

"THE FORMIDABLE POWER OF GEOGRAPHY"
IN ETHEL WILSON'S FICTION

by

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"The Formidable Power of Geography" in Ethel Wilson's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the impact of geography on Ethel Wilson's fiction. Wilson's respect and affection for the varied and hitherto unspoiled physical environment of British Columbia determine the settings, characters, and the predominant themes and style of her works. Chapter One, concerning The Innocent Traveller, examines the Victorian influences shaping the author and traces the transition in her writing from Old to New World geography. The power of the natural environment to shape and reflect character is further explored in Chapter Two in a study of Hetty Dorval and the "genius of place." Chapter Three shows how Wilson uses the natural surroundings in The Equations of Love in ironic counterpoint to the blind, self-absorbed activities of the characters. In contrast, Chapter Four reveals Wilson's self-conscious protagonist in Swamp Angel using nature, British Columbia's rivers, lakes, and mountains, as a guide in her quest for self-discovery. Chapter Five, concerning Love and Salt Water, shows how Wilson also uses the sea in a protagonist's quest to surmount fear and loneliness. Chapter Six, a study of Wilson's short stories, summarizes her use of natural imagery to create and sustain mood, to depict character and conflict, and to achieve philosophical resolve.

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Introduction

In Love and Salt Water, Ethel Wilson writes that "The formidable power of geography determines the character and performance of a people." ¹ Ethel Wilson's respect and affection for the natural world of her adopted province of British Columbia determine not only the settings, characters, and recurring themes, but also the style of her fiction. With vivid imagery, she evokes the vast forests, the stark sage-covered hillsides, the isolating mountains and inlets of British Columbia and celebrates the determination, self-reliance and resourcefulness fostered by such an environment. Her characters are viewed always in conjunction with the natural world. Objects and events in that world presage, parallel, or reinforce happenings in the human sphere. Images of animals, rivers, and fish abound. In assessing influences on her writing, Ethel Wilson has publicly admitted, "[My] locale in a sustained piece of writing...has to be British Columbia. There are other places in the world that I know and love, but none that I know and feel, and love in the same way. But I did not choose it. It chose. It is very strong." ²

This thesis attempts to explore the impact of the powerful physical environment and the pioneering social environment of British Columbia on the imagery, the philosophical framework, the very style of Ethel Wilson's

writings. In Chapter One, a brief analysis of her autobiographical novel, The Innocent Traveller, serves to illuminate the Victorian influences shaping the author. Knowing her heritage allows one to appreciate the inscribing effect of nature and geography on Wilson's thinking. The increase in her use of natural imagery in The Innocent Traveller becomes even more marked in subsequent novels, though still conveyed in an ordered, lyrical Old World style.

The "genius of place" that holds in thrall many of Ethel Wilson's characters is explored in Chapter Two, through an analysis of Hetty Dorval. This, the second written but the first published of Wilson's novels, introduces another theme common throughout her works: "No man is an island." ³ When communication with others is suspended either by chance or misunderstanding or design, Wilson's characters employ numerous strategies to mask the realization of their loneliness. Irresponsible individuality such as that exhibited by Hetty Dorval and young Frankie Burnaby leads to tragic consequences.

Against the rugged backdrop of the British Columbian landscape or within the impersonal setting of modern urban Vancouver, individuals tend to be isolated--geographically, culturally, socially, emotionally. Both novellas that form The Equations of Love, studied in Chapter Three, poignantly acknowledge this isolation. The protagonists are too often

preoccupied with their own preservation to develop any sensitivity to their natural surroundings. In "Tuesday and Wednesday," few besides the omniscient narrator see beyond the dreary East End streets of Vancouver to find refreshment in the beauties of the harbour, beaches, and mountains, so accessible to all who would see. The world of nature explored in Chapter Three is a world of chance, of continuous change. Only the fit survive. Ethel Wilson stresses that to achieve any measure of satisfaction or happiness in life, one must confront apathy, fear, or selfishness, and participate responsibly in "human relations which compose the complicated fabric of living." ⁴ She expresses a firm belief in the value of family tradition and the necessity of a caring, responsible commitment to family and community. Equally vital to combatting isolation and adversity is the appreciation that in nature there exists an "incorporeal presence ...something that transcends life and is its complement." ⁵ In nature, Ethel Wilson seeks and finds a divinity expressed in all living things.

Many of Wilson's strong female characters sense the need to embark on a literal and metaphysical journey. Chapter Four examines Maggie Vardoe's quest in Swamp Angel to seek a physical and social environment that affords her a measure of happiness and fulfillment. Waters and rivers of British Columbia figure prominently in quests for self-knowledge, encouraging individuals to explore surfaces for

what they conceal--not only the surfaces of the water for hidden challenges and dangers, but the surface of their lives for unrecognized aspirations and undeveloped potential. A character's perception of his surroundings often reveals his personality or emotional state. Animals often reflect intellectual or emotional experiences. The cyclical movement of nature comforts and renews, giving an individual such as Maggie the contentment and strength that spur her to help others. Each of Wilson's characters must accept the realization that one is ultimately alone, and must use one's own power, like a swimmer, to manoeuver around obstacles. At the same time one must be attuned to the needs of society, for "we are all in it together." ⁶ Just as Maggie comes to recognize that she can relinquish the substance and retain the essence of the Swamp Angel, so Ethel Wilson affirms that the essence of a well-loved place such as Three Loon Lake remains with a person forever.

Chapter Five examines how Ethel Wilson distills the essence of yet another important geographical feature of British Columbia--the sea. As suggested by the title of Wilson's fifth novel, Love and Salt Water, love and compassion are vital in ameliorating the isolation and the dangers of "the unplumbed, salt estranging sea." ⁷ Only by encountering and facing the fears of life and its passing can an individual avoid the "desert" of loneliness and appreciate the glory of existence.

A study of Ethel Wilson's short stories, in Chapter Six, serves as a final overview of the author's themes and techniques. In its analyses of Mrs. Golightly and other stories, this paper will summarize Wilson's use of natural imagery to depict character, to establish and sustain the mood of a story, and to emphasize forces affecting life itself. Appropriately, the epigraph of this collection of short stories states, "Life is a difficult country...and my home." Her stories affirm that, by human sympathy and communication, by an appreciation of the divine in formal religion or in nature, the hardships and the darkness of life may be tempered.

In such a young province as British Columbia, Ethel Wilson understandably seeks to establish a cultural tradition, to define a social climate, to make her beloved province real. Wilson makes Vancouver real, in its early days of wooden sidewalks, in the dreary wet streets of its East End, in its spectacular views of False Creek and of the seabirds, the harbour and the North Shore Mountains. She evokes the shores and islands of the province, exults in the life embodied by its salt water. She paints reality on the huge canvas of the Upper Country, bringing to life its stark hillsides, its powerfully surging rivers. For places and objects only become real, not by mere physical existence, but by existing in the imagination.

This paper will attempt to show that to depict character, to establish and sustain the mood of a story, to emphasize forces affecting life itself, Ethel Wilson characteristically draws upon the natural imagery which forms such an integral part of British Columbia. The enriching stimulus exerted by her natural surroundings is captured forever in her writings, as she guides us in a search for the essence of life.

CHAPTER I

The Innocent Traveller and

"The Formidable Power of Geography"

Ethel Wilson develops the characters of her fiction by portraying them as an integral part of their natural surroundings. The essence of "place" colours all interpersonal relations, reflects and determines all emotions. Just how strong is Wilson's belief that "the formidable power of geography determines the character and performance of a people" ¹ can be best examined in the second of her works to be published, The Innocent Traveller. This novel is most unusual in Western Canadian literature in that half of it is set in the Old World, half in the New. The story describes ways in which a family, having lived in the small British manufacturing town of Ware and having been strongly inculcated with Victorian precepts, responds to beauty, isolation, and a pioneering society in the vast natural setting of the New World. Wilson's delightful reminiscences of cultural events and country gardens in England, when juxtaposed with her powerful descriptions of the expanding settlements and natural landscapes of Canada, permit her to demonstrate the differing balances between cultural and geographic influences experienced in each world. The Innocent Traveller is thus an excellent vehicle to trace

the transition between Old World and New. Likewise, it is an appropriate starting point for this paper in its attempt to examine the impact of geography on a people and a culture, and the influence it exerts on the writing style of the author.

Furthermore, The Innocent Traveller is autobiographical, and thus is most valuable in illuminating the Victorian influences shaping the ideas and style of the author. She was born Ethel Bryant, the daughter of English Methodist missionaries in South Africa. When her mother died, Wilson was only eighteen months old. Seven years later, after her father died, she was sent to live with her aunt, grandmother, and great-aunt, members of the Edge and Malkin families who had earlier emigrated to Vancouver. Except for the four years during which she attended a rigorous high school in England, Wilson chose to remain in her adopted and much loved province of British Columbia. Knowing her heritage allows one to appreciate the inscribing effect of nature and geography upon Wilson's thinking, and by extension, upon her writing.

Perhaps being orphaned in childhood made it all the more necessary for Wilson to fix herself within the context of a family. There is evidence that as early as 1930, she had written an outline for a work that would define and immortalize her family. ² The dramatis personae of this

work are four generations of Wilson's maternal family. Her great-grandparents, Joseph and Elisa Edge, have become Father and Mother Edgeworth in the novel, and their large family can all be identified despite their pseudonyms. Just as their fictional counterparts, Grandmother Annie, Topaz, and Rachel, bravely seek a new life in a new continent, so did Wilson's relatives--Ann Elizabeth Edge Malkin, Eliza Phillips Edge, and Mary Isabella Malkin. Just as Grandmother and Rachel Hastings offer to raise Rose, the narrator of The Innocent Traveller, so also the three women of the Malkin family welcomed into their household Ethel Bryant, the future author of the novel. Fiction serves but a thinly disguised reality.

The Innocent Traveller affirms the value of family tradition of protecting and supporting family members regardless of age or personality. Indeed, it is a whimsical account of an ebullient lady who, during her life span of over a hundred years, owes her exuberant and carefree existence to just such family indulgence and protection. Conversely, the novel demonstrates that a caring, responsible commitment to family and community is all the more necessary in a land where tradition has not been long established.

Ethel Wilson claimed that her writing was motivated by the lack of a cultural base in our young, rapidly growing province: "I found it imperative to write. In my childhood we had stood, in Vancouver, on a sort of subsoil of a

culture which, as the forests came down, had been vaguely prepared by our forebears in the haste of building and earning." 3

Ethel Wilson is always aware of the inexorable change effected as "time slides into time":4 "No one could stop the changes that came, not even if they had used a slogan to keep people away" (II:126). She wrote The Innocent Traveller as a "family chronicle" because she "wanted to make a record of a typical British family that settled B.C., to preserve a sense of Vancouver, as it was, for future generations." 5 To her, "the history of families like the Hastings family is to some extent the history of the city of Vancouver" (II:158). When Yow, the Hastings' cook, boasts about his noble Chinese lineage and extensive family, Topaz reiterates, "In this new country, it is very important that we should not lose track of family history. Traditions tend to die" (II:168).

