quite clearly to her accuser, Frankie:

'A lot you know, you comfortable safe ones. Wait till you've had your baby in secret, my fine girl, in a dirty foreign place, and found a way to keep her sweet and clean and a lady like her father's people was, before you talk so loud. Shut your mouth!' (HD, 103,04).

In choosing to keep her baby sweet and clean, Mrs. Broom is responding to the rigid structures of her society. Hers is a response of survival.

Mrs. Broom is forced to lie, to deny her own "natural" child, in order to become acceptable to an "unnatural" social structure. Her denial of Hetty sees her doubly consumed by male dominance. The second consuming is, of course, her submission to patriarchal standards that exclude illegitimate children. The first submission is to Hetty's

father. Her name, Mrs. Broom, suggests her role as a domestic worker, a role that she continues in her life with Hetty. Her name also suggests the agility with which she sweeps away the unwanted debris of her past. But since she implies that Hetty's father's people are of a higher class than she is, it seems that as a domestic worker she was sexually exploited by a man who should have exercised more responsibility than he did. In disguising the 'mistake' that she makes with Hetty's father, Mrs. Broom protects his safe anonymity and again concedes to male dominance. She thereby denies a mutual loving relationship between mother and daughter.

Hetty Dorval compares two families and reveals how societal standards impinge on the family and ostracize, unfairly, those who do not comply. Frankie's narration, which incorporates both childish recollection and the uncertainty of young adulthood, ironically exposes her self-complacency. Her closing comment about the doom of occupied Vienna includes the doom of Hetty, who is in Vienna with her Jewish friend, Jules Stern. Frankie's awareness of the "faint confused sounds" (HD, 116) that were heard from the city parallels Hetty's own fragmented manner of speaking, and her frequent mute self-defenses. The confused sounds contrast with Frankie's clear, authoritative voice, and it seems that the sounds cause her to reconsider her own position.

The novel's final statements are distinctly separated from the last chapter by several blank lines. The empty space serves as a time of reflection for Frankie, a reflection that is stung by the horror of

World War II -- and a reflection that reveals to Frankie how her own assumed authority rejected Hetty and helped to send her "on her way" (HD, 116) to the very centre of human intolerance. Wilson's theme of human commitment is introduced with John Donne's invocation to humankind. The theme ends, bitterly, with the destruction of World War II. However, Frankie's tendency toward self-recrimination alludes, perhaps, to some future tolerance.

Chapter Two

THE FAMILY WAY: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

The Innocent Traveller recounts with compassion and comedy the lives of a family of "left-over women" (Smyth, 93). Smyth's metaphor for the Edgeworth females evokes at least two images of woman's world, which is the subject of Smyth's essay, "Strong Women of the Web: Women's Work and the Community in Ethel Wilson's Fiction." First, left-overs recall the remnants of a meal, and the meal in Wilson's fiction is often the tangible result of women's work. We are, therefore, dealing with a mundane community, but the work within the web is not so tiresome as to be unworthy of recognition. Second, left-overs may remind us of another aspect of women's work -- child delivery, the immediate afterbirth, and the years of life after birthing. It is with this second image that I begin my consideration of The Innocent Traveller.

Wilson affirms childbirth to be the impetus for a woman's life, and often for death, in nineteenth-century England. The now dated term "confinement" carried far more weight in the previous century when pregnancy, birthing, and child-rearing both defined and confined women. The motherless home was relatively commonplace during the childhood of Topaz Edgeworth, whose mother Mary dies in confinement with her ninth child. The novel's narrator expresses the desensitized attitude of Victorian England with regard to the life span of women when she describes William Sandbach a "a widower, and, as mortality among wives

was high, this seemed almost according to nature" (IT,43). Death in childbirth is seen as 'natural' by this society, and the possibility of it becomes part of the consciousness of the society's young women. Topaz Edgeworth and her niece Rachel defy this 'natural' occurrence by eventually rejecting marriage and potential death in confinement.

Topaz entertains expectancy of becoming the second wife of the widower William Sandbach, but her hopes are dashed. The doom of Topaz's expectation arises out of her own attitude and the attitude of Sandbach. Neither person is willing to submit to the confines of matrimony. Sandbach is blunt, if only in a private confession, about his feelings. In contemplation of his situation, Sandbach asks himself, "'Shall I marry again? ... I wonder if Topaz Edgeworth ... she's very good at a dinner-party ... but I don't love³ her and I don't think I ever would love her, and I can **not** go through that misery again. I'm free'" (IT, 45). The misery to which he refers is the death of a wife. Experience causes Sandbach to regard the loss as inevitable. I do not overlook her denial of love for Topaz. I do discern, though, that the italicized 'not' places emphasis on his deepest anxiety, the loss of a partner in marriage. Without a wife, Sandbach is 'free' of that possible misery. He chooses to exist as a family of one as a form of protection, and I call him a family because he conducts his life as if there were a Mrs. Sandbach. He infiltrates and is accepted by the community's social structure, not only because he is a charming politician, but because he is "the only man in the two towns who gave dinner-parties" (IT, 43).

His behaviour is noteworthy. He overcomes the loneliness of bachelorhood by ignoring a social order that relies on women to organize functions of entertainment. His act is gently defiant in that he enjoys the social world of a married man without submitting to the potentially painful restraints of marriage.

Topaz's disposition is far more complex than Sandbach's, in spite of the innocence ascribed to her in Wilson's title. Her life is one of continual defiance. From our first meeting with her "[u]nderneath the heavy mahogany table ... in a world of shoes" (IT, 4) to the freedom she finds nearly one hundred years later in kicking off her knickers, Topaz Edgeworth refuses to comply with any social patterns. Her recalcitrance, however, does not prevent her from loving William Sandbach. But her love comes dangerously close to transforming her into someone other than Topaz. The first notion of her passion renders her "rapt, plain, and silent" (IT, 44). These are unfitting adjectives for Topaz. Indeed, the entire Edgeworth family spends a lifetime attempting to squelch Topaz -- and they fail. Her spontaneity, her penchant to live fully in her own distinct way, is the essence of Topaz. She challenges the existing social order by her rejection of it. The confession that she makes about her feelings for Mr. Sandbach creates alarm because of her willingness toward uncharacteristic compromise: Topaz vows, "I would lie down and let him [Sandbach] tread upon me" (IT, 46). Her confession is unreasonable, and her life as we read it bears witness to this moment of passionate irrationality.

Love, in the mind of Topaz, will reduce her, yet she hopes it will transform her into Mrs. William Sandbach -- a woman who, it seems, would bear little resemblance to Topaz Edgeworth. Her role as wife, as she sees it, would dissolve the "irascible" (IT, 15) individualism that she retains throughout her century of living. Above, I also stated that love was not Sandbach's immediate criterion in his rejection of Topaz as wife. He, in fact, considers that he would probably never love her, yet he entertains the thought of marriage. Love is an abstract emotion, and while Wilson relies on her readers having a similar notion of love's joys and disappointments, she does not rely on love to be the compulsion and strength that leads to and upholds marriage in The Innocent Traveller. The world Wilson presents is based on practicality. With the death of Mrs. Edgeworth, which love could not prevent, comes Mr. Edgeworth's realization that "he had done with Love. It is all very well to say that Father had done with Love, but there remained the need for companionship and a sharing of the household's cares which were inescapable" (IT, 10). This need "drove Father into a second marriage, whether he would or no. The foundations of this marriage were respect and integrity" (IT, 11). Love may become a part of such solid foundations, but love is too abstract to confront the concreteness of a motherless home that houses eight children.

Father Edgeworth is "driven" into his second marriage by the demands created by his children. In his situation, he is unlike William Sandbach, and cannot simultaneously play the role of husband and wife. The community of Ware is attuned to Mr. Edgeworth's helplessness:

Each woman [who] attended Mrs. Edgeworth's funeral] knew in her heart that Mr. Edgeworth, with all those children and bereft of his wife, was, for all his vigour, ability, and good looks, much more vulnerable than Mrs. Edgeworth would have been if her Joseph had been taken from her. Every wife and mother yearned over him, and so did others who were neither wife nor mother (IT, 10).

The yearnings of every wife and mother reveal their compassion for the man. But the others, who are neither wife nor mother, reveal a different interest in Mr. Edgeworth. He is for them a potential husband, and marriage is one of the few opportunities available to a single Victorian woman who may wish to leave the home of her parents. We learn immediately in the novel from the authority of Matthew Arnold "that a modicum of education, given under healthy and happy conditions, is the right of every boy. This ... [he] would extend to girls also" (IT, 1). Thus, the young women who attend Mrs. Edgeworth's funeral are undoubtedly uneducated. Their success will not be realized in professional careers, but rather as wife and mother in their own households. Their interest in Joseph Edgeworth, or in any single male, is an interest in independence, which, paradoxically, will find its expression in a loss of identity.

Mary Edgeworth best exemplifies this paradox. She is a middle child who possesses neither the charm of the eldest sister Annie, nor the vitality of the younger Topaz. "Mary had never yet been Mary, a person in her own right" (IT, 18) when Edward Shaw proposes marriage to her. The conditions of the proposed union will take Mary, with her

husband, to the Mission Fields of India. Her status as an uneducated, unambitious young woman leads her to accept the proposal. Love is not her motive -- she hardly knows Edward Shaw. It is not surprising then that Mary experiences her individuality fading -- she "had begun to feel that she was nothing but Mr. Edgeworth's good girl who was going to marry a missionary, no longer Mary who was going to marry Edward" (IT, 21). In her move to become a person in her own right, outside of her father's house, Mary only becomes an isolated wife whose husband is a stranger and whose family is removed from her. She submits to the consummation of her marriage, we are told, more out of homesickness than love, and the swiftness with which Wilson relates the entire relationship between the couple creates the impression that Mary conceived on her wedding night and died nine months later after the birth of her twins. Again, another motherless home exists. The loneliness of growing up without a mother may be one reason why Mary's daughters, the "indistinguishable twins Tilly-and-Sassy" (IT, 159) choose to remain "spinsters" (IT, 5). They may be disinclined to repeat the same kind of household. The theme of motherless homes and childless women is pervasive in The Innocent Traveller, and while Mary was sadly indifferent to the possibility of death in childbirth and the confines of wifedom, there are at least two women in the Edgeworth family who are not.

Topaz and Rachel consciously preserve themselves by existing outside of matrimonial bonds. Topaz's decision is at once innocent and

shrewd, and I propose that her innocence exists in appearance only, and is a calculated result of her shrewdness. She enjoys an open willingness to tread lightly upon others and elicit from them the means of her well being. This forthrightness, which is exclusively hers, reveals the ludicrousness of her silent vow to invite William Sandbach to tread upon her. In reality, she could never allow that to happen. Topaz is always in control. At the dinner table where her family hosts the prestigious Mr. Matthew Arnold, Topaz "determined to be noticed immediately, so she spoke across the table to the guest" (IT, 2) despite the fact that all the children had been "warned" to maintain silence and gravity throughout the meal. The child's constant, defiant outbursts achieve her goal. She "had succeeded. She had been noticed" (IT, 2). Topaz is artful and wholly aware of her strategic location at the family table. Father, the patriarch, sat "[f]ar away at the end of the table" (IT, 1) rendering Topaz physically unreachable by him, and throughout her life she will remain at a protective distance from visible male authority.