Wilson's beliefs parallel those of another British Columbian author, Sheila Watson, who states that "art must establish a cultural past to act as a collective experience to sustain the future of a nation." 6 They are in concurrence about "how if [people] have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or insensitivity." 7 Only through using one's own past experiences and knowledge as a comparison or metaphor can one comprehend the world. A knowledge of personal or family

history, of national and racial origin is invaluable in enabling individuals to "locate and to understand themselves and others." ⁹ Ethel Wilson's fiction reflects her conviction that "the memories we choose to remember (and those we choose to forget, as well) give our lives their characteristic shape, and collectively they give our culture its characteristic shape." ⁹ The "otherworldliness and selflessness" of *Grandmother* (II:175), the filial responsibility of Rachel -- both are qualities that lend meaning to life, that assuage the underlying sorrow of humanity. "For Ethel Wilson, choosing your memories properly is a moral responsibility. For herself as an author, recounting the past of British Columbia is a part of her own duty to remember responsibility." ¹⁰

In *The Innocent Traveller*, Rose learns of responsibility, of involvement in humankind, by viewing herself as part of the continuum of the Edgeworth family. She maintains the oral transmission of family practices and standards. The Edgeworths' close identification with family exemplifies how "family resemblances are ... a major means of extending the ontological realm of the personal; how they enable us to establish a personal prerogative for understanding change within the schematic and objective world of other things." ¹¹ Indeed, membership in the family determines one's very being:

So strong was the woven fabric of their large domestic life that the Edgeworth family were first of all members

one of another, and next, each became aware of his own individuality. They were sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers before they were people. They rapidly became cousins, nieces, and nephews. Also uncles and aunts. Quickly one child, slowly another, apprehended its own condition as a person (II:15).

Though aggravatingly self-centered and irresponsible towards others, Topaz is still defined in family terms: "Topaz had already become Aunt Topaz, and was now on her way to being Great-Aunt Topaz, without noticing at all" (II:72). Even at her death, Topaz reveals how powerful is her perception of her position in the family:

For speaking clearly, the words she said as she died were, "Me, the youngest!" and although the last of her generation had twenty years ago departed, her life was still tied to the powerful and assembled family which had slipped one by one with acceptance or amazement through the strangely moving curtain of Time into another place (II:16).

Unlike Rachel, who maintains "a small, warm, and well - conducted world" for her mother, aunt, and niece "for no reward other than the fulfillment of her own fierce integrity and sense of order, and the confidence and placid affections of her family" (II:161), Topaz develops little responsibility towards herself or others. If family life becomes too encompassing, too protective, one can become unaware even of personal solitude or uniqueness. So sheltered is Topaz by her family that she always is the object of responsibility, and none is required of her in return. Consequently, she is "quite unaware of the realities of the people whom she [meets] day by day" (II:104). Having always been exempted from making decisions, Topaz allows her responsibility for

choosing a church carpet to reduce her to an anguished, self-pitying "moan."

Although waters and rivers figure prominently in the quests for self-knowledge often chronicled in the literature of our province, it is ironic that Topaz travels instead on a "comfortable and well-conditioned" canal (II:69). Artificially constructed and capably administered by her family, the canal demands no decisions, affords few obstacles. Her passage through Time smoothed by others, Topaz finds no need to mature. She remains throughout her life still very much an indulged and impulsive child. When her stepmother dies, Topaz is "still in her light-hearted minority at forty-five" (II:71). Mrs. Grimwade is astute in her observations: "If she needs a mother at her age, she'll still be needing one when she's ninety" (II:78).

Despite her whimsical treatment of Topaz, Ethel Wilson quietly denounces her lack of responsibility to herself or others. Topaz is as a "water-glider" on a pool, seldom encountering, and knowing nothing of, the "acute sorrow or acute joy or dull despair" experienced by those who swim the "dreadful deeps" of "circumstance and human relations" (II:103). For her, "the joy of living ... was seldom checked by people, things, or events" (II:103).

Topaz, with her unconventional and enthusiastic response to life is "the innocent traveller." Even at the age of three, when she is first introduced, Topaz is

delightfully irrepressible, irreverently disclosing the secret of the family's new toilet to a distinguished dinner guest. Always "anxious to be noticed" (II:2), "the small and irascible Topaz was an individual from the time she uttered her first sentence ... until that day nearly a century later when, still speaking clearly, she died" (II:15). Her perception of their shoes as she crawls under the dining table serves to introduce the many members of the Edgeworth family. Her numerous anecdotes, relayed many years later by her great-niece, Rose, provide a lively social commentary on the differences between life in the small town of Ware in mid-nineteenth century Staffordshire, and life in the equally small frontier town of Vancouver in mid-twentieth century British Columbia.

The formation and regulation of a community require customs, manners, and ritual. To Canada, Grandmother brings her "powerful spiritual awareness" (II:102); Rachel, "her fierce sense of duty, her integrity, and a great deal of common sense" (II:103); and Topaz, her loyalties to Gladstone, the Royal Family, and her father. This incalculable "baggage not immediately visible which they [bring] with them" (II:102) springs from the Victorian propriety and Wesleyan faith so strongly inculcated into their family life by Grandfather Edgeworth.

The Victorian household was run with strictest

propriety. Roles of male and female, elder and youth were fixed. Responsibilities and entertainment alike were incorporated into an ordered, predictable pattern of living. The busy and spreading family, political, and Chapel life "went on continuously and ... composed the background of the Book meetings of the winter months, of Topaz's annual visits to old Mrs. Grimwade in London, of a short visit annually to the seaside...and of an occasional journey to the continent of Europe" (II:61). Time flowed on imperceptibly but inexorably as new generations "slipped one by one with acceptance or amazement through the strangely moving curtain of Time into another place"(II:16).

It seems appropriate that just when the three Edgeworth women are about to sail into view of the continent that is destined to be their new home, they are greeted by the Northern Lights, "antics of the unexplained and ungovernable heavens" (II:97). They have left behind them the "happiness of familiar loves, dear places, and ordered days" (II:91). Relinquished is the land in which metaphors are urban and industrial, in which natural images are pastoral and domesticated. In the opening chapters of The Innocent Traveller, Ethel Wilson has recreated the Victorian sensibility by highlighting images regarding propriety of dress, duties to household and community, loyalties to country and God. Natural images are few and innocuous--

"lofty and so often clouded English skies;" "vague sweet songs of birds" (II:73). In England, geographical and natural images may provide romantic analogies for conversation or literature. In Canada, geography dictates where one lives, how one survives.

The values, beliefs and habits of the emigrating Edgeworths, bearing the imprint of their past environment and upbringing, permit them to give little notice or significance to the "wayward phenomena of birds, wind, stars...[or] strange plaguings of beauty" (II:73). Topaz blithely greets the Northern Lights as "a portent! A welcome indeed!" (II:98), and Grandmother feels "she has had a foretaste of Heaven and Hell" (II:99). They little realize that they have been transplanted from a place where existence is very ordered to one where hidden meaning lies beneath surfaces, dichotomies abound, and life and truth must be constructed anew. Topaz and Grandmother show little comprehension of Nature's proclamation:

"I am independent of you, uncontrolled by you, indifferent to you, and you know nothing at all about Me" (II:99).

Only those previously exposed to the power and indifference of nature, like Rose, the narrator of The Innocent Traveller, or Ethel Wilson, the author, can fully appreciate its threat or promise.

Even when confronted by the vastness and brilliance of

the autumnal Canadian forests, the British emigrants do "not recognize it as great beauty because they had always acquiesced in what they saw, not distinguishing beauty unless it presented itself in familiar, obvious, and inescapable forms" (II:107). Rachel responds to the freedom and space of the new country, and feels soothed by the stark beauty of the jack pines:

Although Rachel would always be prone to anxiety, she had for ever, now, a fundamental peace -- because she was where she liked to be. She was in essence as much a Canadian as those who had trodden Canada's wooded shores two hundred years before, or their descendents (II:113).

Like other British Columbian authors such as Roderick Haig-Brown, Malcolm Lowry, and Jack Hodgins, Ethel Wilson departs from the "survival" theme of many Canadian authors.¹² She emphasizes the contentment and success of immigrants, not their confinement and defeat. As Rachel gazes through the train window on her westward journey, "the worry and the fret dropped away from her, and she felt a new lightness of heart and a release" (II:112). In their newly adopted province, nature is harmonious, not hostile. Indeed, nature is often the victim of man rather than the reverse: "Down came the forests. Chop. Chop. Chop" (II:124). In her desire to possess the land which affords such freedom, Rachel exclaims, "I wish I'd come here two generations ago" (II:113).

Fortunate are individuals such as Rachel or Rose, who can find "momentary refreshment" in a "timeless impersonal

world" (II:258), who can experience "the comfort of the sunset or the bird on the wing" (II:259). In The Innocent Traveller, as in all of Ethel Wilson's works, objects and events in this "timeless impersonal world" presage, parallel, or reinforce happenings in the human sphere. But although she exults in the encompassing natural environment, Wilson suggests that isolation can be ameliorated only by participating responsibly in "the human relations which compose the complicated fabric of living." 13

Rachel's inner response to natural beauty stimulates her involvement with others. But the more intensely she feels, the less she is able to express her feelings. "There was within Rachel a virgin well into which beauty silently seeped ... She did not have to transmute this beauty into conversation" (II:166). The inner contentment generated by her experiences, however, is translated into kindnesses and obligations cheerfully fulfilled for those so dependent upon her.

Grandmother, appreciating landscapes more reminiscent of her homeland, relates instead to the "human toil and planning and thrift which [gave Ontario farms] their prosperous dignity" (II:110). Tiring of exclaiming over the "transformed autumnal Canadian forests," she chooses instead to read Ranke's History of the Popes (II:106). When the great peaks of the Rockies advance upon them, the travellers, newly from the Old World, can not fully

appreciate this wild extravagance of nature:

"I think, love, that they are rather too big! I could appreciate the mountains better if we had come upon them before we'd seen all the other bignesses. I think that my appetite for big things is gone," said the Grandmother.

Able to respond only in familiar ways, the Grandmother characterizes the enormity and profusion of the mountains in pastoral and religious terms: "The mountains skip like rams," "The Lord doeth wonderful things" (II:120).

Although Grandmother acknowledges that they will "have to try and learn new ways" (II:101), she soon recognizes that she is "rather old ... to be able to assimilate great change" (II:111). Indeed, when she reaches the young town of Vancouver, Grandmother retains the tradition of daily prayer sessions and of At Home days in her drawing room every first and third Tuesday. "The ties which bound them to their old home held steady" (II:159).

Significantly, Topaz, who never sees beyond her secure, closed world, requires little consolation from the natural world to make life supportable. Although many of Ethel Wilson's female characters embark upon a literal and metaphysical journey, examine their lives, and begin life anew, Topaz is not one of them. Having left behind the crowds and restrictions of Victorian England, she is less impressed by the vast landscape than by the freedom this frontier land allows from restrictive convention. It is Topaz's impulsive decision to go "camping" that allows Ethel

Wilson to explore more fully one of the chief themes of the novel--the response of the characters to a new world, the conflict that arises between the strength of culture and the impact of place.

For "ladies who had never seen snakes before, except in a zoo" (II:182), who confuse a garter snake with a venomous serpent, venturing out onto the summer cottage veranda to sleep the night is a bold undertaking. Thus in that very humorous chapter, "The Innumerable Laughter," Topaz bolsters her resolve to face the wilderness by taking with her many familiar accoutrements of civilization--her walking stick, umbrella and parasol, some biscuits and a bit of chocolate, her quilt, Grandfather's shawl and her hat! However, these props do nothing to ameliorate the stress of her first contact with primal nature, and "the dark cosmic and planetary silence outside the cabin really disturbed and deprived Aunty a good deal" (II:188). Unused to the proximity of deer, owls, and forest, Topaz is driven to reflect, "This is, when all is said and done, a very wild country, and only newly inhabited. Truly the New World" (II:190). Appropriately, she conjures up memories of the English beard, that symbol of authority and security from her past, to attempt to dispel her fear of the "unknown and elemental." Ultimately, it is her British education in the Classics, her half-held belief that "whoever should hear the fluting of the pagan god Pan [is] in danger of a revelation

which [will] turn him mad, and whoever should see Pan ... might die from the experience" (II:192) that inculcates the final terror, and drives her into the "shelter of walls, doors, windows, and humanity" (II:194). Combining images of a serpent, naked men, and a pagan god of nature in the same chapter as the description of "a dark unknown flower of fear" opening inside "the white satin body of Topaz," Ethel Wilson clearly implies that sexual knowledge or experience threatens the innocence of Topaz. Isolated from her family, Topaz could not exist. Even the artificial accoutrements of her culture and the social order they imply are not enough to give security and meaning to a life as protected as hers. Indeed, Topaz's "unquenchable vitality...[has] been preserved and untroubled by [her] lack of awareness of the human relations which compose the complicated fabric of living. The limitless treasure and absorbing motions of a continuous hidden life [have] neither enriched nor depleted her" (II:255).

Topaz recognizes that she has never had a "buried life". Offhandedly she muses, "My life rose in Staffordshire and I suppose it's going out into the Pacific Ocean" (II:253). When she is very old, her world of nature is restricted to the seagulls. They are, as she is, creatures of no responsibility. Moreover, they prefigure the flight of Topaz's soul into the setting sun. Topaz is likened to one last migrating bird who "remains alone ... wishing to go,

awaiting something" (II:274). With a sense of awe perhaps experienced by those who savour the "timeless and impersonal world," the omniscient narrator speculates on an all-encompassing Divine plan:

If there is a sense of polarity which exerts an influence on the winged creatures of the pathless and unpreventing air, it seems reasonable that a polarity should exist ... to which the unknowing human spirit, through its own atmosphere more tenuous than air itself, responds (II:274).

Even those who take little notice of the natural world are not exempt from its laws. Death holds no trauma for Topaz, just as life has held none. Unused to exercising any responsibility for her actions, she views death as but another adventure, or "innocent travel," to the "promised land."

Rose, who like Ethel Wilson shows an appreciation for her natural surroundings, gravitates more readily to natural metaphors. Rose's incongruent wishes, to "be a dog in a nice family" or to be a "devilishly indifferent" gull (II:260), highlight her inner conflicts. As David Stouck has observed, "Animals are frequently an index to intense emotional experiences [and important philosophical considerations] in Ethel Wilson's fiction."¹³ A dog knows of nothing but his loyalty, his "love [for] his dear people" (II:260). Like Topaz, a dog has no existence independent of his family. By her warm accurate descriptions, Rose demonstrates that she still respects the goodness of her grandmother, admires the stability of her aunt, and enjoys

the exasperating but entertaining irrepressibility of her great-aunt. If she were a seagull, Rose would miss the contentment, the occasional "rapture" and the "love" afforded by her "own people."

Nevertheless, a part of her envies the seagull who is "slave to nothing but his own insatiable appetite" (II:261), for she is aware that her duty to family restricts not only her freedom but also her growth as an individual. She senses, too, that unlike people who cannot evade the inevitable, confining passage of time, these "lawless birds...take no heed of the war" (II:259), are untouched by the "great and terrible events [that] are massed by Time and Plan upon the slow-moving curtain" (II:263).

As Ethel Wilson did not begin her formal writing until she was over forty years of age, she brought to it a maturity, a well-developed philosophy. Her works reflect an experience and objectivity gained through long periods of perceptive observation and of interest in the human condition. Stringent in her editing, she strove always for a spare, understated style, which in turn forces the reader to assume some responsibility for creating the fiction. Inevitably, one's attention is directed towards the author's manipulation of both story and reader. Although there are prescient statements and flashbacks in The Innocent Traveller, there are fewer authorial manipulations and intrusions evident in this work, designed to mirror Wilson's

earlier life and British background, than there are in her later works set completely in British Columbia, such as Equations of Love, Love & Salt Water, and especially, Swamp Angel.

For The Innocent Traveller is a chronicle of transition and stylistically reflects the author's ties to the Old World culture. Both Rose and her relatives, and the author and hers, emigrate to a frontier land but cling to the security of their Old World traditions and values. By coming to view herself in the context of her family and in the continuum of time, Ethel Wilson is able to reconcile permanence and change in herself, her family, and society. Although her youth permitted Wilson to adapt quickly to the "new land," the smooth lyrical style of her prose in The Innocent Traveller remains Edwardian and Victorian. Instinctively, she may have felt that an ordered, Old World style was required to underline the transmission of Victorian family (and literary) traditions to the New World. A flowing, cheerfully articulated chronology serves to emphasize the protection family provides against loneliness and against outside influences, the continuity it ensures through ensuing generations. On the other hand, despite the comic, nostalgic tone that she uses in portraying England and the legacy of its customs, Ethel Wilson's real love of her adopted country shines through in her evocative descriptions of its mountains, valleys and rivers.

CHAPTER 2

Hetty Dorval and "The Genius of Place"

In all of Ethel Wilson's fiction, the physical environment so determines and reflects the life of every character that it becomes their "genius of place." An excellent opportunity to explore the significance of "place" is provided in Hetty Dorval, the second book Wilson wrote, although the first of her works to be published. Frankie Burnaby, the narrator of Hetty Dorval, recognizes that "the genius loci is an incalculable godling whose presence is felt by many people but certainly not by all." "To some," muses Frankie, "the genius of place is inimical; to some it is kind." ¹ For those to whom the genius of place is kind, identification with place not only allows peace of mind but gives the confidence and motivation to focus on their own identity and relationship with others. Others, however, may fall "prey to the rapacious god in [a] place" and become unhappy, frightened, or even have to be "taken away 'raving mad'" (HD:70).

In analyzing the natural imagery in Ethel Wilson's writings, Desmond Pacey concludes:

The relationship of human beings to these cosmic rhythms [the change of seasons, the movement of animals, the flow of rivers] is twofold: they are at once spectators of them and participants in them. From the

contemplation of them they can obtain either a sense of universal harmony or a sense of their own insignificance. ²

Frankie demonstrates an obvious affection for the vast expanses of "sprawling hills" covered with "sagebrush carpets," traversed by "dun-coloured gorges" and "outcroppings of rock" (HD:8). Riding home each weekend on her pony does not become mere routine, for her "accustomed country eyes roving the expanse that [unfolds] itself at each bend of the river and road" (HD:11) note all the changes of seasons:

In spring the bluebirds, in summer the ground-hogs changing suddenly from little vertical statues to scurrying dust-coloured vanishing points; in autumn... a flying crying skein of wild geese, sometimes a coyote at close range... (HD:11)

Despite its stark beauty, the landscape of the interior of British Columbia could to some individuals feel almost oppressively isolated. It proves a most effective backdrop and environment, however, for Hetty Dorval. Facey suggests that

the mysteriousness of the hills at evening, their "variety of surprising shapes and shades," the oblique shafts of sunlight disclosing "new hills and valleys," suggests the multifaceted mystery of Mrs. Dorval, whose effect upon Frankie is slightly different if equally baffling every time she sees her. ³

The landscape also signals Hetty's rejection of the community and complications of other people. Through the help of her "housekeeper," she has found a town "so small that relatively it was a village. But relative to the surrounding solitudes it was a town" (HD:7). Hetty's "square bungalow all alone

above the river" (HD:2) is located in these surrounding solitudes several slopes east of Lytton. The walk up a steep "winding trail" further removes her from society. If you were to survey the landscape from the square window of Hetty's bungalow, "a figure of man or of beast crawling distant across the great folds and crevasses of these sprawling hills would make you stop, look, point with surprise, and question. One is accustomed to their being empty of life " (HD:4).

Frankie realizes that the "genius" of this place could be inimical for some, and warns:

If the person in Mrs. Dorval's bungalow feels any fear of this desolate scene, or if the person is subject in solitude to moods of depression or despair, then that person had better take her piano and her dog Sailor and her packing cases and go by train or by the Cariboo highway to some comfortable town full of people. (HD:4)

But the specificity of Frankie's threatening words is doubly significant. When she tells her story of "the places and ways known to [her] in which Hetty Dorval has appeared" (HD:71), she is remembering them as a young woman who is older and more experienced than when she first encounters Hetty. Furthermore, by the time she is narrating the story, she has effectively driven Hetty off to isolation and possibly to death in Vienna. Hence, these words are a hint of the hostility that we will see Frankie develop by the end of her account of the "affaire Hetty."

Certainly the twelve year old Frankie feels no such rejection of Hetty in their initial meeting. She remembers

her early fascination with Hetty, and is able to describe with great clarity the circumstances and surroundings in which she chanced to meet her. Their first encounter was "so easy and natural... [with] no one making an effort at conversation" (HD:17). Frankie innocently perceives her to be "pure" and "spiritual". Only "afterward"⁴ (perhaps after Hetty attracts Frankie's boyfriend, Richard?) did Frankie decide that the "innocence of [Hetty's] slightly tilted nose" was "a flirt's nose" (HD:18).