Topaz receives more than a modicum of the education that Matthew Arnold would extend to the girl children of his era. Her classical training at Mrs. Porter's school is complete enough to permit her to teach. But she does not teach. Her status as a wealthy business man's daughter spares her from the drudgery of wage earning. Topaz, though, spares herself from learning the details of another occupation, that of household matriarch. At the time of her stepmother's death, "Topaz was left in a position for which ... she was not by experience prepared"

(IT, 71) and as a result, a servant must assume the position. Her inexperience is learned. Her refusal to be challenged by "the mechanics of ordering, marketing, selecting, planning, cooking, or serving" (IT, 72) removes Topaz from the likelihood of ever becoming a wife. She is at this time approaching fifty years of age, and she is completely unabashed at the prospect of being cared for by anyone who would play the role of mother in her life. Her disposal towards an entirely social rather than practical life excludes the possibility of her being a productive family member. Instead, she is superfluous -- although cherished. She uses the social order, of which she is not really a part, for those mechanical necessities of life that she will not provide for herself. I emphasize 'will not' because it is unthinkable that a woman so well read, well travelled, and well determined to be noticed 'can not' learn to prepare a meal or plan a budget.

Topaz's gratifying vulnerability evokes the thought of her father's vulnerability that was apparent to each woman at Mrs. Edgeworth's funeral. Vulnerability is equated with the incapacity for caring for one's self and one's family. While Mr. Edgeworth could surely provide financially for his children, his traditional role as father sequesters him from the daily routines that make his earned wages necessary to both his children and himself. He is, therefore, aware of his need "for a house partner who would maintain the standards by which he wished his children to grow up" (IT, 11). His attitude explains to some extent why a woman like Topaz chooses to stay outside of a

patriarchal domain; nevertheless, Mr. Edgeworth's simultaneous control of and withdrawal from family routine is conventional according to Victorian times. Topaz's defiance is not. Her decision to be unconventional eventually places her in the care of Rachel, her niece, who becomes "the man of the house" (IT, 158) of "left-over women" in Vancouver.

Rachel is an androgynous character, in that she is both man of the house, and acting mother of a group of single women. Desmond Pacey comments that "Rachel is the practical one, the Martha to Annie" (Pacey, 75) but, in fact, her name is Rachel, not Martha. I agree that like Martha, she is the care giver, but more directly, she is like her Biblical namesake, Rachel, who is the surrogate mother to another woman's children. By being both mother and father, Rachel's role deconstructs the gender-based differences that construct the conventional and unconventional existences of Mr. Edgeworth and Topaz discussed above. Yet, this family of women is still unconventional. It includes no men. It is not a nuclear family.

Rachel, like Topaz, is deliberate in her decision to be unmarried. She differs from Topaz in that she conforms to society's pressure to be productive, and because of her difference, Topaz becomes her charge. Rachel not only takes on the duties of household administrator, she is also reduced to being the one who must face "the wash full of those pocket-handkerchiefs of [Topaz's]" (IT, 185,6). But Rachel's decision to remain single is the key to her survival, in spite of the burden Topaz presents. Her singularity is her strength. It

affords her an inner life that Topaz never needs. Rachel secures herself in contemplation:

... but I could never have married Tom Shaw or anyone else. Only this life that I lead is tolerable to me. I could not endure to be other than I am. Oh what a beautiful, beautiful morning!

There was within Rachel a virgin well into which beauty silently seeped. She could receive the beauty of the morning without speaking. She did not have to transmute this beauty into conversation (IT, 186).

The language Wilson uses in this passage connotes a complete marriage between Rachel and her place. As the "virgin," Rachel allows the essence of her surroundings to enter her. She is fulfilled by this union. There is no submission involved in this marriage, no "deferr[ing] to her mild lord" (IT, 68) as her grandmother had done. As a result, Rachel is self-assured in her responsible capacity as the leader of the new Edgeworth family.

In forming a family, these women comply with social order. It is their commitment to each other as women, and their repudiation of the traditional male authoritative figure in the family that reveal their defiance of conventionality. Blanche Gelfant notes that:

[f]amilies provide a context of relationships which give a woman (in particular) a meaningful role in life as mother, wife, daughter, sister, cousin. The Innocent Traveller celebrates these roles, but also undermines them ... by showing Rachel as a woman held in perpetual if loving servitude (Gelfant, 123).

I suggest that the only role being undermined is that of wife in The Innocent Traveller. There are no wives in Rachel's Vancouver home. Without disregarding that at least one member of any communal living must be an organizer, which Rachel surely is, I am not convinced of the existence of servitude in her case. Servitude is bondage, and it overlooks the realization of Rachel's success. She chooses accomplishment and independence outside of marriage. She achieves both in caring for this group of women, and her "reward ... [is] the fulfillment of her own fierce integrity and sense of order, and the confidence and placid affection of her family" (IT, 161). Her willingness to be so active in life, to be the un-stereotypical spinster, diminishes the notion of servitude, and more importantly, magnifies her defiance of social expectations. She is bound only by her own beliefs, which are not unaffected by community standards, but are distinctly Rachel's, and are formed for unselfish survival.

Servitude does exist in this household -- but not in the instance of Rachel. Topaz is the woman who becomes a slave by her unwillingness to become more than superficially involved in the people or events around her. Her shallowness makes her a slave to indolence and immaturity. She knows no complexity that could offer her elation or pain and thus free her from her own timid boundaries. There is disappointment in the narrator's tone when she compares Topaz to

those 'water-gliders' which we see in summer running about on the top of pleasant weed-trimmed pools. Unencumbered by boots or boats they run, seldom wetting their feet and, one supposes, unaware

of the dreadful deeps below them, in which other beings more heavily weighted are plunged, and swim or sink, caught in the mud or entangled by the debris of circumstance and human relations (IT, 103).

The image of human interaction that Wilson presents here is so unpleasant that one could almost commend Topaz for keeping her feet dry. However, to do so would be to overlook an emphatic concern in all of Wilson's fiction, which is encapsulated in the epigraph of her first novel:

"No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe;
every man is a peece of the Continent,
a part of the maine; if a Clod bee
washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse,
as well as if a Promonitorie were, as well
as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine
owne were; any mans death diminishes me,
because I am involved in Mankinde;" JOHN DONNE

Topaz is not involved in humankind. I argued earlier that her restraint is protective, and I am still of that view. But through the juxtaposition of Topaz and Rachel, Wilson demonstrates how differently two women can challenge social institutions like the nuclear family. Rachel's "fierce integrity" offers productivity and personal satisfaction. Topaz's idle and oxymoronic loud timidity creates nothing but an odd and often irritating character. She 'islands' herself far more drastically than Hetty Dorval does, but with different results. Topaz is noticed; however, she makes no impression. Finally, she is only "a gossamer" (IT, 275) and not a "strong woman of the web."

Topaz could have developed further her gentle anarchy. Her vitality and individualism are ingredients enough to make a worthy

platform of defiance that could live on as strong impetus for change. Instead, she fades to insignificance, much like her forgotten sister Mary. Rachel, on the other hand, is remembered. She develops for herself a potent sense of purpose by recognizing and adhering to her rejection of wifehood. Rachel does not represent an absolute repudiation of marriage as an institution, but rather a celebration of female integrity that does not rely on a male counterpart for identity. Rachel's awareness of choice and her earned self-confidence allow her to "swim" strongly in the entanglement of human relations. An Edgeworth nephew notes that "a person like my Great-Aunt Rachel has her own memorial. But Great-Great-Aunt Topaz ... [who only] agitate[d] the stream ... has no Memorial" (IT, 104,05). His observation aptly incorporates Wilson's metaphor for making a mark in history. Topaz agitates the stream only by making herself an island in it. Rachel confronts the water from within, I suggest, by swimming upstream. She is in the company of strong swimmers like Maggie Lloyd and Ellen Cuppy, and another rarely mentioned figure in Wilson's fiction, Emily Porter, of Mrs. Porter's School.

Emily Porter is the school teacher of young Topaz. As the result of growing up as a motherless child, Emily is an oddity in that she is fully exposed to her father's life. He is a Greek scholar -- and presumably that is what Emily would have become had she not married. Her marriage fails, and as readers, we are asked to regard the situation closely as Wilson is elliptical in her discussion of it. The author hints, through Mr. Porter's point of view, that Emily is unable to

fulfil the role of wife -- her tendency to academe creates within her an austerity that repels her husband. I, however, mistrust Edmund Porter's sensibility:

Never once did Emily's soft limbs melt willingly into his arms. ... When, before a year was out, their only child, a daughter, was born, Edmund saw with bitterness that the child aroused in his wife a passion of tenderness that he could never evoke. He detested seeing Emily bending over the baby and lifting it to her breast. He absented himself from home whenever he could. He was an easy, natural sensual man, and she an academic beauty who had better married one of her father's old friends, and spent her life puttering about a library with a lot of bloodless old scholars with their academic jokes, thought Edmund bitterly (IT, 29,30).

Emily's inability to be Edmund's wife on his terms suggests that Edmund has an overly rigid concept of what a wife should be. His sexual satisfaction appears to be his greatest concern. Such an attitude could reduce marriage to a barn yard affair. Wilson has been accused of incorporating into her fiction "the Puritanical element of Canadianism which seeks to hide sexuality behind a cloak of moral rationalizing" (Dahlie, 9). I disagree. While I would not place her with writers who 'flash' their readers by flinging open the cloak, Wilson addresses human sexuality as she does every subject -- with subtle dignity. She does not, however, regard sexuality as the sole basis of a good marriage. It is useful to look back to the second marriage of Mr. Edgeworth which had for its foundation "respect and integrity." Wilson does not overlook

that when the "stepmother ... began to live in Father's bedroom with Father ... [that] [t]he household moved again into smooth accustomed gear" (IT, 14), but in the two years that it ran out of gear, it ran without bitterness. Edmund Porter reveals selfishness and jealousy of his infant daughter that, along with his perception of his wife's coldness, render their marriage unworkable. Emily is left to run a single-parent family, not unlike the one in which she grew up.

Like Rachel, Emily uses the skills at her disposal to be successful; hence, her school for girls materializes. Her thought of the past is to consider "[w]hat a shipwreck it's been!" (IT, 32) and as a strong swimmer, like her counterparts, she survives the wreck. Only in breaking the bonds of marriage is Emily able to implement her knowledge and usefulness productively in society. Her value as a mother is embellished also as the child will be nurtured in an atmosphere that fosters the education of women, an atmosphere that intimidates her father. Edmund discerns the contemplative, serious nature of Emily to derive from her scholarly background, and he regards her nature as unacceptable in a wife. Ironically, Emily's educative abilities, coupled with her divorce, provoke her to share her learning with many young girls. The breakdown of one social institution spurs the existence of another and portends the reforms that Matthew Arnold affirms. His proposed changes will not occur without resistance, but, once met, they will stimulate further needed innovations in the system. Central to my argument is that as greater changes occur in the structure of society, smaller, but often more painful changes take place, such as

the failure of the family unit. Edmund and Emily Porter are both instigators and victims of the change.

The Innocent Traveller surveys a century in the lives of the Edgeworth family members. While the novel focuses on Topaz's gay but insignificant contribution to the family and to society, it also raises the question of what encourages such inactivity. I maintain that Topaz's life is a reaction to a patriarchal nuclear family that she rejects. Her existence on the periphery of that unit does not alter the social structure in which she lives, but it does denote her inability, and the inability of many like her, to conform. Topaz personifies unconventionality, but Wilson chooses to demonstrate the character's maladjustment through humour and compassion. Such a view is pragmatic. Most nonconformists are not tolerated as openly as Topaz is, which points to the hardship of living outside of social norms. Wilson's treatment of this subject is gentle. Like her characters, she only mildly resists the society of which she writes. Yet, she does infect her readers with questions about the stubborn strictures of civilization. One may even view her work as elegantly sardonic if we see Topaz as the laughable product of nonconformity. The "necklaces and bracelets to which Aunty [Topaz] was addicted" usually made her look "wrong" (IT, 228). In fact, her apparel frequently presents Topaz as clownish. Viewing her as too gentle in her anarchy is sad, but I think useful if we are to learn something from Topaz. Wilson's fiction suggests that gentle anarchy should create change through a character's

active involvement in society. Topaz's adamant disentanglement from the "web" of humankind prevents her from encouraging such change.