What bonds Frankie and Hetty so quickly is their common love of nature, and in particular, of the wild geese. It is Frankie's "ears, which [are] used to country silences and sounds, [that hear] the sound that will thrill [her] till [she dies]." Then Hetty's "eyes [pick] up the movement of the fluid arrow rapidly approaching overhead, and the musical clamour of the wild geese [comes] more clearly and loudly (HD:18). Frankie keeps her thoughts to herself, but as she sees "the fluid arrow ...[cleave] the skies, [she feels] an exultation, an uprush within [her] joining that swiftly moving company and that loud music of the wild geese" (HD:18). Hetty experiences the same excitement but voices her feelings, "Oh Frankie, when we stood there and the geese went over, we didn't seem to be in our bodies at all, did we? And I seemed to be up with them where I'd really love to be. Did you feel like that? (HD:20)

Frankie marvels, "That was so exactly how the wild geese made me feel that I was amazed" (HD:20). Later, when Frankie's parents condemn Hetty as "a woman of no reputation," Frankie gives the evidence, "she loved the wild geese,...as proof of Hetty's innocence" (HD:42). When she "thought of Mrs. Dorval looking up at the wild geese and turning to [her] in rapture, ...[Frankie] could not believe that she was bad" (HD:43). When Frankie informs Hetty that her parents will no longer allow her to visit, Hetty also cites the wild geese as her reason for liking and trusting Frankie.

Young Frankie is the only person to view Hetty in natural surroundings with which she is at ease and which arouse in her a warmth and sensitivity. She is the only person in Lytton to "know" Hetty through personal contact rather than public reputation. Both Frankie and Hetty have shown themselves to be individuals who can refresh themselves "painfully yet with delight" in the "timeless and impersonal world" of nature (II:258). For brief moments, both appreciate the solitude of nature, envy the freedom of the wild geese, and are able in that context to communicate their feelings one to another.

Like Ethel Wilson herself, Frankie Burnaby is also moved by the deceptively dangerous power of the "sullen opaque and fawn-coloured" Fraser and contrasts it with the "blue-green racing urgent Thompson River" (HD:7). "Ever

since [she] could remember, it was [her] joy to stand on [the] strong iron bridge" spanning the confluence of the Thompson and the Fraser to "look down at the line where the expanse of emerald and sapphire dancing water joins and is quite lost in the sullen Fraser" (HD:8). Before Frankie visits Hetty's house for the first time, she and Hetty stop their "horses for a minute on the Bridge, and [look] down at the bright water hurrying to be lost in the brown" (HD:20). With these images, Wilson seems to suggest that Frankie's innocence is about to be tainted by Hetty's experience or reputation. However, in light of the unsubstantiated defamation heaped on Hetty during the course of Frankie's story, perhaps Wilson also foreshadows the way in which Hetty's positive aspects of character, as shown by her response to nature, will be obscured by widespread public condemnation which dwells only on her lack of social integration.

Natural surroundings have not only a logical cognitive effect on a person, but a symbolic one as well. The confluence of the Fraser and the Thompson Rivers, the Bridge that spans them, the sagebrush of the dry hills surrounding Lytton, the wild geese in flight overhead--all assume symbolic proportions in Hetty Dorval. Desmond Pacey contends that "the tumultuous river is symbolic, to the young girl Frankie, of Hetty Dorval herself--something powerful, mysterious, almost monstrous, but at the same time

very beautiful."⁵ If the Fraser indeed symbolizes the experience and self-centeredness of Hetty, and the Thompson, the youthful innocence of Frankie Burnaby, it is not surprising that by the end of her turbulent relationship with Hetty, Frankie rejects the social lack of responsibility of her older friend but seems to have become as insular, as self-protective, as uncaring as she.

Frankie acknowledges the power exerted by her natural environment, for she recalls:

As we talked and laid our little plans of vast importance for that day and the next, the sight of the cleaving joining waters and the sound of their never-ending roar and the feel of the frequent Lytton wind that blew down the channels of both the rivers were part and parcel of us, and conditioned, as they say, our feeling (HD:9).

Indeed, these rivers continue to condition her feelings, as can be witnessed in her change in tense as she describes the Thompson: "Perhaps the water was emerald, perhaps it was sapphire. It is both. It is neither. It is a brilliant river, ...a racing calling river" (HD:3). It comes as no surprise that Frankie feels that her "genius of place is a god of water" (HD:70).

Frankie is conditioned by her environment, but in turn her personality governs the manner in which she perceives her surroundings. To Frankie, the still image of one mountain, the Sleeping Beauty, when reflected in the circular frame of an old mirror in her room at the boarding school in Vancouver, "had more unity and significance than

when you turned and saw its substance as only a part of the true, flowing continuous line of the mountains" (HD:53).

It is not uncharacteristic that Frankie is attracted to the Sleeping Beauty in isolation, just as she was drawn to the "touching purity" of Hetty's profile, "the soft curve of her high cheek-bone, and the faint hollow below it" (HD:18). Hetty clearly becomes the sleeping beauty when, in Frankie's hotel room in London, "she [turns] over in bed and [makes] a beautiful S with herself" (HD: 111). Viewing Hetty in isolation, Frankie is able to admire the older woman's beauty and love of nature. By obeying her parents' wishes and viewing Hetty as a member of society or "part of the true, flowing, continuous line of individuals involved in mankind,"⁴ Frankie recognizes that her view of Hetty has been a fragmented reflection--"I could not see Hetty plainly. I could not tell what she was really like" (HD: 87). She is led to discover that Hetty's beauty provides but a deceptive screen for an immoral and selfish sensuousness. To some degree, Frankie's parents are successful in helping her overcome her childhood preference for beauty in isolation. But only through the catharsis of telling her tale does Frankie truly begin to perceive the unreliability of appearances.

Unlike the story of The Innocent Traveller, which begins in England and ends in Canada, the story of Hetty

Dorval does just the reverse, beginning in British Columbia ✓ and moving to England. Because Frankie Burnaby's genius loci is a god of water, she is relieved that in England she is to live beside the ocean. Nevertheless, she is reminded of the place "where two rivers flow together," and of the "shore of the Pacific Ocean," and she knows with certainty, "My home is there, and I shall go back" (HD:71).

Hetty Dorval, however, never allows herself to establish roots in the surroundings that allow her such feelings of release. For balanced with loyalty to "place" must be a responsibility to community. Only when an individual ✓ experiences compassion for and responsibility towards his or her fellows, only when he or she internalizes the traditions, beliefs, and hopes of a community does life become tolerable. Frankie has the decided advantage of strongly established family ties and traditions--"Father and Mother set and maintained the family standards in an exacting loneliness where it would have been easy to be slipshod and lazy" (HD:10), and of widespread acceptance in the town--"if it was church-time...people were always friendly; there was always a beckoning finger and a nod that meant 'Sit here with us'" (HD:11). Family and community ties are likewise vital in creating a sense of "place."

Thus Hetty Dorval, who has been told little of her origins, who knows nothing of the existence of her real mother until it is too late, does little to counteract her

deracination. Centering in upon herself, she flees from situations that cause her any inconvenience or discomfort. She is unable to form any prolonged attachment to place. In petulant tones, Hetty asserts, "I do not propose to spend my time paying attention to all kinds of people...All I ask of anybody is to be left alone and not to be interfered with. I'm sure I always leave people quite alone and interfere with nobody" (HD:26). Hetty Dorval explores the tragic consequences that arise when an individual isolates herself completely from all others.

Hetty's inability or unwillingness to relate to others renders her as liminal, as "separated tragically from her fellows" (HD:46-47) as Torquil, the grotesque Lobster Boy exhibited in the travelling fair. Hetty is isolated by being different. Frankie Burnaby is quick to observe the individuality of Hetty's speech--"We didn't talk like that" (HD:21), the uniqueness of her horse and saddle, the utter isolation of her bungalow overlooking deserted sage-covered hillsides.

Hetty's rejection also results from the community's aching need for solidarity, the need to feel that "every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the maine." In a town where the sharing of "school news, town news, church news, store news" (HD:11) fosters a sense of unity, the townspeople will ultimately be repelled by one in whom they can find no similarities, for whom they can feel no empathy.

In her determined "endeavours to island herself," Hetty remains solitary and unknowable. Even Frankie comes to recognize that:

One cannot invade and discover the closed or hidden places of a person like Hetty Dorval with whom one's associations, though significant, are fragmentary, and for the added reason that Hetty does not speak--of herself. And therefore her gently impervious and deliberately concealing exterior does not permit her to be known. One guesses only from what one discerns. (HD:72)

By having Frankie admit that, even after a number of encounters with Hetty, she can only guess the thrust of her emotions and motivations, Ethel Wilson not only underlines the lack of responsibility of Hetty's non-communication. She signals the unreliability of Frankie's first-person narration, a device not used in any other of Ethel Wilson's writings, a device of which a critical reader must always remain aware.

Tales such as those about Hetty Dorval are not that uncommon in small communities or remote areas. Howard O'Hagan, another British Columbian author, explains the evolution of such tales in his novel, Tay John:

For your backwoodsman is a thorough gossip. Left alone he gossips to himself. He lives too much with silence to value it unduly. He pays for a meal, for a night's lodging, with a tale. His social function is to hand on what he has heard, with the twist his fancy has been able to add...What he has not seen he deduces, and what he cannot understand he explains. 7

What Frankie cannot understand, she too tries to explain. Indeed, her entire narration of Hetty Dorval is an attempt to understand her beautiful but unfeeling friend. She comes

to sense what Ethel Wilson and many other authors believe, that all life, as far as we know, is fiction. It only means something when you retell it. There is no meaning before language.

Hetty Dorval is isolated by her unwillingness to "speak-of herself" (HD:72) and by her inability to communicate her feelings about others: "You know... people..." (HD:111). An enigma, she is further ostracized by the irresponsible language of others--gossip without verification. In a town where it is a diversion to go to the depot to watch the train arrive, it is only natural that Hetty should attract speculation. Frankie admits that she and her friend might atone for arriving late for supper "if we arrived home with the account of words spoken and information gained." (HD:5). The anxiety of the young girls about the impression they have given the Indians--"Goodness knows what they would tell the other Indians in their log and earth houses when they reached home. You never knew" (HD:5)--emphasizes further that, in a small town more than anywhere, "No man is an island".

Although Frankie feels that before keeping secret assignations with Hetty Dorval she always enjoyed a close bond with her parents--"We had always been three, and there was no constraint amongst us" (HD:38)--she nevertheless admits their inability to vocalize intimate feelings:

"somehow we would never never have said that to each other-- it would have made us all feel uncomfortable" (HD:20).