Chapter Three

FINDING 'NEW SPACE': THE RE/QUEST OF MAGGIE LLOYD

The gentle anarchy in Swamp Angel is pervasive. Wilson's presentation of aberrant families again includes women who form groups because independence, death, and despair prevent the nuclear family from functioning. The author's concern with the disintegration of the family unit is subtle, yet it underpins the novel's progression. Three female characters, Maggie Lloyd, Vera Gunnarsen, and Nell Severance all defy conformity in efforts to achieve personal freedom. The women's movements toward self-assertion are brave and unrelenting, yet, in spite of their actions, all three women remain bound by convention. Their accomplishments are often undercut because they find it impossible to survive outside the rigidity of social expectations.

Most obviously, Vera Gunnarsen, a disillusioned wife, tries but fails to maintain a life endurable to her. She succumbs always to her husband's self-serving demands. The Gunnarsens' relationship becomes one of belligerent tolerance, with Vera as the partner most vulnerable to blame because of her constant pettiness; however, Halidar's quiet, persistent selfishness is equally reprehensible. Nell Severance, the novel's wise woman, ignores societal demands, but not without experiencing self-reproach for the effects her life has upon her daughter, Hilda. Old age finally ensnares Nell and forces her into compliance. She relinquishes the symbol of her gentle anarchy, the

revolver named the Swamp Angel, and the relinquishment is her symbolic acceptance of death. Nell, far more than Vera or Maggie, is attuned to her conformity and its encroaching destruction. Maggie Lloyd is the novel's focal character and it is she who makes the most drastic moves toward independence. She sheds an existence as Mrs. Edward Vardoe to proceed with a life that is her own -- a life that she controls.

Maggie's bold efforts are neutralized, though, by the role she takes on at Three Loon Lake. She accepts, even cherishes, the position of the lodge's cook and organizer who is curbed by the usual restraints of time, money, and personal conflicts. Her new troubles are not unlike the problems she faced with Vardoe, yet she accepts them. Maggie's journey from Vancouver housewife to the interior of British Columbia as camp cook is indeed a quest for independence. It is, however, a deficient quest, and it is Maggie's 'quest' that is the greatest source of gentle anarchy in Wilson's novel.

The quest motif in literature conveys, most often, a character's seeking out of the self for the purpose of personal betterment. Knowing one's self is, within a humanistic view, the first step to knowing human nature. A quest performed for self-knowledge and a greater understanding of humankind assumes that there is a right place for every individual and that by searching out that place the individual will know herself and will thereby achieve a greater happiness than would exist in a state of unquestioning. Through the presentation of Maggie Lloyd's journey and its end, Wilson dissolves the pragmatic notion of the quest.

Maggie is not a hero. She leaves Vancouver with a determined idea of who she is and where she is going. Her "plans have been made for some time and have been a great support to [her]" (SA, 41). The enactment of her calculations allows Maggie to begin her journey as Mrs. Lloyd, not as Mrs. Vardoe. She knows from the beginning exactly who she is, and it is this initial knowledge that permits her to make plans. Maggie's 'end' is the impetus for the 'means' that take her to Three Loon Lake. This structure is a reversal of the quest motif, and as such, the structure denies Maggie the acquisition of self-knowledge that could arise from a journey of discovery.

In his introduction to Swamp Angel, David Stouck labels the novel "a quest romance" (SA, Introduction). Other critics agree.

Hallvard Dahlie notes that

the circuitous journey from Vancouver to Westminster, the bus trip up the Fraser, Similkameen and Thompson valleys - do not simply spell out a lesson in geography. They represent both a literal and a metaphorical journey up-stream, to a clear source or beginning, as it were, where Maggie can take stock of her life and begin anew (Dahlie, 10).

Both commentators incorporate into their observations an identifiable goal towards which Maggie works -- and achieves, which is the pattern of the literary formula within which they are reading. Adherence to such a formula renders Maggie's character, words, and actions problematic because they do not fit into the motif's structure. The novel ends in uncertainty, not in resolution, with Maggie as the personification of

confusion, rather than the accomplished hero. Wilson offers her reader ' an anti-hero, and through Maggie, the author presents the erratic nature ' of the quest motif, at least as it pertains to twentieth-century women.

Readers are drawn into the novel as accomplices to Maggie's surreptitious escape from her husband, Edward Vardoe. The scene is tense without being melodramatic since Maggie's arrangements to leave are so meticulous that they allow little room for failure. The tightness of her plan proceeds from her initial self-knowledge and determination, and of course, from the desperation she feels in her marriage to Vardoe. The success of her plan relies rightly upon the stifling schedule of her domestic life with her husband. The self-knowledge and determination remain, unrelentingly, with Maggie throughout the novel. They are not qualities that she seeks. But she does shed her desperation in her journey "up-stream," and I suggest that this is the only change that Maggie endures. Hers is not an honourable move forward, but neither is it dishonourable. It is a running from ' desperation as much as it is a move to freedom. These are not elements' of the quest. They are simply changes in Maggie's existence that promote life rather than suppress it.

We meet Maggie as she engages in a sparse conversation with Mr. Spencer, a sport's store owner, and the conversation exposes Maggie's constricted existence. Her language is too concise and unrevealing. Mr. Spencer asks:

'Would you like to sell your flies?'
'Yes, but I have no more feathers.'

'We can arrange that. Have you a vice?'
 'Yes, my father's vice.'
 'We will take all the flies you can make.
 Would you like to work here? We have a
 small room at the back with a good light.'
 'I would rather work at home.'
 'Where do you live?'
 'Out Capitol Hill way.'
 'And you come from ... ?'
 'I have lived in Vancouver for some time.'
 'Oh. You were not born ... ?'
 'I was born in New Brunswick.'
 'Will you come to the desk? Sit down.'
 He took up a pen. 'Your name?'
 'Lloyd.' The word Vardoe died in her mouth.
 He looked at her large capable hands and
 saw the ring (SA, 14-15).

Maggie's manner of speaking recalls the bantering of words employed by Samuel Beckett's characters in absurd drama, and with the same effect. Her evasive answers evoke the uncertainty and isolation of her situation. She will find some comfort in a life away from Edward Vardoe, but she needs money to end her marriage, and earning money is the basis of her connection with Mr. Spencer. Abstract consolations such as faith and honour have no place in Maggie's plan. Only the concreteness of cash will buy her a bus fare to the province's interior. The only question that Maggie answers with surety is: 'Your name?' 'Lloyd.' More than a year before she leaves her husband, Maggie drops his name. "Vardoe" does not even merit the term 'name' in her mind. It is reduced to a "word" in Maggie's denial of it. She knows who she is and who she will remain. She never searches for a new self, but rather 'a "new time ... [and] new space" (SA, 23) in which to express her self.'

Maggie's meeting with Mr. Spencer exposes an oppression in her life. Unknowingly, Mr. Spencer reveals the outward signifier of that

oppression: the wedding ring. For Spencer, the ring automatically defines Maggie as "Mrs." For Maggie, the ring confines her to a reduced life with Vardoe. Only in the first chapter of the novel is Maggie Mrs. Vardoe. Accordingly, in this chapter, we see her "framed ... in her window as she looked out"; "humiliated and angry" in the marriage bed; being "unfair" to Edward; provoking and practising "annoyed silence"; "trembling"; until finally a "weight lifted a little from her" (SA, 15,16,17,18,19). She leaves. She takes with her very few private possessions, as one might expect from a woman whose life has been diminished in marriage. But she does take her new name, Lloyd, and a small yellow bowl that she purchases in Chinatown. David Stouck refers to the Chinese bowl as "the grail ... [of] Maggie's quest" (SA, Introduction). Usually, the grail (or symbol of it) if it is attainable, is the motive for the quest, not a travelling companion. Again, an inversion is apparent, making the motif a suspicious paradigm through which to read the novel. Wilson goes so far as to parody the 'grail' as we later see Maggie "dropping the ashes [of her cigarette] thoughtfully into her yellow bowl" (SA, 110). It should be noted too, that Maggie buys this particular bowl, rather than one of a finer rice china, because the yellow one is inexpensive. The purchase reflects the financial restraints that underlie many decisions made by characters in this novel. If, however, the bowl is a symbol of anything, I am more concerned with its connection with Chinatown, and how that microcosm functions within Swamp Angel.

Maggie's alienation lies not only with her husband, but with her surroundings in Vancouver. The narrator describes the pervasive "harmony" of the Quong family, and as Maggie travels through Chinatown, she pleasantly senses the accord of the community. As she walks "savouring the names," Maggie forms a "private enjoyment" (SA, 24) of the Chinese quarters of Vancouver. But the narrator adamantly isolates the neighbourhood:

Chinatown intensifies and becomes its true self - and none other - just after you cross Main Street as you journey west. A short few blocks, and Chinatown ceases abruptly as if it had never been, the vestiges of Shanghai Alley are left behind, and the city takes over again, regardless (SA, 24).

The harmony within Chinatown depends on its seclusion from the city. But the city's powerful infiltration will, nevertheless, be seen in Joey's attitude in spite of his membership in the closely knit family. The only protection from the pejorative qualities of urbanization is retreat from it, which is impossible for Joey, whose livelihood depends upon being a link between the inner and outer communities. Maggie's awareness of Chinatown's consonance intensifies her own feelings of alienation in her life with Vardoe in Vancouver. Her purchase of the yellow bowl and her decision to take the bowl with her allude to her approval of the order in Chinatown, an order that she would have accompany her in her escape from marriage -- and she does bring order to Three Loon Lake. She does not, as the 'quest' suggests, seek order there.

The rural area of New Brunswick is her real home, and city life is unsuited to her. Hence, Maggie reacts with consenting silence when a fellow traveller deduces that "'city people seem to have a larceny in their blood by nature'" (SA, 59). Maggie's own view of the city can be known inversely. "By the time that two months had gone past, Maggie's union with Three Loon Lake was like a happy marriage" (SA, 84). She could never achieve such a partnership in the city, either with a man or with the place. The comforts that she knows at the lake are directly connected with the natural setting. So much that when Joey Quong suggests a snack-food receptacle for the lodge, Maggie imagines "the litter of the hot-dog and fried-potato stand, the paper droppings of the people like the droppings in a poultry yard" (SA, 108). The thought of urban routine disgusts her. She considers that "Joey was pure city" (SA, 108) and her thought is at variance with her general view of Chinatown and its inhabitants.

Maggie comes to dominate the Gunnarsens' lodge. As in her own marriage, where she was dominated, the effect is not satisfying for everyone. Vera Gunnarsen suffers from Maggie's strength. Alexandra Collins notes that

Maggie's decision to move inland toward the wilderness shows her rejection of the decadence of frontier society. Her husband Eddie reflects a seedy urban environment which is the antithesis of Maggie's half-conscious views of an ideal civilization. Although Maggie enjoys the magnificence of the natural setting of Vancouver, and

she admires the hard work of the Chinese, she longs for the purifying effects of the wilderness. The reader must recognize, however, that her influence over Three Loon Lake will be civilizing (Collins, 68).

Collins articulates pluralism in Maggie -- she has a willingness to incorporate both urban and natural practices at the lodge in an effort to make the business run smoothly, and to maintain the order that she deems a personal need. But her double-sided "civilizing" effect overwhelms Vera, and Maggie encounters intense difficulty in understanding Vera's hostility. Maggie's lack of understanding will, however, move to compassion when Vera's anger succumbs to madness as the two women's relationship declines.

The antagonism between Vera and Maggie is not merely a personality problem. It stems, quite closely, from each woman's relationship with her husband. Maggie, the stronger of the two women, competently, if coldly, rejects "her slavery" (SA, 40) in marriage. So forceful is her rejection that her ensuing actions imply a celibate life. Her harsh memories of life as Mrs. Vardoe grow into more general complaints. She eventually feels that

[her] tormented nights of humiliations between four small walls and in the compass of a double bed were gone, washed away by this air, this freedom, this joy, this singleness and forgetfulness (SA, 96).

"A" double bed, not "the" double bed has been shed by Maggie. The focus is now on her solitary existence, and it is marriage itself as much as Vardoe that repels her. She endures two marriages -- both with unhappy

endings. Some of her comfort lies in being "Tom Lloyd's own widow again" (SA, 36), which is a very safe distance from being wife. When social pressure requires her to reveal her background, Maggie discloses her widowhood, but says nothing of Vardoe, since "[t]hat was as if it had not been" (SA, 117). The tragedy of her first marriage and the denial of her second marriage release Maggie into the wilderness -- not to find herself, but to express her already established self in the fulfillment of hard work and in new space. Those who do not accept or fit into Maggie's programme are 'glitches.' They are disruptive and Maggie, who is not trained in diplomacy, deals clumsily with disruption.

Maggie's irritation with Vera's weakness overlooks her own inability to deal with a bad marriage. Maggie knows "another woman would have done the thing better. Another woman would have faced Eddie Vardoe and told him that she could not live with him any longer" (SA, 36). But Maggie, not uniquely, cannot be other than herself, and she conveniently decides that "this is the very last time I will think about it, [the marriage] the very last time" (SA, 39). Accordingly, when Maggie and her rigidity confront Vera's incapacity to bend when circumstances demand bending, Maggie bristles. She forgets that she too is not capable of everything. She assumes that if Vera would act in a manner that Maggie considers more suitable, "[e]verything could be perfect" (SA, 89). The question is, of course, perfect for whom? It is arrogant for Maggie to suppose that perfection for her would also suit Vera. Perfection evokes a sense of stasis -- a slot that Maggie comes

dangerously close to cherishing in the isolation of her natural setting. The spectrum of acceptable behaviour is a broad one, and without excusing Vera's pettiness, Maggie's assumptions are a blindness she acquires to support the rigid order that emanates from her and allows her survival.

Vera's intrusion upon Maggie's 'peace' provokes pain and anger in both women. Vera's animosity toward Maggie is not an isolated or spontaneous reaction. Vera feels inadequate because of Maggie's capable management of the lodge. It is unfair, I think, to agree with Vera's harsh self-judgement. We must remember that "[o]nly a woman who pulls too heavy a load for her strength and skill could know Mrs. Gunnarsen's emotion. Not even a horse" (SA, 75). Vera begins to view Maggie as the self-appointed guardian of the Gunnarsen's lodge. In Vera's mind, Maggie is not unlike the keeper of a citadel. Vera's husband, Haldar, would himself be that keeper if his physical strength would permit it. Since Haldar is crippled, Maggie, with the same aspirations as Haldar, imposes her strength where his fails. Vera is the conscript. She goes through her required motions without enthusiasm because the goals of her husband and Maggie are not goals that Vera shares. Vera becomes a victim of her husband's blindness:

His judgement had become impaired to the extent that he thought that his wife was unreasonable, and he did not see, or know, that below her argument was a growing fear and dislike of the future with a crippled man and a child at Three Loon Lake (SA, 71).

Maggie fails to understand Vera's predicament and her insensitivity exists in spite of her own role as victim of Edward Vardoe. Maggie also accepts that Joey Quong is "pure city" and, therefore, will not adapt to life at the lodge, but she does not extend the same acceptance to Vera, who also needs the security that Kamloops has to offer. Vera is reduced to desperation by a husband who confines her through his own consuming selfishness, and by Maggie, the only other adult with whom she communicates. Vera's frail nature, coupled with her feelings of displacement, lead her into a suicide attempt. Not surprisingly, it is a weak attempt.

Vera's endeavour to drown herself is an act of madness. It goes beyond gentle anarchy. But her madness is very much an act of resistance. Neither previous actions, words, nor silence have convinced Haldar of Vera's despair, and it is Haldar's attention that Vera needs. Since she is unable to penetrate her husband's sensibility, Vera turns to Maggie, who she knows has her husband's respect. Vera's position is not enviable. It relies wholly upon patriarchal and matrimonial expectations, and she is able to conform to neither. Unlike Maggie, she cannot or will not walk away from her vows. Also, unlike Maggie, Vera has a child to care for, which makes marital separation a far more complex consideration. Vera's only choice after her failed attempt at suicide is to make a humble appeal to Maggie. Awkwardly, the two women form a sisterhood. Vera's madness is their secret. These are precarious grounds upon which to form a relationship, but they are in keeping with the uncertainty that all of Wilson's characters face. More

importantly though, Vera and Maggie demonstrate female unity to be motivated by despair, yet the existence of the unity uplifts them and offers them hope. The concealed nature of their sisterhood renders it a marginalized affinity, which is ironic, given the peripheral position that each woman occupies as wife, and that each woman tries to overcome. In their new bond, Vera and Maggie do not perforate patriarchal power. That is not their desire. Instead, they spontaneously form a new centre that relies on woman's strength for support. Maggie is dedicated, (even though she remains austere) to her conciliation with Vera and she shares her feelings with Nell Severance.

Contrary to her name, Severance, which implies Nell's separation from society, Nell is very much aware of, if not directly "in the web" of humankind (SA, 151). Her ability to maintain this dual position results in a sagacity that no other character in the novel achieves. Maggie respects Nell's wisdom. She therefore decides to tell Nell about Vera's attempted suicide. Their conversation allows Nell to articulate for Maggie what the younger woman has been unable to discern for herself. In her blinding push for orderly success, Maggie relies heavily on her companions to adopt her methods and her point of view as paramount. Hence, Maggie thinks that "[i]f she cannot cope with Vera and her folly, ... [she has] failed" (SA, 140). Maggie wrongly considers that it is her task to "cope" with Vera. Maggie would only offer her another set of expectations by which she could unhappily live. The sisterhood that the two women stumble upon is a compromise that

initiates in Maggie a broader vision. Nell crystalizes the dual feelings that Maggie experiences. She repeats the words that Maggie knows in theory, but fails to comprehend practically: "it takes God himself to be fair to two different people at once'" (SA, 151). Nell makes this statement with regard to her own life; however, the web that ensnares all of humankind spins from Nell's mind into Maggie's thoughts and allows the younger woman to apply the words that have been a platitude for her until this moment. The implication of Nell's advice rescues Vera from Maggie's judgement. At the same time, the implication saves Maggie from increasing isolation that stems from her own rigid concept of order.

Nell's trip to Three Loon Lake is, it seems, made as a kind gesture to her friend Maggie. Nell's fears for her friend are the growing fears of the reader: Maggie is sequestering herself unduly and unrewardingly. Indeed, Maggie "[f]or her own future ... was not afraid, although she looked forward cheerlessly" (SA, 141). Nell is sensitive to Maggie's stoic nature. Nell's own experience together with her insight impel the older woman to warn against the dangers of austerity. She reminds Maggie that "[w]e are all in it together. 'No Man is an Island. I am involved in Mankind,' and we have no immunity and we may as well realize it'" (SA, 150-51). The comment recalls Wilson's previous characters, Hetty, Frankie, and Topaz, and enhances the author's theme of human commitment. In an effort to diminish Maggie's growing indifference to human relationships, Nell recounts her own life's obligations and how she chose to deal with them. As stated

above, Nell has a capacity for pluralism -- she is willing to juggle and accept duality in principle and practice. As such, she survives two roles: common-law wife in a vagabond marriage to Philip, and absentee mother to their daughter, Hilda. Her absenteeism creates some remorse but no guilt. Guilt could perhaps spur an over-compensating attention by Nell in her later treatment of Hilda. But there is no overcompensation. Nell remains at a loving, but almost impersonal, distance from her daughter throughout their lives. Nell's "uneasy divided allegiance" (SA, 50) between Philip and Hilda is not an equal division. She is asked by Philip to choose between husband and daughter (an unfair dilemma, but one which we must assume incorporates Nell's approval) and she chooses husband. Nell presumably assimilates the uneasiness that she feels in her choice. Her act of leaving her daughter so that she can be Philip's lover and travelling companion is, after all, hedonistic. It is an act of non-conformity. It is gentle anarchy.

Nell's entire life is an act of some sort. She juggles modes of thought as smoothly as she juggles the revolvers in her circus performance. She plays the sage with Edward Vardoe and later with Maggie. Her insights have merit. Nell knows nothing of Vera except what Maggie reveals, and with the understanding that Maggie lacks, Nell knows that "[t]he unhappy Vera [is] house-bound without an opening window; hell-bound" (SA, 152), a predicament that Nell herself strives a lifetime to avoid. In old age, fat and fatigue impinge on Nell and do, in fact, restrict her to the home, yet she continues to act. Her

revolver, the Swamp Angel, becomes her stage partner. The gun, along with Nell's physical appearance, are the visible emblems of her ongoing resistance to social attitudes. She refuses to dress in other than lounging clothes, which precludes her acceptability within the community. The neighbourhood regards her as that "peculiar" woman, especially when she is seen out of doors wearing "the long cape over her dressing gown" (SA, 78). This picture of Nell evokes the image of a magician, complete with her walking stick/wand. She has, at this time in her life, lost the agility of a public performer and as a result she falls and reveals her revolver to the curiosity of her unwelcome audience. The gun becomes threatening, and like Vera's madness, goes beyond gentle anarchy. The Swamp Angel can be a symbol of unconventionality only as it remains a private possession. Once exposed, it embodies the force of a weapon, which it is not.

Commentators have accused Nell of clinging wrongly to her past. They view the Swamp Angel as a symbol of her youth. William New remarks that

[i]f the adult attaches too closely to the past, he becomes Nell Severance, valuing the symbol, the revolver, more than the reality of life (her daughter) that is around her - not by conscious choice anymore, but by ingrained habit (New, 45).

Desmond Pacey agrees, noting that "[t]he opposition between movement and stasis is ... conveyed by the symbolic use of the ancient revolver, the Swamp Angel" (Pacey, 152). Both views have merit, but they overlook Nell's significance as a resisting female. One cannot deny that the gun

holds fond memories for Nell, but one must not ignore that she dedicates her life to being different. She disregards the disappointment of her own parents as she lives outside of "the 'bonds' of matrimony" (SA, 150) with Philip. She endures the hostility of Philip's genteel family who scorn his attachment to a "girl from the circus" (SA, 150), and she overcomes the "uncomfortable feeling" (SA, 50) of abandoning Hilda to boarding school. Her role as circus performer is, in itself, an exotic act -- an oddity by narrow social standards. When all these old roles dissolve, Nell remains an oddity. The gun remains with her. While it does represent something of the past, it is also an expression of the present. Nell juggles the revolver in the presence of Vardoe, and the act intimidates him. There is no real threat that Nell will use the Swamp Angel violently, yet the gun creates a tension throughout the novel. Vardoe wonders if the old woman can shoot (him), the neighbours wonder if she has shot someone, and Maggie, more knowingly, wonders what has reduced Nell into relinquishing the revolver. As readers, along with Maggie, we see the Swamp Angel as a symbol of Nell's persistent, living resistance, and not merely a token of her youth.

For Hilda Severance, the Swamp Angel signifies an unpleasant childhood. It reminds her of the ostracization she suffered at boarding school because she innocently boasted of her mother who was a circus juggler, and her father, who was a gentleman. Her school-mates considered both professions to be peculiar and they extended their considerations to Hilda, who must also have been odd by association.

Her rejection is not unlike those of the novel's other female characters. Hilda rejects the lifestyle that she learns by example from her parents. She takes a clerical job, meets a business man, marries him, has children, and leads a traditional life. She practises gentle anarchy in an effort to be unlike her mother. Nell writes to Maggie that "Hilda seems happy to be in a nice conventional family at last ... Hilda becomes more conventional every minute" (SA, 127).