Neither parents nor child are able to verbalize their true concerns or feelings about the influence exerted by Hetty Dorval. Frankie admits, "Mother had never seen Hetty, and I could not bring myself to try and to fail, to describe what Hetty looked like, and the feeling that she gave people. I should just have sounded silly" (HD:54).

Upon first meeting Hetty, Frankie innocently perceives her as "pure" or "spiritual." It is not until Hetty utters what Frankie considers to be a profanity that Frankie begins to see her as having "another face" (HD:19), or being two-faced. When Frankie's father tries to dissuade his daughter from visiting the stranger in their midst by labelling Hetty "a woman of no reputation," the youthful Frankie is unable to communicate to her father her convictions that he "couldn't have believed these things if he had seen her himself" (HD:42). And indeed, when Mrs. Burnaby does notice the "woman with a most heavenly profile" (HD:63) on board the ship to England, she is unable to believe that it could be Mrs. Dorval, The Menace. When Hetty beseeches them to help her by refraining from gossip, Frankie and her mother later maintain that "when she spoke to [them] she was sincere and frightened" (HD:66).

Nevertheless, the earlier biases of her parents and

her own changing experiences and emotions colour Frankie's perceptions. She later comes to regard Hetty's appearance of purity "as a rather pleasing yet disturbing sensual look" (HD:20). Frankie rationalizes, "It could not be expected of a child of twelve that she should recognize the complete self-indulgence and idleness of Hetty" (HD:30). Frankie likens Hetty to a cat who "simply [sheds] people" (HD:30). A cat is also noted for its self-sufficiency and its promiscuity. Although Frankie describes the contrasting family loyalty of geese, she neglects to realize that perhaps Hetty, in her admiration of the geese, longs for a similar consistency and direction in life.

There can also be no doubt that over the years, Frankie actively but unsuccessfully tries to reject the charms of her older friend. Even as she travels to confront Hetty over her developing friendship with Richard, Frankie admits, "I yet could not dislike Hetty" (HD:74). Although she prevents Hetty from entering the "integrity" of Cliff House, the trusting, loving home of Frankie's relatives, Frankie confesses, "She was hard to hate as I looked at her". Though the more mature Frankie strives to denounce Hetty, she appears to secretly admire her isolating, self-centred quest for a life of no complications. This is not surprising when one recalls the recurring symbol of the wild geese. Because the geese evoke a feeling of soaring, of freedom, they may also be symbolic not only of Hetty's

flight from human ties and responsibilities, but also of Frankie's distaste for complications and responsibilities.

Nevertheless, just as Frankie's parents had tried to protect and isolate Frankie, so Frankie herself tries in turn to protect and isolate her cousins. Frankie recognizes (or rationalizes), "Although I had not thought of Mother and Father in relation to this whole matter, I am sure now that it was they who had been the unconscious or subconscious cause of my intervention" (HD:108). Hetty, on the other hand, implies that the ultimate reason for Frankie's driving her off is her jealousy of Hetty's place in Richard's affection.

Whether Frankie's intervention is motivated by jealousy or by self-righteousness, she commits a social fault similar to that of which Hetty is accused--she tries to isolate herself and her relatives from complications. Hetty's assertion, "I don't want to have my life complicated and I can't bear scenes" (HD:48), is echoed in Frankie's objection, "You muddle up my life too much...I've got my own life to live and I don't want ever to see you again--ever" (HD:114). That Hetty recognizes Frankie's corresponding isolation and self-centeredness is immediately apparent in her sympathetic reply, "I understand exactly. I feel for you. It is preposterous the way other people clutter up and complicate one's life. It is my phobia, Frankie, and I understand you...so well" (HD:114).

Unlike Frankie and unlike Topaz of The Innocent Traveller, Hetty has not the security of an extended family. In fact, she is unable to place herself in the continuum of any family, for Mrs. Broom has always led her to believe that she was an orphan. Even young Frankie realizes the injustice that has been done to Hetty, and she chastens Mrs. Broom, "If you'd brought her up like mother and daughter maybe she'd..." (HD:103). Maybe she would be better able to come to terms with herself, with her relationship to others, and not be forced to continue her futile quest for fulfillment?

In her attempts to isolate or island herself, Hetty also denies herself the opportunity of maturing. In much the same way as Topaz, Hetty remains until the end of her story still very much an indulged and impetuous child. In contrast, Frankie's concern and involvement with the lives of her cousins lend her a maturity and determination superior to the woman who is substantially her senior. Mrs. Burnaby, who was possibly jealous of Hetty usurping her place in Frankie's affections, later determines to acquire Hetty's bungalow. Frankie's parents undoubtedly realize how indelibly Frankie's memories of Hetty are linked with the place of their meeting, and wish to exorcise her "ghost" from the home on the hillside overlooking the river. Mrs. Burnaby's rationale is that "Here life would be very simple. Nothing and no one could complicate life here" (HD:59).

Recalling her mother's words after a span of several years, Frankie ironically queries, "Couldn't they?" Perhaps in retrospect she recognizes only too well that "no man is an island..." She certainly discerns the parallel between her mother's sentiments and those of Hetty: "(I will not complicate my life)" (HD:59).

Yet Mrs. Burnaby is recognized by Sister Marie-Cecile, and even by Hetty Dorval, as a "good" woman for her selfless devotion to her family. Frankie interprets one of the quotations in the epigraph, "Good is as visible as green", literally and confirms that in her mother, "good was visible" (HD:87). Ironically, this quotation is drawn from Donne's poem, "Community", notable for its cynical view of women.^a ✓ Mrs. Burnaby is, after all, guilty of passing on malicious and unfounded gossip that helps destroy Hetty's reputation and her future happiness. Furthermore, green is one of the least visible colours of all the spectrum, and Frankie's only reason for judging that green "was not visible in Hetty" is that she "could not see Hetty plainly" (HD:87).

Hetty errs in seeking security in terms of wealth, not of "people." Even though she comes to realize that "Rick is a thousand times nicer" (HD:115) than Jules Stern, she is unwilling "to give [her] life to Rick's sister," or to expose her emotions or her past to the scrutiny of Rick's extended family. It is also possible that she may have been

unselfish, realizing she would bring unhappiness to Frankie and her relatives.

Such is the artistry of Ethel Wilson that at the close of Hetty Dorval, the reader is startled, as likely was Frankie, into reviewing the "truth" about Hetty in a new light. What indeed can be attributed to Hetty's character flaws, what to Frankie's, her family's, and society's biases? The novel's epigraph again springs to mind. "No man is an island..." seems a familiar credo in the Burnaby household, but the Burnabys were guilty of islanding their family, and the people of Lytton guilty of islanding their little town, against a newcomer. Even more global implications become evident in the final paragraph of the story:

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

(HD:116)

Desmond Pacey links this final paragraph with the second quotation from Donne in the epigraph, "And makes one little room an everywhere":

The story, in its modest way, is being held up as a microcosm of the whole human world prior to the Great War [sic]. The irresponsible individualism of Hetty Dorval, multiplied a million times, precipitated that conflict. And since no man is an island, that conflict destroyed not only the individualists but the communalists as well. ♡

Hetty and Mrs. Broom are unable to show their love in the procession of little rooms they share. Frankie is likewise unable to show full compassion or forgiveness for the

sleeping Hetty, even though she is touched by the "rise and fall of the frail envelope of skin" and intuits that the "rise and fall of the unconscious sleeper's breast...is a binding symbol of our humanity" (HD:111). How much more dangerous it is for countries to "island" themselves in nationalism and self-righteousness.

One of the themes maintained throughout Hetty Dorval is based upon the quotation that forms the chief portion of the epigraph:

No Man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; ...any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde.
(John Donne)

As we have seen, it is not only Hetty Dorval who islands herself, but families, towns, nations. Frankie herself has grappled with conflicting desires both for freedom and for incorporation in family and community. This is all too common a challenge in a province where a powerful landscape demands on the one hand a self-reliant individualism, on the other a need for companionship and assistance.

Fortunately for Frankie, it appears that in her struggle to resolve opposing opinions and emotions through the telling of her experiences with Hetty Dorval, she has attained a greater level of experience and maturity. Most importantly, she has glimpsed the almost overwhelming responsibility one has towards a fellow human being.

Had Ethel Wilson known only what she recognizes as the mores and appreciations of her grandmother, as outlined in

The Innocent Traveller, her writing style would have been vastly different from what we perceive in her later novels. Tradition and family are still important, but the way the West Coast shapes her thinking is reflected throughout. Wilson's frequent images of water, forests, and mountains verify the overwhelming influence of a natural environment where, as Bruce Hutchison so aptly describes:

the bulk of mountains, the space of valleys, the far glimpses of land and sea, the lakes and rivers, all cast in gigantic mold...make a man feel bigger, more free, as if he had come out of a crowded room. 10

In Hetty Dorval, the distinctive qualities of the natural surroundings form an integral part of the story. To reinforce the importance of the influence of "place," Wilson's prose abounds with imagery of the senses:

We would look up at the broad sweep of brown Fraser... Then we would hear wheels or hooves and feel vibrations of the bridge and turn idly to see a conveyance creaking by driven by silent Indians...We would turn and again look down...the sight of the cleaving joining waters and the sound of their never-ending roar, and the feel of the frequent Lytton wind that blew down the channels off both the rivers were part and parcel of us, and conditioned, as they say, our feeling. (HD:7)
[Emphasis mine]

Wilson extensively uses not only the imagery but also the vocabulary of vision. "To see," "to look," "to stare," "to watch," "to gaze" are verbs frequently employed in all her novels, but most frequently in Hetty Dorval. Attention is often drawn to "eyes," but their perceptions are often completely subjective. Appearances can be deceiving to even the most "experienced eyes" (HD:1)!

By capturing the essence of her beloved Upper Country, Wilson attempts to explain the powerful influence exerted by this immense, sparsely inhabited natural environment. In her deceptively simple but provocative account of Hetty Dorval, she suggests how interaction with such surroundings can reveal inner feelings and aspirations, and can provide analogies by which human beings can develop an awareness and acceptance of others. Most importantly, the landscape tests strength of character. Spurred by her "genius of place," Frankie resolves a number of internal conflicts and gains a new compassion and maturity. Conversely, unable to accept nature's conflicting challenge--both of relishing the freedom of one's individuality and of participating in the unity of one's fellow beings, Hetty Dorval ultimately surrenders to her self-centered immaturity. Thus is success or failure determined by the power of "place."