Nell is thankful for her daughter's comfort, but her awareness of Hilda's conformity intensifies for Nell her own need to remain outside of social expectations. As she watches Hilda become a part of the establishment, Nell "regret[s] very much ... [she] sent ... [Maggie] the Swamp Angel" (SA, 128). For Nell, the gun staved off the encroaching demands of dull routine, and without it, she is vulnerable. She reaches her lowest point while being fitted for a hat for Hilda's wedding. The affair disgusts Nell. She longs for her revolver, but without it, she concedes. The narrator remarks "[h]ow like a monument ... [Nell] sat in front of the mirror. Imagine making a hat for a monument" (SA, 122). It cannot be done without lapsing into the ridiculous. But Nell is a monument in size, presence, and principle. She is dissension personified. The concession that she makes to her daughter is, therefore, majestic. Hilda, who throughout her life reacts against her mother, is not at fault as she demands her mother's compliance. The happiness that Hilda finds in marriage and conformity, that Nell, Maggie, and Vera do not find, saves the novel from a pervasive tone of pessimism. Hilda seems truly content and with her

contentment comes a fuller understanding of Nell. Hilda's eulogy for her mother reveals that she

ought to say some of the sad
conventional things about Mother
it seems only right but ... [she]
can't because Mother's life was
complete and to say anything else
would be phony and that's one thing
she couldn't bear (SA, 154).

Hilda learns much from Nell and clearly she has adopted the willingness to entertain a dual outlook on life. Hence, while Hilda conforms in her nice conventional family, she is also sympathetic to the ways of gentle anarchy.

Nell Severance's resistance weakens without the Swamp Angel, but it does not disappear. She tells Maggie: "I have just a few convictions left and I hope to die before I lose them" (SA, 151). She displays a fortitude that her brother-in-common-law, Nigel, lacks:

'He was a gentle anarchist. When he was staying with us, the evil of the world had become too much for him and he started one night to throw himself off a cliff. What a night! Then he found that he had forgotten his false teeth so he came back to the house to get them. When he got his teeth in he reconsidered. Later he became very respectable and dropped us. He married a millionaire biscuit-manufacturer's daughter and died a year or two ago of old age and in affluence, surrounded by a gaggle of grandchildren who never would have existed if it hadn't been for Nigel's false teeth' (SA, 149-50).

Nell undermines Nigel's act of resistance in her recounting of the story. She trivializes his reconsideration by attributing redeeming

powers to his false teeth. Her disgust heighten's at Nigel's marriage into a family of staid money that is earned uninterestingly by the mundane act of biscuit baking. Nell implies that her regard for Nigel would be much greater if he had thrown himself off the cliff. He would have then upheld his convictions of gentle anarchy until death, as Nell intends to do. Through Nigel's story, Nell demonstrates how easily one falls into conformity. She does not advocate suicide, but she will accept it as an alternative to the act of compliance that is demanding and destructive. Nell uses the story to warn Maggie that she may be replacing her unbearable confinement with Edward Vardoe with another equally isolated existence. The everlasting web of which Nell speaks reaches into the interior of British Columbia and anywhere that humans interact.

The web ensnares Maggie Lloyd, in spite of her flight from marriage. She receives the Gunnarsens as her family:

These people were now her family.
She had no other. One can say,
also, To hell with the family,
but the family remains, strong,
dear, enraging, precious, maddening,
indestructible ... (SA, 140).

The family described here is an aberrant one, as we see most often in Wilson, both in its membership and its attitude. The family cannot be otherwise if it exists with jealousy, competition, disdain, silence, and compassion. Recognition of diverse emotions that the family yokes together permits sanctioning of the family, yet any group existence impinges on the individual. If Maggie is to remain with her new

relatives in some form of harmony she will have to master the art of compromise. She will not be like Nell and maintain her convictions until death, unless, of course, her convictions are merely to cope with Vera.

While Maggie has no qualms about breaking matrimonial bonds, she still wants to live within the structure of the norm. She does not know what will make her look to the future with cheer. Her goals are trivial -- not heroic. Although she admires, even loves, Nell, she cannot match Nell or emulate her, and Nell understands Maggie's limitations. The older woman approves of her friend's spirited efforts toward individualism, but she does not pretend that Maggie is a dedicated gentle anarchist. Maggie's character lies somewhere between Nell's and Hilda's, but her known respect for Mrs. Severance's integrity leads Nell to put the Swamp Angel in Maggie's care. She asks Maggie to throw the gun into the lake upon her death. Nell's plans to take her statement of defiance with her to the grave. The symbol of her defiance, the Swamp Angel, will be buried too. Wilson imposes a final confinement on her characters as Maggie complies with Nell's request to drown the gun. Dissension demands active participation; it cannot form a partnership with compliance. The narrator asks, "does the essence of all custom and virtue perish?" (SA, 157). It seems that it does. After the revolver's flamboyant plunge into the lake, "the fish, who had fled, returned, flickering, weaving curiously over the Swamp Angel. Then flickering, weaving, they resumed their way" (SA, 157). Life continues unchanged.

The description recalls Topaz Edgeworth's slight agitation of the stream and her sad insignificance. Nell's life and her beliefs settle uncomfortably "in the ooze" (SA, 157) of the lake, along with the Swamp Angel.

The circular image created by a gun that has its origin in the swamp, and takes its final place in the ooze at the bottom of the lake suggests a potential rebirth. Gentle anarchy may thrive. David Stouck notes that "[t]he reminder of Excalibur (SA, Introduction) in Maggie's gesture of throwing the gun away, but again his interest in the quest motif ascribes more heroism to Maggie than I am able to see. His observation also disregards Wilson's parodic use of the Swamp Angel itself. Stouck states that the "gun had its origin in a battle fought to prevent the abolition of slavery" (SA, Introduction). In its origin, the gun is then emblematic of resistance to social reform. Its reproduction into the miniature show piece celebrates the gun's loss of power. Nell's use of the Swamp Angel further undermines the gun's primary purpose as it becomes her symbol of non-conformity. The gun wholly loses the male authority once attached to it as Nell skillfully manipulates the revolver. Whether or not the essence of Nell's Swamp Angel will resume itself in other women is not known. But surely we can see, on one level, the symbolic burial of male authority as the Swamp Angel lies in the ooze at the bottom of Three Loon Lake, and male authority is, I think, the target of gentle anarchy.

Chapter Four

THE EQUATIONS OF LOVE: LYING + DISGUISE x TIME = SECURITY

The three previous chapters focus on characters and a narrator whose awareness of social confines encourages them to break tradition. Their struggles for individualism define the rigidity of existence to which they cannot comply. The Equations of Love inverts this structure. In this novel, actually two novellas, Wilson presents characters who are marginalized by their communities. Their situations, on the outskirts of established society, are unacceptable to them. The efforts of Myrtle and Mortimer Johnson, Mrs. Emblem, Vicky May Tritt, and Lilly Waller are spent on becoming "like folks" (LS, 163). These are Lilly's words. She articulates her goal far more clearly than the other characters, and she also achieves that end with more skill and surety than others do.

Lilly is a liar, and a more talented liar than her predecessors in "Tuesday and Wednesday." Ironically, she lies and disguises her way into the state of respectability for which she strives. Respectability takes on a dubious nature in being attained by devious methods, yet Lilly and her acquired 'decency' seduce the reader into admiration. Similarly, Vicky Tritt gains strength and merit by lying well. In allowing her readers to support characters who practise deception, the narrator tampers with our viewpoint. The commonly accepted virtue that we attach to truth telling dissipates in The Equations of Love as we

read of people who are forced to lie in order to conform.

These characters' actions are a forceful sort of gentle anarchy. Their guile infiltrates and manipulates the group they want to join and do join, which serves to expose the questionable foundations of society. Unlike Hetty, Topaz, and Nell, who openly and adamantly live outside of the community's prescribed rules as a statement of dissent, the characters in "Tuesday and Wednesday" and "Lilly's Story" weaken the very boundaries that alienate them in the first place; thus, they are dissenters, but of a more subversive nature. They enter society by making flawed restitution to customs and habits from which they have been led astray, or have never learned. Lilly, for example, no longer partakes in sexual intercourse outside of marriage. That practice has consequences that are visually identified in pregnancy. But lying does not, and paradoxically, lying is the greatest tool used to overcome the intolerance of a society that deems deception, or at least 'the little white lie' as allowable -- even gratifying. Wilson introduces the milieu in which she writes with the novel's epigraph: "'... what is Terewth ... what is the common sort of Terewth ...'" (Bleak House). The question is unanswerable. Truth in The Equations of Love becomes so involved with point of view that the two are frequently indistinguishable, rendering sincerity to be an arbitrary response that suits a character's individual time and place.

Helen Sonthoff comments that "Ethel Wilson deals with, 'the common sort of Terewth' which involves deceptions, distortions, outright lies, and ... the ways in which lying can produce truth" (Sonthoff,

101). Distortion aptly describes Mrs. Emblem, and this assertion leads to a similar view of the narrator, who intrudes, unreliably, to foster the reader's response to Mrs. Emblem. This lengthy excerpt exemplifies my point:

She sank into the rocker and it was a pleasure to look at Aunty Emblem as she sat, still panting a little, the rocker giving, forward and backward, to her large slow movement. What a beautiful golden woman she was! What a beautiful gay soft-eyed girl she had been! That was your thought as you looked admiringly at Mrs. Emblem. She had decided to keep her hair a warm gold, and it suited her. Her rouge ran round the side and just below her eyes on her softly curving cheeks, like it tells you to do in the papers, and this suited her too and enhanced the soft pretty sparkle of her large, grey-blue eyes, still young although they seemed to know the world so well. Her little nose was indeterminate but pleasing, with a hint of the ridiculous in it. But her mouth was perhaps her most pleasant feature. No amount of lipstick could alter the fact that her mouth was well shaped and gay and made for happiness, with a catch and a dimple at one corner. When Mrs. Emblem laughed, as she often did, her eyes crinkled and vanished into the dark lashes. The pleasant phenomenon of Mrs. Emblem's soft laugh made you want her to laugh again. She must at one time have been a slip of a girl, for her hands, ankles and feet were small and well shaped. She was a singularly single-minded person. From her pretty head and her features nearly buried in agreeable fat, and the long alluring vee of her black dress, to her neat black pumps she was good to look upon, a warming sight (T&W, 19-20).

Mrs. Emblem is presented as an elderly woman who bleaches her hair, wears enough make-up so as to render it a disguise, is so overly indulgent in her eating habits that her fat hides whatever the hair dye

and make-up missed, and is inappropriately garbed in a cocktail dress that compliments neither her age nor her place. She is in a state of deterioration. Yet the narrator encourages her readers to admire the woman, it seems. However, the picture that I receive is one of a woman who has been duped by the newspaper images, and appears foolish as a result. The honesty of a mirror might be more useful to her than a newspaper advertisement. A mirror could prompt her to wash off the great "amount of lipstick" to which the narrator ironically alerts us. We can assume too that the "agreeable fat" that buries Mrs. Emblem's features also spills out unagreeably from the "long alluring vee" of her dress. It seems to me that Mrs. Emblem wrongly attempts to project sex appeal, which presumably is what the newspaper is trying to sell. The narrator's presentation of Mrs. Emblem's distorted appearance is in itself deceptive. Readers are asked to enjoy the warmth of an old Aunty, yet the elderly woman does not quite merit the respect that is advocated.

Mrs. Emblem's endeavour to be 'like folks' depends upon where she identifies societal standards to be set. Clearly, she looks to 'the paper' for models of behaviour. The generic term, 'the paper' gains authority by its daily use, and the uncritical reader of the paper can fall victim to its 'common sort of truth.' Readers like Mrs. Emblem absorb the personal columns and the funnies (her favourites). For her, "[t]hey are real life" (T&W, 55) rather than an emblem of it. By adhering to the paper's authority, Mrs. Emblem becomes exactly what her name suggests. She assumes a disguise based on her conception of the

newspaper's credibility. Readers of The Equations of Love are asked, I suggest, to read more carefully than Mrs. Emblem does, and to deduce through reading that the "warming sight" of this woman is superficial. She is created daily through the application of make-up, just as the newspaper is created daily by the application of ink onto a blank page. Mrs. Emblem is, therefore, not a character whom we can regard as a standard for judging other characters. Nor can we rely upon the narrator who, with enthusiastic irony, sympathizes with Mrs. Emblem. This novel deals constantly with deception. The effect is a mistrust of a society that nurtures and produces distortions, which inevitably do become accepted as truth.