CHAPTER 3

The Equations of Love:

"Circumstance, Influence, and Spiked Chance"

Ethel Wilson is skilled at writing stories that can be interpreted from more than one point of view. Just as Hetty Dorval can be seen from the perspective of a young Frankie Burnaby, so a clearer picture of her can be derived by taking into account the bias of the first person narrator. Again, in "Tuesday and Wednesday", the first of the two novellas that form The Equations of Love,¹ Wilson uses the bias of her third person narrator to force her readers to view the condition of the characters from a double perspective. On the one hand, she humorously but gently portrays the meagre attempts at self-preservation displayed by some lower-class inhabitants of the East end of Vancouver. On the other, she incorporates the inspiring beauty of the natural landscape and the latent energy of the elements, which, if the struggling people could only appreciate and internalize them, would greatly enrich and inform their lives.

For the attitudes and education of the characters in The Equations of Love differ considerably from those in Ethel Wilson's earlier novels. The urban surroundings that they inhabit or that they choose to notice do indeed still reflect and determine their lives. Almost none of the characters, however, show any appreciation for their natural

surroundings. Almost none are "aware of the incorporeal presence in air, and light, and dark, and earth, and sea, and sky, and in herself [or himself], of something unexpressed and inexpressible, that transcends and heightens ordinary life, and is its complement" (EL:194). Although this quotation occurs in "Lilly's Story", the second of the novellas that form The Equations of Love, [the absence of such an awareness] among many of the characters in "Tuesday and Wednesday" is valuable in explaining one of the important ideas informing the story. "Tuesday and Wednesday" evokes the [social impotence, atrophying imaginations, and anaesthetizing encounters of individuals who, engrossed in their own needs, notice almost nothing of the natural world about them.] Oblivious to nature, to both its beauties and its dangers, they have nothing to transcend or complement their ordinary lives.

In The Innocent Traveller, the Edgeworth women are disturbed by a confrontation with primal nature because they have never encountered it in the manicured countryside of England. Perhaps not coincidentally, Mort Johnson, when he arouses the energy to work, is a gardener, one whose cultivating and weeding is designed to transform natural surroundings into tamed ones. Mort lacks the self-assurance to view himself objectively in the competitive world, modelled by nature, where only the fit survive. While searching for a job in a nursery near Burnaby Lake, Mort

visits "a country of hills and wooded ridges which [lies] near yet remote (it seemed) from Vancouver" (EL:98). With the parenthetical "(it seemed)," Wilson reiterates that the expanse of countryside and the natural beauties of the woods so close to Vancouver seem remote from the consciousnesses of people such as Mort and the other characters of "Tuesday and Wednesday," characters conditioned only to the confining and drab streets of the city.

{ With amusement tempered by a measure of irony and sympathy, the ever-present narrator of this novella describes two days in the life of Mort and his wife, Myrt. To emphasize the triviality of their daily routine, the action takes place during days that are traditionally the most dull and uninteresting of the week. They are also the final two days of Mort's life for, on the Wednesday evening, he meets with a fatal accident.

In Ethel Wilson's fiction, it is the sensitive and contemplative characters who find comfort or renewal in nature. Although drab weather parallels the drabness of their rooms and the drabness of their lives, few of the characters in "Tuesday and Wednesday" take notice of nature or derive satisfaction from it. Or conversely, because the characters derive little satisfaction from nature, their lives are as drab as the drabness of their rooms and of the weather. The omniscient narrator illumines their

insensitivity to beauty, their lack of spiritual communion with nature, by opening the story with an evocation of some of the superb natural attractions visible to residents of Vancouver. Were they not too preoccupied with survival, they would notice that:

the fresh light of the rising sun touched, and then travelled--losing as it travelled its first quality of morning--down the Golden Ears, down the mountains north-east of Burrard Inlet, down the Sleeping Beauty, down the Lions, and down the lesser slopes descending westwards to the Pacific Ocean, until the radiant sunrise deteriorated into mere flat day. (EL:3)

Those people who are "up and about in Vancouver" are working, and so "the phenomenon of sunrise, being only the prelude to another day, [slides] away unobserved by anybody" (EL:3).

Absorbed in daily routine, the city dwellers are capable only of perceiving a "mere flat day." Mortimer Johnson is less interested in sunrises, or even in getting up, than are most people, and his "bedroom [faces] westwards and [is] darkened as much as possible" (EL:3). Eventually Mort pulls up the blinds to "let the morning in, but no air" (EL:5).

Mrs. Emblem asks her niece, Myrt, "Why don't you air this place?" (EL:21) { Both Mort and Myrt are too lazy or too preoccupied with themselves to avail themselves of one of the basic natural elements, fresh air.

If the characters of "Tuesday and Wednesday" were more appreciative of the energizing effects of air and light, if they were "aware of the incorporeal presence...[in the] earth, and sea and sky," it might foster an awareness of a

corresponding divinity to be found in themselves and others.

[Ethel Wilson appears to be suggesting that people such as Mort and Myrt might then feel more self-acceptance about where they fit in the overall scheme of life, and thus might be able to develop more understanding and feel more respect for themselves and for others around them.] No matter how Myrt disdains social pretension with "the extra quarter inch of her drooped eyelids and that amused small turned-down smile" (EL:6), it is the world of the Edgeworths and the Burnabys, "deeply affected by British notions of culture and social propriety," to which she and Mort try so self-consciously and unsuccessfully to belong. Just seeing a woman wearing alligator shoes and a suit on a street car is enough to put Myrt in a poor temper. "Having endowed the woman in the brown suit with several unpleasant qualities, and having assumed the character of a woman universally put upon" (EL:10), Myrtle is little likely to allow her feelings to be assuaged by notice of any beauty of the mountains, the sea, or the sky, or even of the lovely Indian summer day. In contrast, her employer greets her by proclaiming, "What a beautiful day!"

Had Myrt known a strong bonding of family, had [she not felt herself such an isolated entity], she might have been less [centered upon herself], less needy of feeling "solidarity with Mort against people in general" (EL:82). Myrt and Mort have united themselves as a family of two

against the world, and though each loves the other in his own fashion, they are also quick to show resentment. Aloud, Mort is saying, "Here's your tea, honey;" in his mind, he is threatening that "one of these days if she doesn't treat him good he certainly will slug her" (EL:5). Planning a better than usual supper to celebrate Mort's first day on a new job, Myrt views herself as "the loving wife unselfishly arranging a pleasant evening for Mortimer" (EL:18). But when Mort is late in coming home for that dinner, "Half an hour later Myrtle was very mad with Mort who was no longer a good husband" (EL:26). It may be that their vanity and pretention are all that save them "from recognizing the meaningless, destructive void that surrounds [them]."³

However, it is their protective wall of vanity and pretention that equally blinds them to any beauty in their surroundings.

Even Mrs. Emblem, the most epicurean of the characters in "Tuesday and Wednesday," is "hardly aware of the poignant communications of the sky, of birds, of ocean, forest and mountain, although she thinks Vancouver is a nice place" (EL:51). Ethel Wilson seems to be emphasizing that many people of Vancouver have become so accustomed to, or feel so removed from, what she believes to be one of the most beautiful settings on this earth, that they no longer see it. We have noted in Wilson's previous novels that characters project their experiences, their emotions, their degree of self-confidence, dissatisfaction, or longing, onto their

surroundings. Topaz's or Rose's, Hetty's or Frankie's--
 everyone's perceptions are relative.

Moreover, not perceiving any glimpse of an "incorporeal presence" or plan in their universe, the characters allow their environment to become self-fulfilling. A hopelessness and drabness in one's life can be reflected in a room that is dingy and needs cleaning such as Myrt and Mort's, a room in which:

the bureau [is] littered with brush, pins, comb, Eno's, face cream, hair, hairnets, powder, beads and old dust;...the blankets and flannelette sheets [are] unfresh; ... there [is] no attempt at cheer or colour...
 (EL:8)

Drabness can also be reflected in the "gray blankets" on Mort's bed; loneliness, in a "light, which has no shade, [changing] small and naked in the middle of [Vicky's] room" (EL:56); false reality, in "all the neon lights" on Granville Street; melancholy and sorrow, in the "dark wet pavements" of Cordova Street (EL:127). After Victoria May Tritt, Myrt's obsessively shy cousin, has just endured the pressure of assuring Myrt, Aunty Emblem, and Irma Flask that Mort has died a hero and not a drunken fool, she appreciates escaping "into the dark street" so much that, as a result, she finds "the air ... pleasant and the heavy rain refreshing" (EL:127).

When the characters of "Tuesday and Wednesday" lack even rain or dark streets to turn to, their imaginations become preoccupied with self-protective but unproductive

streams of thought. Myrt expends her energies in a driving "suspicion" and resentment of "society" people. Mrs. Emblem dwells daily on three portions of the newspaper. She experiences a "vicarious pleasure" from noting the people chronicled on the Society Page, "who so industriously and sometimes vainly spend themselves, and are so prodigal of their smiles, and rush about so much" (EL:54). She enjoys the "funnies," identifying with Little Orphan Annie, "the eternal little girl who never grows up," and appreciates that "the lines [of a character's] jaw [or] brow at once disclose good or evil. You know exactly where you are: would that one's own acquaintances were so marked " (EL:54). Most of all, Mrs. Emblem enjoys the Personal column, and weighs the merits of each man's advertising for a companion. Vicky also retreats into the unreal world of the newspapers and movie magazines, for "she [is] safe among the people she [knows] so well, the true companions of her mind, who [do] not know her, who [do] not even turn their faces towards her, who [demand] nothing of her--not recognition, not even a word" (EL: 77). Spurious, imaginary communication with people at one remove from reality replaces the social interaction of real human contact. Maybelle Slazenger surrounds herself with "a good many dolls of two or three sexes, ...[who provide her] with a pseudo-human greeting when she [returns] home in the evening to her small and empty flat" (EL:20). As "Morty [sits] on the interurban car

and as he [looks] out the window, he [does] not see bush, small houses, bush, more bush, and drizzly grey mist" because he is basking "in the perpetual sunshine that always surrounds one's most indulgent dreams" (EL:108).

Unfortunately, Mort's life is reduced to a series of unfulfilled dreams. Anyone who cannot distinguish reality is unlikely to comprehend nature, on which all reality is based. As we can see, all the characters in "Tuesday and Wednesday" compensate for their own inadequacies by finding inadequate substitutions for "the timeless and impersonal world to which [one can turn] and in which [one can find] momentary refreshment" (II:258).

Ethel Wilson contrasts the escapism and the discontent or loneliness of the majority of these characters with the equanimity of old Wolfenden, who admits his faults--"He can, and does, look back along a sorry procession of years which he does not regret" (EL:71), and who "has an affinity with the scene" of Burrard Inlet with its "peaceful backdrop of mountain...and blue clouded or gloomy sky" (EL:69). This old indigent's enormous curiosity and interest in the seagulls, "these calculating active birds which have little to recommend them except their strength, their fine coarse beauty, and their wheeling flight" (EL:69), and his desire to be one of them, affirms his positive identification and kinship with nature. By contrast, Victoria May Tritt will often watch the seagulls, but passively, unable to verbalize

why. The narrator believes that the seagulls attract Vicky because they "are as anonymous as the crowd of people on Hastings Street and make no demands upon her" (EL:68). Vicky is like "most people [who] come down here because, vaguely, they like it; or because they have nothing whatever to do; or because they are on their way to somewhere else and it won't hurt to stop for a minute" (EL:69).