The culmination of Mrs. Emblem's attention to her appearance prompts the narrator to say that "Mrs. Emblem knows nothing else [than] what it feels like to be a woman" (T&W, 56). Although woman's feelings are not articulated precisely in the novel, there are several female responses upon which to draw in order to understand the narrator's comment. Mrs. H.Y. Dunkerly suffers "a slightly silly feeling" (T&W, 15) for openly showing affection to her husband. Mrs. Emblem is "feeling depressed" (T&W, 48) as she reflects upon her niece's belligerence. Vicky May Tritt oddly retreats from the company of other women "feeling greatly relieved, and yet she was familiarly unhappy" (T&W, 76). Mrs. H. X. Lemoyne feels vulnerable because she is both "loved and bullied by her family" (T&W, 83). Finally, Myrtle, who thrives on displeasure, succumbs to "that waiting feeling, that waiting

feeling, and ... become[s] ... a little irritable" (T&W, 84). These responses are, it seems, what it feels like to be a woman. Mrs. Emblem's affinity to these feelings of womanhood could arise from her role as wife that she has played three times in her life.

Mrs. Emblem's "'two sod cases ... and one divorce'" (T&W, 23) describe her three marriages. Her curt synopsis of her wedded lives is at variance with the narrative view that sees Mrs. Emblem "born to be a wife and a mistress" (T&W, 50). The view is suspect in relation to a woman whose wifely duties revolve around the inebriated activities of her husband, Homer. So accustomed is she to dealing with Homer's habits, that she comically but expertly "sniffs" that Mort has ingested three bottles of beer. Mrs. Emblem recalls Homer with dubious affection. The exactness with which she reveals the routine of nursing her drunken spouse undermines any fondness for the occupation (T&W, 46). Mrs. Emblem is presented more as an ironic martyr than a concerned wife. It is not surprising that she faces the possibility of a fourth marriage with reluctance, since in her present state of singleness, "at least she now owns herself" (T&W, 51). The narrator's comment is acid, with the implication that marriage, for women, demands submission of the self. It demands ownership by the husband of the wife, and leads to situations like Mrs. H. X. Lemoyne's "bullied" existence. Wilson quietly effaces the three 'happy' wives in "Tuesday and Wednesday" by naming them simply "Mrs." Mrs. Emblem is given no first name. The second initials in the names Mrs. H. X. Lemoyne, and Mrs. H. Y. Dunkerly suggest an abysmal being signified by rote. As X and Y, the women are simply

'unknown' variables in marriage, the standard equation of love. The H in their names (including Mrs. Emblem's whose husband was Homer) of course indicates the men's first names, but the repetition of it in the women's names expresses their loss of identity. The H might more suitably stand for housekeeper. Wilson gingerly explores the theme of female subservience by her subtle presentation of three wives who ironically appear to contrast with Myrtle Johnson, the novella's malcontent.

Myrtle and Mortimer Johnson exhibit an unsatisfying marriage. They lie to and about each other. They find their greatest comfort in unified anger. Yet, unlike the story's other wives, Myrtle has an identity. She has a name that is hers only -- and she is not a housekeeper, either in her own apartment, or in the domestic job she awkwardly performs at Mrs. Lemoyne's. Myrtle's rancor intimidates her husband and her employer, but Mrs. Emblem is immune to her niece's resentment. The aunt reacts curiously to what she perceives as Myrtle's harsh treatment of Mortimer. Mrs. Emblem's reaction exposes the victimization she herself has suffered as wife. She asserts that "'Mort should certnly take a stick to'" Myrtle (T&W, 26) -- the violence will presumably make Myrtle a more caring wife. In her role as wife, Mrs. Emblem has learned that a wife's duties include total subservience, and this, it seems, she accepts. Willingly, or otherwise, she has participated in her own victimization in her failure to reject the position of obedience. Mrs. Emblem is not alone in her beliefs of

marital communication. Mortimer repeatedly considers that if Myrtle "acts like she did yesterday, I'll slug her" (T&W, 5). The insanity of wife beating implies in this instance, the assuagement of Mortimer's anger, and more pointedly, the hope of altering Myrtle's behaviour. When the psychology of male dominance defaults, as it has in the Johnsons' marriage, male violence may be required to produce patriarchal compliance. The primitiveness of both Mortimer's and Mrs. Emblem's attitudes is left unjudged by the narrator; however, the inclusion of the notion of brutality in the novella induces the reader to examine the issues being presented here. Social values and female response emerge as prominent concerns.

Myrtle is subjected to potential violence because she is a wife who rejects the traditional role of subordination that accompanies wifehood. But her repudiation of the homemaker with the soothing voice jars with the jealousy she displays of Mrs. Lemoyne and of the "society woman" she sees on the streetcar. Myrtle's status as working class tenant irritates her. She would like to have more than she has, as expressed in her lie about Mort's "big contracting job up in West Vancouver" (T&W, 11). Mort also tells the same lie and expresses the same jealousy of people who have earned money and security. The Johnsons' frustrations manifest themselves unproductively, and inwardly, with Myrtle's harshness toward her husband, and Mortimer's inclination to hit his wife. Like Vera Gunnarsen, the Johnsons lack the skills that could supply them with the knowledge of what they want, and eventually with what they want. Lilly Waller, of "Lilly's Story," has those

skills. She is a consistent liar, in contrast to Myrtle Johnson, who cannot remember the story she last told her listeners. Lilly, also in contrast to Myrtle, dedicates herself to years of unselfish hard work. However, Lilly and Myrtle do share one position: they both reject the traditional role of wife. This female response is one of the issues that yokes together the two dissimilar novellas in The Equations of Love.

Lilly Waller grows up in her own world of amorality. Her early encounter with the police induces fear in Lilly, but no sense of right and wrong. Thus, when her friend Matty resorts to stealing, Lilly does not partake in the practice, or judge her friend -- instead, she avoids the situation. "This she did, not because she had any particular dislike of thieving, but from her strong instinct for self-preservation and her desire to avoid the police" (LS, 152). Lilly's urgent need for self-preservation culminates from an isolated childhood, where she learns nothing of familial dependency. For Lilly "[h]e [her father], her mother, the sun and the rainy weather, school, eating, going to bed and getting up, were all of a piece and she accepted them as being all right" (LS, 147). She learns how to live only by imitation. There exists in her childhood no moral code to delineate conformist behaviour. She has only the vague impressions offered by her parents, who drink heavily, deceive conveniently, and shirk responsibility. The child regards these habits to be as necessary as the basic needs of eating and sleeping. As she matures, and becomes pregnant, unmarried and still

poor, Lilly again turns to imitation to direct her out of her hardships. The sight of two young women, with attractive names and pleasant dispositions, encourages Lilly to be like them, 'like folks.'

Lilly's poverty is abated through hard work and planning. She cannot change her pregnancy, nor does she want to. Being unmarried is the easiest hardship for Lilly to overcome. She assumes the role of widow of Mr. Walter Hughes, and she presents her role as legitimate through the purchase of a wedding ring. The ring, for society, defines the state of matrimony. The availability of wedding rings in pawn brokers' shops, like the one visited by Lilly, reduces the ring's merit, and the merit of the institution that it represents. The wedding ring, as it is easily purchased on a second-hand shop, becomes the emblem of failed commitment. Lilly has no aspirations to that sort of commitment. "She did not want a husband but she longed ... for respectability" (LS, 167) -- which she attains through deceit. No one ever questions Lilly's past. Her concoction of the young widowed mother elicits sympathy, not mistrust. Unlike Maggie Lloyd, who situates herself among strangers without offering any explanation of her history and becomes the subject of gossip as a result, Lilly Hughes carefully explains her whole 'story' to the willing ears of her new acquaintances. In contrast to Maggie, Lilly knows "she must answer ... questions, because if you say nothing, ... people begin to wonder" (LS, 174). Her lies are graciously received because she presents such a pathetic picture, but also because most people can identify with at least part of her life. The fabricated, selfish sister from whom Lilly cannot seek help is familiar to Mr.

Meeker, Lilly's first interrogator. The elderly man empathetically states: "I got a sister like that ... she'd take the back teeth out of your head she's that mean" (LS, 176). He believes Lilly with ease because he understands the nature of families, especially Wilson's families that so often impinge and destruct. Mr. Meeker's role as local gossip (male characters in Wilson frequently play the part of gossip) insures Lilly's acceptability since he can, no doubt, be relied upon to promote her sad story throughout the community. Thus, Lilly's dream for respectability is being realized through her skill as emulator and liar, and through the reliable gossip of Mr. Meeker. As Lilly continues the arts of imitation and deceit, perfecting and unifying them as she goes along, she becomes so respectable that she is admired, both inside and outside the novel.

As Mrs. Walter Hughes, Lilly adopts the role of domestic worker in the Butlers' home expertly. By the brief example set by Esther, the retiring worker, Lilly addresses her new boss as

`Madam' She heard herself say the word with great surprise. It was not difficult. **Madam.** She felt, rather than knew, that this word was a strong weapon that she would use to win this house from Esther for Baby (LS, 180).

The passage illustrates Lilly's aptitude for manipulation. She does acquire the position in the Butler home. Mrs. Butler is suitably impressed by the young woman's language. She is defenseless against Lilly's intuitive regard for words as weapons. Words, truthful or not, are Lilly's tools of gentle anarchy. She detects in the Butlers' home a

safety and elegance to which she would expose her daughter, but Lilly's admission to this type of society will not be permitted if her actual past is known. Therefore, she must lie and she must incorporate into her lies an element of Mrs. Butler's own life style -- hence, the title, Madam. Lilly's infiltration of the Butler's existence becomes Lilly's assimilation of her employers. Eleanor, the child, is raised to speak as the Butlers do. All the while, her mother's duplicity recedes further into history and bears on the child only in the legitimacy of an assumed name. Lilly herself apparently forgets that she has not always lived in such 'respectability,' and that not all on-lookers admire her present position. Mr. Meeker, while performing his reliable part as local tattler, painfully reminds Lilly of her status as maid, which reveals Eleanor's position as "'the maid's daughter'" (LS, 195). The articulation stings Lilly. It impels her to leave the Butlers to become 'Madam' of her own modest home. She is no longer marginalized socially or geographically. Lilly moves into town, performs a responsible job, and is part of the web of society.

Lilly's ingestion of 'folks' gives her the necessary confidence to function within society on her own. She retains the myth of Walter Hughes -- she will have to explain again the circumstances of her single parenthood. Walter Hughes supplies for Lilly needed respectability. For Eleanor, he procures legitimacy. In his absence, Walter Hughes supplies much more stability than most of Wilson's present fathers. Lilly's own father leases her to a neighbour; Lilly's employer, Major

Butler, has no children to disappoint. In their absence, he abuses his wife through years of infidelity, to which she typically reacts with silent disgust; Hetty Dorval's father does not even acknowledge his daughter; Frankie Burnaby's father teaches her social intolerance; Topaz's father encourages her insignificance; Maggie Lloyd's father instils in her the austerity that excludes her from reciprocal relationships; and I will show in the next chapter how Ellen Cuppy's father isolates her, rendering the daughter suspicious of marriage. Within the fiction of Ethel Wilson, patriarchal power demands questioning since these fathers supply their families with few of the traditional attributes prescribed by their power. The fathers in Wilson undermine the myth of the patriarch -- in her fiction, fathers are unworthy of rule. The legendary Walter Hughes and the irony of his influence serve to expose society's absurd demand for legitimacy as provided by the father.