The following description of the harbour appears to be associated with Vicky, but the narrator suggests that only when Vicky actively watches and projects herself into the scene will she be rewarded by such a vision:

How pleasant it is to lean against the rail, down by the C.P.R. dock and watch the seagulls wheeling, alighting, taking off again, and filling the air with their cries. And as if that were not enough, behold the waters of Burrard Inlet, different in colour tonight, and the ships ... coming and going, and across the water the houses and buildings near the water line of the North Shore, all lit up by the evening sun, and the twin spires of the old Indian church by the water, and behind all this the mountains; and behold the sky! ... The eye follows the seagull, the floating log, oil on the water, the busy launch, the two squat ferries that ply between the two shores of Burrard Inlet, the big docking ship. One is entertained as in a dream.

(EL:68-69)

Ethel Wilson makes a sad commentary on the indifference bred in many of the natives of Vancouver by the familiarity of the view, for she notes that it seems to be "the people of the prairie who are actively interested in this scene that lies before them, [and who] comment upon the smell of the salt and the diurnal miracle of the tides which never fails to surprise them" (EL:69).

Wolfenden, however, has a greater love and empathy for nature than any of them. He even lives "in Stanley Park in a hollow tree" for six months of the year. Therefore it can not be a lack of creature comforts or material goods that prevents people such as Myrt and Mort from enriching their lives by observing nature, for monetarily Wolfenden is poorer than they. It is significant that Wolfenden views people and nature "with the old habit of a writer's eye," eagerly noting and remembering every detail. It is significant, also, that his prized possession is a volume of Montaigne, for in his Essais, Montaigne's "examination of himself developed into a study of man and nature... Montaigne's last essays reflect his acceptance of life as good and his convictions that man must discover his own nature in order to live with others in peace and dignity."⁴ We see now the advantage Ethel Wilson gives Wolfenden over Mort, Myrt, and even Vicky. Like Montaigne, the old man studies nature, and uses his discoveries in formulating his own principles. He questions the changing behavior of the seagulls: "And why do they go, nightly, and return at daybreak? Could they not spend the night here?" (EL:70) He respects the purposefulness and resolve of the seagulls and emulates these qualities by sleeping among the trees even though he must outwit the police to do so. He values his continued freedom, his powers of observation, his active mind, and because he has been able to come to terms with

himself and view himself as part of the natural order, "he is not lonely," as is Vicky, and he does not feel resentful of people who appear more successful or prestigious than he, as do Mort and Myrt.

Tuesday dawns sunny, and an Indian or false summer warms yet another day in which Mort works at a job that lasts only a day. The "hot sun [is] setting" when Mort accompanies his friend, Fork, into the funeral parlour to look around. Little does Mort know that the sun will set for him forever the following day! The text also says, "The sun, at that time of the year, goes down suddenly, and then it is night before you know it" (EL:39) [Emphasis mine].

(Other omens and ironies crowd) the story. The name, "Mort", in French means "death", and as David Stouck has observed, "Fork" suggests "flesh and mortality."² Although Mort chooses a rich purple coffin for himself—"There'd be some satisfaction in being buried in something like that," (EL:42)—ironically it is Myrt that "—plain as day— he [sees] lying there" (EL:42). Nevertheless, the funeral parlour has "the assuaging effect on him ... of a warm beach on a starred summer night" (EL:40). Again, in few words, Wilson is able to provoke a variety of reactions from her readers. Neither Mort nor any of his friends or relatives are among those Vancouverites who enjoy walking, lounging, or having a beach party on the warm beaches on a starred summer night. How sad it is, Wilson implies, that the

cleanliness and opulence of a funeral parlour should bring pleasure to Mort when alternate natural beauties are so readily available to him.

The influence of weather is even more noticeable as the story continues to Wednesday: "The morning miracle had again deteriorated into a day which was merely a dull Wednesday which promised to be wet...the weather had broken" (EL:78). The narrator even finds the Vancouver weather important enough to inject a rather lengthy discussion of it:

When the weather is fine in Vancouver, fairly impartial residents will tell you that it is finer there than anywhere else in the world. That may or may not be true; but it is at least true that the surroundings of Vancouver, on those days, are more glorious and scintillant than those of any other northern city. Other people will observe that gloomy days are more frequent and more gloomy in Vancouver than anywhere else except in the United Kingdom. I do not know for sure about that, but this was the kind of day that Mort now let into the bedroom. Yesterday the mountains sprawled nearby in frank glorious abandon; today they were nowhere to be seen. Neither was the ocean.

(EL:78-79)

To speak of "fairly impartial residents" jokingly implies that the narrator knows it is difficult to be impartial, and believes that there are many partial residents who would be even more glowing in their defense of the weather and their description of the scenery. Ethel Wilson again highlights the lack of observance or appreciation some individuals have for natural surroundings by juxtaposing this passage with the image of Mort pulling up the blind quietly and letting in what passes for daylight, but prompted by his

vulnerability and lack of self-esteem, turning immediately from the window to determine in what mood Myrt will be when she awakens (EL:78). He did not notice the mountains in glorious abandon yesterday. He will not notice the absence of the ocean this morning. His personal problems demand what little energy he has.

The narrator hints at a correlation between weather and emotion, external and internal climates, by quoting what appears to be an exception: "Although the day was dull and promised rain which came later, Myrtle's inner climate was equable..." (EL:82). Mort also begins the day in a good humour, but he recognizes "the need of a job and some money in his pocket" (EL:97). He goes looking for a job that will be "reg'lar but not too reg'lar" and applies at a nursery from which he was fired years before "for being lazy, negligent and incompetent" (EL:96). Mort's indolence is a closer match for "the soft grey day, day soft and damp and enervating, air opaque and lethargic" (EL:96). There is a feel of impending threat as references to the worsening weather increase: "...holding promise of rain" (EL:96), "the rain coming soon" (EL:97), and "drizzly grey mist sliding past" (EL:108). By afternoon, "rain [is] falling fitfully," and Myrtle begins "to become, quite unreasonably, a little irritable" (EL:84). It is "drizzly evening" by the time Mort, walking along Powell Street, sees his drunken logger friend, Eddie Hansen. Although "the rain [has] now begun to

drizzle" (EL:91), Vicky Tritt chances to witness the meeting of the two men "across the misty drizzly street" (EL:92). By the time Mort and Eddie reach the dock, it is "quite dark and the rain [makes] the visibility very bad and goodness what might have happened to Eddie the old fool if Morty hadn't been along to take care of him" (EL:110). We soon learn what does happen to Eddie. He steps "off the dark wharf into the dark night and [falls] with a tremendous splash into the dark water which [closes] over him" (EL:112) and Morty is unable to save his friend and dies trying.

We have, in ordering "Tuesday and Wednesday" chronologically and according to weather, unfolded the clever overlapping and disconnection of chapters which focus now on Mort, now on Myrt or Vicky. In fact, Vicky learns of Mort's death in Chapter 12, before the account of his day begins in Chapter 13. The disruptions in the story line, together with the worsening of the weather, heighten the sense of chaos and futility, of impending tragedy.

The deterioration of the weather serves as more than a marker of threatening doom and gloom. It reinforces what Ethel Wilson herself has observed in nature -- with osprey catching fish, kittens catching birds -- that chance or accident can alter or terminate life at any second. This is one of the themes that Wilson consciously develops in the novella. As we have learned in The Innocent Traveller, life cannot always be planned with confidence, for Death, the

"incalculable stranger" (II:73), causes all to "[slip] one by one with acceptance or amazement through the strangely moving curtain of Time into another place". One has no immunity from Chance or "Trouble". A chance meeting with Eddie Hansen on Hastings Street, combined with a chance visit of the dock watchman to the bathroom, results in Mort's death.

Wilson further emphasizes the inevitability of chance by recording Vicky's thoughts when she learns of Mort's death. For Vicky becomes

aware how melancholy, how desperately sad life can suddenly become which was a few minutes ago all right, and happy--almost--and that people couldn't stop doing things, somehow, that ended like this; and you didn't know it would happen and so you couldn't stop them. (EL:117)

Because she was orphaned at so young an age, Ethel Wilson was especially cognisant that life is never safe, that "life and time [continuel] as usual everywhere under heaven with practised ease their ceaseless fluid manipulations and arrangements of circumstance and influence and spiked chance and decision among members of the human family" (EL:127).

By her repetition of the words "caused" and "enabled", Wilson reinforces a sense of ever-widening circles of events that can be set in motion by chance or circumstance:

such arrangements [of circumstance and chancel as had caused Victoria May to be what she was; and had caused her that night to see Mort sober and Eddie drunk; and had caused her to force her small will upon Myrtle Johnson; and had caused her...by means of a lie to turn Myrtle aside from her fury, and had thus enabled Myrtle to become the widow of a hero, not of a louse, and so

had enabled Myrtle to remember Mort with half grudging tenderness...and had caused her (Victoria May) to do Mort a great service by so establishing him in general reputation and in memory; and had caused Myrtle to esteem herself a woman not preferred--for one fatal moment--to that souse Eddie Hansen...; and thus had caused Myrtle to continue to dominate Mrs. H.X. Lemoyne and Victoria May and even Irma Flask...

(EL:127-128)

[Emphasis mine]

Consistent with their failure to acknowledge the flourishing natural realm or the potentialities of their own natures, the characters of "Tuesday and Wednesday" are likened to domesticated animals and birds, harmless and unthreatening. Victoria May Tritt is seen as a "fly" and a "poor dawg." Mrs. Emblem, the only character who indulges in creature comforts, is linked with a kitten--"Mrs. Emblem and the kitten, who had much in common, woke from time to time.... settled again and slept" (EL:127). She is not linked, of course, with the predatory aspect of the kitten, who can be a "feral, wise, inscrutable little [hunter prowling] on silent paws," but with its capacity for limited instinctual physical pleasure, observed when the kitten runs to its litter box "with croons of delight," and after scratching in the dirt, sits down, "a look of blissful angelic abstraction" on its face (EL:64). Crowds of people going down Hastings are "silent as fishes, [swimming] noiselessly past and [vanishing]" (EL:89). Mrs. H.Y. Dunkerley is like a small bird as she comes "twittering, flying across the grass" (EL:26), and Vicky's voice in church is similar to that of a "small twittering bird"

(EL:95). Mort's insecure thoughts and feelings are likened to a "rough mountainous sea" (EL:4), and some of his disturbing thoughts [turn] themselves round and round like dogs settling down and then they [settle] to sleep (EL:37). When Mort is relieved to see Mrs. Emblem, she is a "radiant vision, temporary rainbow" (EL:45). By drawing most of her images from nature, Ethel Wilson, through contrast, highlights all the more the oblivion of the characters to the natural world about them. It is only the author and her narrator that recognize these unfortunate people as belonging to the natural universe of "creatures great and small."