Lilly lies her way into respectability with surety until she is confronted with the presence of Yow, her former lover. In her achieved security, she does not as one might expect, reveal herself, as she is positive that Yow will do. Instead, she resorts to further deception, since deception has always insured safety for her. She relies on the knowledge of one of Wilson's wise women, Miss Larue -- a woman who is 'street-wise' in different ways than Lilly. Miss Larue devises for Lilly a new appearance -- a guise that Lilly has previously not attempted. The "wig" and "cheaters" (LS, 252) decreed by Miss Larue are in keeping with Lilly's whole existence, and as she eased into

respectability through her lies and her association with the Butlers, she will again have no problem assuming the identity of the matronly figure conjured by Miss Larue. (Interestingly, Lilly's final appearance contrasts sharply with the painted look of Mrs. Emblem.) In her new role, Lilly's respectability extends to happiness. She marries. During Mr. Sprockett's proposal to Lilly, she induces her manipulative tears to flow since she feels compelled to reveal something of herself to her new partner. The reader assumes that Lilly will finally relate her true story. But those expectations are undercut ruthlessly, yet comically, as Lilly explains the circumstances of her wig, her "'Adaptation.'" Lilly cannot change her rendition of Mr. Walter Hughes. Like the wig, it is an adaptation of her life. Mr. Hughes is not a lie -- he is a living element of the woman who sits opposite Mr. Sprockett in the restaurant. Lilly's fiction, like Mrs. Emblem's newspaper, becomes truth by repeated use, and truth, in the case of Lilly's story, and Mrs. Emblem's public appearance, becomes reality.

The novella ends in much the same manner as "Tuesday and Wednesday" does. Lilly's lie assumes a sincerity that is for her, unquestionable. Readers who have been duped into expecting a final confession have misread Lilly's desperation and determination. But readers who have been duped are awakened quite drastically by Lilly's trivial admission about her wig. She has nothing disreputable to hide. She is Mrs. Walter Hughes. Similarly, Vicky May Tritt's account of Mortimer's heroic attempt to save his friend is taken as truth. While

Vicky's story is closer to 'what really happened' than Lilly's is, both women resort to an adaptation of the facts that serves to placate their listeners, and to restore respectability -- which is, of course, the demand that society makes upon its members.

Chapter Five

SURVIVING IN LOVE AND SALT WATER

The Equations of Love exploits the nature of deception to present it as truth. Truth, then, takes on a flexible character. Truth incorporates an individual's point of view as dictated by the individual's circumstance. In Love and Salt Water Ethel Wilson again explores the nature of truth, but with increased subtlety. The characters in this last novel do not tell lies. But they do perceive truth as arbitrary and changing. The effect upon the individual of this type of perception is uncertainty -- and uncertainty permeates the lives recorded in this novel.

Love and Salt Water relates the life of Ellen Cuppy, from her sad childhood, to the loneliness of her young adulthood, and finally to her marriage. Ellen's loneliness, as seen in so many of Wilson's characters, derives from a protective need to stay separate from relationships. As an adult, Ellen is uninvolved with family, friends, or lovers. Her isolation is acquired through the experience of her mother's death and her subsequent abandonment by her father. Ellen, however, will overcome her early learned austerity as she recovers from the trauma of a near drowning in her adulthood. She will survive the salt water, and in doing so she will be prepared to survive the "encroachments of love" (LSW, 82) in her marriage to George Gordon. There is, however, no intimation that the couple will live within the myth of wedded bliss. The novel ends in stark honesty: "They [Ellen

and George] resumed walking very slowly, and this was the actual beginning of their happy chequered life together" (LSW, 203).

The gentle anarchy in Love and Salt Water, as in Swamp Angel, resides in ironic narration, which lures the reader away from the author's unresolved story. The narrator constantly exudes pessimism and forces the reader to concede to the acerbic tone. Form and content are closely bound in the novel. Desmond Pacey argues that the book "lacks that final unity of effect which so distinguishes the best of Wilson's work in fiction" (Pacey, 173). I, on the other hand, find meaning in Wilson's discordant ending. The novel's chequered final comment does not lack unity, but instead upholds the author's continuing tone of healthy scepticism. It is within the ironic tone that I acknowledge the novel's gently anarchic statements on marriage and the nuclear family. Both social institutions are scrutinized in Love and Salt Water -- the verdict: marriage is a trying experience that may produce order and happiness, but more often results in chaos and disappointment; and the family, derived from marriage, usually exists in a fragmented state of tension. The imposition of these two institutions upon society's members creates estranging non-conformity and anxiety. Wilson's gentle anarchy censures society's inflexible structure. The author challenges this inflexibility through the actions of Ellen Cuppy, who will overcome the strictures imposed by both the small and large communities in which she lives.

Love and Salt Water introduces the theme of marriage from a child's perspective. Ellen Cuppy, at eleven years old, regards her

sister Nora as "a lamb getting ready for the sacrifice" (LSW, 3). Nora is actually preparing for her wedding of the following day. While childish thoughts display simplicity, they are at least honest. Ellen has her own parents' marriage to use as a standard for judgement and I surmise that the Cuppys's relationship causes the child's early awareness of female submission in marriage. Many commentators would disagree. Blanche Gelfant views the Cuppys's union as "the happiest of marriages" (Gelfant, 129); and Desmond Pacey remarks that the "marital love ... between Frank and Susan Cuppy is strong and sure" (Pacey, 164). These considerations exist perhaps because the narrator assumes us that "he [Frank] and his wife loved each other dearly" (LSW, 8). But this statement prefaces the explanation that Frank Cuppy "was an absentee husband. That being the case, Mrs. Cuppy had spent barely one-third of their married life with him" (LSW, 8). The Cuppys's is a fraction of a marriage, not the whole thing. Their marriage includes Susan's constant awareness of Frank's potential infidelity: she "did not take her immunity from trouble entirely for granted, as Frank was too good-looking" (LSW, 10). His few, short visits home that repeatedly end in early departure evoke in Susan an attempt "to be philosophical" (LSW, 10) --an admirable, but emotionless response. Susan also senses her husband's disinclination to be with the family when he is at home. Rightly so, since "Frank did not always hear what they said, although his hearing was perfect. He habitually thought of other things" (LSW, 10). The narrator rationalizes the Cuppys's strained relationship by

ironically protesting that the two actually do love each other dearly, thus creating considerable doubt on the matter.

The Cuppys's daughter, Ellen, is not insensitive to her parents' part-time marriage. She and her mother become "indispensable" to each other. Father is not included in their companionship. The promises he makes of a group holiday -- that he never keeps -- are of little consequence to the philosophical females of the Cuppy family who find solace merely in the hope of "Some day ... " (LSW, 7). Susan's and Ellen's shared closeness is a product of their mother/daughter relationship, but it also has similarities to the bond between Maggie Lloyd and Vera Gunnarsen in that the bond flourishes by adverse response to the man in their lives. Maggie and Vera know Haldar's selfishness -- he will not respond to Vera's needs, which forces Vera to turn to Maggie. Susan and Ellen live comfortably by the material sustenance that Frank supplies, but they live without his emotional support. They live with the knowledge that "it was nearly his greatest pleasure in life to be with his wife Susan and his tall fair daughter and his little dark daughter" (LSW, 10, my emphasis). Frank cares for his profession as least as much as he does about his family, and while it is not made explicitly clear which of the two takes precedence in his life, the two-thirds of his time that is spent away from Vancouver reveals his preference.

His little "dark" daughter Ellen develops an uncharacteristic seriousness in her childhood as she recognizes her father's uninterested distance from her. Pointedly, Ellen asks "What kind of father are you

that doesn't even listen to his own daughter!'" (LSW, 13). The exclamation mark renders the child's question rhetorical -- it requires no response since the answer is known, and because the inattentive father is in the habit of not bothering to listen anyway. The darkness apparent in Ellen as a child remains with her as she matures to consider her own marriage. The darkness lifts, paradoxically, only when Ellen faces the blackness of her own and her nephew's close encounter with death. Until her moment of revelation that occurs in the Pacific Ocean, Ellen is cold and controlled in her relationships. Her coldness does allow survival, but it does not admit love and human contact.

Shortly after the death of Susan Cuppy, Frank does take his younger daughter on a healing vacation. It is, however, not quite the 'family' holiday he had promised. On the trip, Frank meets and falls in love with the manipulative Nicola Gracey, to whom he soon becomes married. Desmond Pacey comments that "[i]t is because his love for his first wife was so strong that Frank falls in love with Nicola" (Pacey, 164). The logic behind the comment escapes me, but if there is merit to Pacey's observation, the second Mrs. Cuppy will surely find disappointment in a marriage where her husband's love is only a misplaced emotion for another woman. The novel, however, suggests otherwise. Frank Cuppy's "happiest of marriages" to Susan is quickly forgotten, it seems, and with his new wife in New York, he still "came and went, but not so often now and not so far" (LSW, 96). Frank Cuppy's second marriage domesticates him further than his first marriage did,

with the implication that he finds the latter match more rewarding. Ellen acquiesces to her father's new marriage with the submission that her "Mother had irrevocably gone, and taken her ambience with her" (LSW, 90). The absence of Susan's stoic atmosphere, complicated by Ellen's childish scepticism about the absentee husband and father, produce in the young woman a fear of marriage.

George Gordon's proposal of marriage to Ellen accordingly causes her discomfoting thoughts:

... at once her freedom became essential to her again. This free-life-without-an-object, which had become so boring, was suddenly necessary to her security. She knew this life well, and would not exchange it for some other life which might be only a new conformity, and then perhaps a prison far away with a stranger (LSW, 105-06).

Ellen's concern with marriage as an institution that requires a transition to conformity and then to imprisonment derives from the role models to which she has been exposed. Her own mother stayed at home in Vancouver and waited (most of her wedded life) for an unresponsive husband to return; Nicola Gracey, Ellen's step-mother, waits less than Susan Cuppy did, but 'waiting' is still a part of her role as wife; Ellen's sister, Nora Peake, the sacrificial lamb, chooses an absentee husband just as her mother did. But Morgan Peake's visits home appear more strained than Frank Cuppy's did -- Nora and Morgan do not even share a bedroom. Ellen's protective reaction to George's question of marriage is learned from her observations of the women she knows. Conformity for Ellen is, among other things, submission in marriage.

Those ideal/ized marriages, like the one between Isa and Charles Cheney, are recorded in the novel in a marginal way. They exist away from the mainstream of life -- outside of the cities and outside of daily routine. As in Swamp Angel, where Chinatown's order is recognized, but unattainable, the Cheney partnership is admired, but positioned beyond the reach of most contenders.

George Gordon's second and accepted proposal of marriage to Ellen is a guarded one. It occurs after several years of a fragmented relationship between the two. Like the first proposal, the second follows George's divorce from Maidie. George explains his past to Ellen, who reacts with sympathy, and guesses that either Maidie "must be crazy or - well, who can tell" (LSW, 95). Ellen asks another rhetorical question. The answer, if known at all, is known only to the couple involved in the divorce. Hence, in spite of a description that presents Maidie as selfish, and says very little of George's part in the marriage, it is difficult to accuse one partner in the union as singularly guilty. Maidie is clearly shown not to be a 'waiting' wife (not that the role of 'waiter' insures happiness in marriage) she has extra-marital affairs. Still, her singular guilt is unconvincing. The telling names employed by Wilson raise doubts about Maidie's portrayal. A wife named Maidie connotes the possibility that she was treated like a maid rather than an equal member in the marriage. Such a view would see George as an oppressive husband and this view would be in keeping with the novel's other suggested inequalities in marriage.

In his second, epistolary proposal to Ellen, George is tempted to convince Ellen that marriage would be suitable "'especially now that you're out of a job,' but refrained, as she might not think that funny" (LSW, 110). Ellen's early learned independence would indeed bristle at the statement. Behind the dubious humour of the remark lies the implication that George Gordon would become Ellen's keeper, not her husband. George's notion, if it were to be Ellen's impetus to marry him, would confine Ellen in "prison ... with a stranger" as she previously feared. The "chequered" life that Ellen and George begin at the novel's close does not intimate total disaster, but it does allude to the contrasting characteristics between the woman and man, and the intricacies that will be involved in avoiding the clash of dominant personalities. These are the intangible intricacies that, if managed equally, render marriage an equal partnership. Ironically though, since Ellen has lost her job, the novel indicates that Ellen will be kept financially by her husband -- no other female character in Love and Salt Water works outside the home.

Ellen accepts George's second proposal. The barriers that had upheld her boring, secure existence give way to some new feelings in Ellen. She confides to her friend Isa:

'I'm not afraid - I really couldn't bear it if anything happened to stop me marrying George ... that proves it. I couldn't bear it' (LSW, 154).

Ellen does not say she loves George. She learned in her earlier engagement to Huw Peake that "love (which is said to be enough) would

not be enough" (LSW, 80). But even in accepting that love is inadequate to ensure happiness, Ellen is still not convincing in her feelings for George. She relates uncertainty in the hesitant 'proof' she offers in her explanation of their relationship. As yet, Ellen cannot conceive of the commitment required in marriage. She does, however, acquire this insight, brutally, through her near fatal accident in the Pacific Ocean.

Ellen takes her nephew Johnny into the waters of Active Pass to fulfil a promise. The boy must see the seals that inhabit the place. Their excursion into the Pass ends in tragedy. Ellen and Johnny are engulfed in the wake of a large ship. The pair are nearly drowned and Ellen is severely injured. The incident awakens in Ellen emotions she has never known. She receives the knowledge of life and her place in the "web" of humankind. Fearing that Johnny had drowned, Ellen "gazed up at Nora's inanimate child [and she knew] [i]f he lived, she lived; if he was dead, ... she would plunge again at once into the current" (LSW, 179).

Ellen would offer her own life if her nephew dies. She equates their two lives and while she expresses this equality only as it would exist in death, she is stumbling upon a vital revelation. She is able to consider self-sacrifice because of the love that she feels for Johnny. If the two lives are equal, as they surely are, then Ellen must at this moment realize that she not only loves the boy, but that she loves her self. It is at this moment in the water, I think, that Ellen Cuppy changes from an isolated, lonely person to a loving, tolerant, and receptive woman who will thrive in the "web" if she is given the chance.

Carol Christ, writing about women's literature, notes that

motherhood can provide opportunities
for insight only when the mother has
a distance from her children - a
situation hard to achieve when the
children are one's own (Christ, 61).

Ellen is given such an opportunity. In fighting to save her nephew, Ellen "was Nora and Nora was herself" (LSW, 176). Ellen becomes Johnny's mother in her attempt to rescue him. But in that she is not really his mother, the "distance" to which Christ alludes permits Ellen to find new knowledge. Ellen's separateness from Johnny, coupled with the disaster that he faces, allows her to see the cherished bond of mother and child. She not only sees it, but her distance from the bond provides new space for her to fill to form a similar bond. Ellen gains the insight that she previously lacked. This is an awakening in Ellen that she will nurture in her self. Her awakening will finally allow her to overcome the uncertainty that she has expressed in her feelings for George Gordon. She will confront him with the symbol of her experience, her scar, and live with the consequences of the confrontation. Ellen's new understanding of human interaction will not provide her with a story-book life, but it will save her from the feelings of imprisonment that she fears in marriage.

The image of wife as prisoner surfaces frequently in Wilson's fiction. Her interest in the confines of relationships, however, goes beyond a concern with women. She looks closely at the family unit to reveal the love and strength of the group, but also to demonstrate how

the unit does not always function in a supportive fashion. The impossibility of Frank Cuppy's promise to re-unite his family with a shared holiday is an aspect of the family that does not quite work. The promise, even if fulfilled, would only intensify the separation that the Cuppy family usually knows. Nora Cuppy's marriage to Morgan Peake mimics the pattern of the fragmented family in which she grew up. She is satisfied to dwell upon her son Johnny (much as her own mother became overly attached to Ellen) in Morgan's constant absence. Nora's smothering affection for her youngest son is given at the expense of Gilbert, her eldest son, who is wholly unknown to her. Gilbert is doubly alienated. Emotionally, he lives in the loneliness of his mentally handicapped condition. Physically, he lives at a distance from his parents and brother, in the care of a family who is paid to provide the necessities of life for him. The arrangement affords Nora a limited security. She places all of her emotional energy on her second son, with the effect being absolute isolation for her when she is faced with the possibility of Johnny's death. Unlike Morgan, who unfailingly visits and loves his son Gilbert, Nora has hidden from a bond with Gilbert that could appease the anxiety she suffers over Johnny. So Nora suffers alone. She is unable to accept strength from her estranged husband, who lives with her as a tenant might. She cannot find consolation in her love for Gilbert, since she selfishly rejects him, not being "able to face it at all" (LSW, 65). Nora's idea of the family exists beyond the traditional nuclear family, and while this perspective has allowed survival for other women like Rachel Hastings

and Lilly Waller, it serves only to alienate the four members of the Peake family.

The difference that Wilson shows between Nora's attitude and that of Rachel and Lilly does not undermine the author's comments about the family. The gentle anarchy in Wilson's works resides not in a disdain for the nuclear group, but in a recognition and portrayal of the group that does not meet the needs of all members in society. Nora's resistance to the security that the family can offer is not a conscious act of gentle anarchy. She complies as readily as she is able. Nora ascribes to marriage her own placid existence, commenting ironically on "how short-tempered and perverse Gypsy [Ellen] was getting; and she supposed it was not being married" (LSW, 126). Nora fails to recognize that being married has not produced in her the order that she accuses her sister of lacking. Nora accepts the role of wife and mother without the ability to conform to that position and without understanding that she is not conforming. As a mother she is unwilling to face her son Gilbert. As a wife she is unwilling to confer with her husband in the matter of Johnny's health. Nora hides from Morgan Johnny's hearing disability with the rational that "the minute you admit something, it exists and can become worse" (LSW, 147). Nora assumes a responsibility greater than she should. Her place as family member, mother or otherwise, does not allow her to decide the nature of truth for the family's other members. That kind of power reduces the value of communal living, not unlike patriarchal power, which exists in the

interest of the father, and only theoretically for the benefit of all. Nora's mismanagement and misunderstanding of her position in the family suggest that she is a woman who may have led a far more rewarding life outside the customary role of woman as wife.

Nora's response to both of her son's incapacities is to develop her own sense of truth. Gilbert is non-existent for her. Johnny's deafness is unadmitted, and therefore, unreal. Ellen experiences the same sensation as a sixteen year old who discovers that her mother has died. Ellen hesitates, thinking "[i]f I do nothing ... Mother can't possibly be dead. It's if I tell people, then that makes it true (LSW, 16). Ellen quickly overcomes the childish notion -- Nora never does. But the sisters are both aware that truth is closely related to knowledge. Nora's denial of knowledge is with her as she begins her marriage. Such denial is not a state to which she becomes reduced in marriage, but rather one that she maintains. On the night before her wedding, Nora is perceived by Ellen to be a sacrificial lamb, and the image reminds the child of stories about virgins. Ellen's natural curiosity inspires her to ask "'Nora, what is a virgin anyway?'" (LSW, 3). The child is truly unaware. This is one of the few earnest questions that the self-reliant Ellen asks in the course of the novel. The answers that the girl receives display ignorance and evasiveness. Nora says a virgin is "'a biblical character,'" claiming that she herself is "'Certainly not!'" a virgin (LSW, 3,4). Mrs. Cuppy hastily explains that a virgin is "'a young girl'" (LSW, 4) and dismisses the subject by sending Ellen off to the safety of her bed. Nora's

ignorance, feigned or real, is stifling. It denies her sister truth about her own body that the child is old enough to know, since she is old enough to ask. The more disturbing thought lies in the implication that Nora may be entering her own marriage without knowledge of her own sexuality. Mrs. Cuppy's curt illustration of virginity enhances the implication for Nora, and suggests that the women of this household deny and are denied sexual truths. Marriage that exists in sexual ignorance is problematic and offers at least one explanation for the separate bedrooms that Nora and Morgan occupy.

Wilson's delineation of the oppressing and the oppression of women is her starting point in Love and Salt Water. She does not belabour the theme, but it does underlie her narrative. Her presentation of marriage and the family demonstrates 'successful' women to be good homemakers. The sage Aunt Maury and the contented Isa Cheney make the point. Wilson does not, however, focus on these women, but on the females of the Cuppy family. Susan Cuppy, who patiently learns to "put away, as well she could, the regrets [about her marriage] that were sometimes uppermost" (LSW, 9) in her mind, dies young and alone. Her first daughter, Nora, marries an elderly, austere man -- his remoteness appeals to Nora's own "beguiling quality of indifference" (LSW, 8). Ellen, the youngest daughter, learns to cherish independence so highly that its ensuing boredom becomes her security. She comes dangerously close to living outside the web, where her "inner non-conformity" (LSW, 103) would have no effect. Ellen's survival in the salt water does not

imply that her non-conformity will be lost. She will not forget her parents' marriage, or her difficult relationship with Huw Peake. She surely will always remember her revelation in the waters of Active Pass. The "happy chequered" life she enters into with George alerts us to the black and white days ahead for the couple. The final comment on her marriage denies resolution. Wilson does not propose a fantasy ending.

The future, I think, will include the gentle anarchy of a woman who has come to know herself and, therefore, to know others. The security that Ellen takes from this knowledge will save her from submission in marriage. She will not repeat the patterns she has seen in other women's lives. Alexandra Collins notes that Ellen's "marriage at the end of the novel does seem rather contrived, as if Wilson were not sure what the future might be for women like Ellen" (Collins, 71). While I do not share Collins's view of a contrived marriage, I do agree with her intimation of Wilson's larger vision of uncertainty for resisting women.

CONCLUSION

All of Ethel Wilson's novels dispel the notion of order arising naturally out of the nuclear family. She demonstrates that the family does not supply the needs of all society's members. She writes about women who cannot survive within this constructed unit. Yet she writes about successful women. They do not exist in utter chaos, only in occasional but manageable disorder. She describes lives that go on outside of our society's norm, and this is the essence of her gentle anarchy. Wilson's novels explore women's relationships with other women. She avoids relating the details of unequal marriages and suppressed existences. Her focus is instead a positive one. She writes of women's spirited responses to the inherent oppression in patriarchal society.

While forming aberrant families is the most prominent response of which Wilson writes, she includes also the formulation of sisterhoods -- bonds between women that are created to overcome loneliness, ostracization, and despair. But neither fragmented families nor sisterhoods are twentieth-century phenomena. They have always been a part of humankind. The prominence in twentieth-century literature, however, raises the question of the impetus for their existence. They exist beyond society's centre because they resist and question the values of the centre. To be them, or to write about them, is to practice gentle anarchy.

My approach to Ethel Wilson's work is necessary, but necessarily only one way to read her novels. There are other areas still to be explored. For example, a study of women and silence would be of special interest to feminist readers. The existing criticism of Wilson's work attempts frequently to fit her novels into popular literary structures that are inappropriate. Ethel Wilson is a twentieth-century, Canadian female writer. As such, her work demands critiques that are sensitive to her distinct genre. Her stories are about women. Masculinist criticism overlook's the author's vision of another society where women's interests are not subordinate to patriarchal standards. This thesis is a re-reading of Wilson's work that sees the author as a gentle anarchist. My reading surpasses a view that all too often regards her as an innocent traveller.

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