As always in Ethel Wilson's prose, the forces of nature, and particularly of water, are "indifferent." Eddie, in his struggle for life, creates only a "dark agitation of the water" and a "dirty spangled light." We are reminded of the beauty of "a warmed beach on a starred summer night," in marked contrast to the horror of "a dark agitation of the water" with its "dirty spangled light." "Spangles" are false stars, poor imitations of nature. Just as fish swimming down Powell Street are out of their natural element, so Eddie and Mort, in the "high tide water," are out of theirs. For a few, too brief moments, Mort learns the struggle for survival. When Mort and Eddie grapple and choke and become "both of them drowned men," their lights, their essences, seem extinguished forever.

But Mort has "crouched alone up there in the dark...in the sky it seems...his arms extended...under the dim light" (EL:113), and because he hasn't proven himself "indifferent" but has responded to the needs of a fellow human being, he has displayed a redemptive heroism. Mort, who has made few choices in determining his own existence, indeed, who through his lack of thought and personal ambition, has lived in a state almost of non-existence, has finally taken his courage in both hands and made a choice. Although his almost instinctual choice results in his death, Mort has affirmed his humanity.

Accidents are not infrequent in Ethel Wilson's novels. In fact, The Innocent Traveller is the only work in which at least one drowning or near-drowning does not occur. Frankie Burnaby's friend, Ernestine, drowns in the sullen Fraser River while attempting to rescue a small dog. "The little dog was drowned too" (HD:6), for nature makes no distinction between animal and man. Again, it may be the untimely deaths of her mother and father that help Wilson to recognize that life is never safe.

Throughout the reading of "Tuesday and Wednesday", we are reminded of the epigraph to The Equations of Love: "What is this Terewth... ?" Not only do we search for the real truth of the characters. Are Myrt and Mort "kindly, chivalrous, handsome, elegant... an ideal couple" (EL:25), or are they unpredictable, spiteful, and self-centered? Is

Morty "kind, debonair, easy, [or an] idle lying drunken loafer?" Equally, we search for the real truth of the environment. Are those whose eyes do not see still affected by the landscape and the natural elements surrounding them? "Tuesday and Wednesday" has proven unequivocally that the natural environment is ever present and influential, whether it be a world of beauty and inspiration as experienced by Ethel Wilson and her narrator, or a world of indifference and danger, as experienced by Eddie and Mort. Light and darkness, beauty and danger, life and death--all are facets of nature. Knowledge of one cannot but enhance appreciation of the other.

For a story with a seeming lack of natural imagery, certainly a lack of appreciation on the part of the characters for the beauties of nature so close at hand, we see nevertheless a correlation between the lives of the people and natural forces such as air, rain and ocean currents. Ethel Wilson values, and consequently ensures that her narrator conveys, the grandeur of landscape that cradles the city of Vancouver. She details the life of Myrt and Mort with objective amusement because for people unsustained by any foundation of belief or purpose, self-protective mechanisms are perhaps necessary for survival. But Wilson regrets that some people have encapsulated themselves in their rooms, in their fantasies, in their

uncommunicative bodies. Feeling an affinity with the sweep of water and the "mountains sprawled nearby in frank glorious abandon" (EL:79) could foster the recognition that an individual is but a small part of an immense natural plan, that one's self-centered problems are less important than being alive to participate decisively in life. The contemplative person would also realize that chance and accident can change a course of events without warning, and that nature effects all. No one is immune. The characters of "Tuesday and Wednesday" are surrounded by the splendours and the dangers of nature. To be unaware of its powers is to be missing a very necessary dimension of life, the sense of being at one with the giant "web of creation."

"Lilly's Story" begins in the same lower economic area of Vancouver as "Tuesday and Wednesday." Because Ethel Wilson so successfully leaves her readers with a strong impression of grey, drab, denaturalized urban surroundings in "Tuesday and Wednesday" and because "Lilly's Story" describes an escape to the wooded area of Comox and the rural countryside of the Fraser Valley, it perhaps comes as a surprise to realize that there is far more natural imagery included in the former story than the latter. In "Tuesday and Wednesday", the splendour of the natural setting highlights all the more the imperfection of the social order, provides a sense of /

the divine not comprehended by many in a conventional church, and uplifts and inspires or not according to the sensitivity and imagination or lack of it in the beholder. In "Lilly's Story", it is almost as if Lilly is a part of nature without recognizing it. She is likened to animals, feels hunted as one, and protects her young. Because Lilly so focuses on protecting her daughter to the exclusion of noticing nature, Ethel Wilson has less opportunity or need to describe nature, and because Lilly's exposure of her offspring to natural surroundings ultimately allows her daughter to appreciate "an incorporeal presence" in nature, Wilson likely does not feel required, as in the first novella, to prove that the healing powers of nature exist if only one could "see."

Although often removed from an immediate natural setting, Lilly is likened to a hunted animal, living by instinct. Even when she moves to the lush greenery of the countryside near Comox, a small community on Vancouver Island, Lilly receives no emotional or spiritual fulfillment from nature. She does not feel an attachment to place, as do Rachel and Rose of The Innocent Traveller, and has no concept of a "genius loci" as does Frankie Burnaby in Hetty Dorval. However, Lilly does briefly glimpse a parallel between the natural world and human life in a scene of predatory struggle among several animals.

In Ethel Wilson's previous works, many characters have

gained enjoyment, relaxation, or inspiration from nature. However, it is not until "Lilly's Story" that lessons learned from nature are actually applied to a character's own life. "Lilly's Story" anticipates the very personal relationship between Maggie and natural beings and phenomena that plays such an important part in Swamp Angel.

During her childhood and youth, Lilly is very similar to the characters of the first novella in The Equations of Love, for she has not been "accustomed to plan; she [has] gone unresistingly with things as they arrived to her" (EL:160). Abandoned by her parents as a child, Lilly is frequently likened to a small yellow cat, and "indeed the only difference between Lilly and the cat in their apprehension of the future [is] that some day, no doubt, Lilly [will] plan for a tomorrow and the cat never [will]" (EL:146). When Lilly hears her mother and the lodger coming to fetch her and leave her in the care of a neighbour, Lilly slips away to hide in the same manner as does her "little cat" (EL:147). When Lilly later decides to run off to Vancouver, she again is "like a little cat, no worse and no better" (EL:156). Her instinctual behavior is emphasized: "She took things as they came, living where she could, ...protecting herself by lies or by truth..." (EL:156).

It is instinct that drives Lilly to take a ferry to Nanaimo, for "never in her young animal life [has she]

looked below the surface of things as they occurred, nor [has] she looked within herself" (EL:160). It is instinct that drives her to take shelter with a Welsh miner, Ranny, as "Ranny was only a kennel into which a homeless worthless bitch crawls away from the rain, and out of which she will crawl and from which she will go away leaving the kennel empty and forgotten" (EL:164). Indeed, at first her defence of her baby is purely instinctual-- "Lilly's whole body and spirit which had never known a direction, were now solely directed towards giving baby everything that Lilly could give her" (EL:173). In "planned duplicity and in ruthless self-defence" (EL:169), Lilly assumes the respectable identity of a widow, Mrs. Walter Hughes.

For much of her life, Lilly lives in fear of being hunted or traced; hence she is frequently likened to other animals in danger of being hunted. After being questioned by the police for unwittingly delivering drugs or stolen goods, she runs away to hide "in the woods, and [huddles], frightened, silent as a bird" (EL:149). She later accepts lingerie and Topaz's bicycle from Yow, the Edgeworths' Chinese cook, because of her "inordinate desire for things" (EL:137). When she finds that Yow has stolen them, however, she again runs like an animal, "running running through the dark lane, stopping, crouching in the shadows, listening, hardly daring to look around her" (EL:145). Because Lilly is terrified of being discovered by the police, her "fear

[is] stretched to any height of cunning and self-protection" (EL:159). She looks "round about her like one hunted," and walks with "her naturally light tread made lighter by fear" (EL:159).

Fear of her parents and of the police is replaced by a fear that someone might recognize her and reveal her unsavoury past or Eleanor's illegitimacy. When she works as a housekeeper for the Butlers, Lilly seldom ventures into town, and after she moves to the Fraser Valley to avoid Eleanor's being labelled a "maid's daughter," she also refuses to visit Vancouver for fear of being recognized. Fear is like a steel trap used to ensnare and hold captive animals--"about and behind her [spreads] always her intangible and invisible Then, solid as steel, inescapable as past birth or death to come, making her Now always insecure and always scrupulous" (EL:222). Indeed, although Lilly is "humanized" by having a home of her own in the Valley, years pass before she feels secure there, "and the reality of the edifice which she [has] built, of which Mrs. Walter Hughes [is] the culmination, [wavers] sometimes uncertainly before the pseudo-reality of what [has] really been her life" (EL:209-210). When Yow by chance appears as cook at the hospital employing Lilly, she once again is likened to a hunted animal, "drawing back and back into the shade of her kitchen curtains like a silent animal withdrawing into the cover of the forest" (EL:242).

"Year after year now [Lilly] had lived in an obscurity that was so planned and safe that there were times when it seemed that the years of vagrancy had never been" (EL:243). But, as Ethel Wilson is quick to emphasize, life is never safe. "Leaving those who were her life" (EL:245), feeling more alone and isolated than ever, Lilly flees to Toronto. A stranger perceives her as "a deer in the city...a deer dressed in black ...[a] sabled deer startled on the edge of the multitude...the voices of the multitude startle the delicate elegant deer" (EL:267).

Throughout her life, Lilly has been as engaged in the struggle to survive as other natural beings but she is denied their "freedom" and unfettered "motion." On the first journey that she has ever undertaken, that to Nanaimo, Lilly does experience "a new feeling of something light and oblivious, the consolation of sea and wind and strange wooded shores" (EL:160). She gives herself up "to the wind that [whips] her face and to the slapping and the curling of the water against the side of the ship,...feeling sorry that she [has] slept through the journey" (EL:160). Although Lilly feels no identification with the elements, the wind and the water may be a signal to her, as well as to a reader, of imminent change, because for the first time in her life she experiences "an unfamiliar instinct to plan her future" (EL:160).

Ethel Wilson frequently enriches her portrayal of the natural landscapes of British Columbia by affirming their historical and continuing associations with explorers and early inhabitants. In describing "the well-wooded and watered area of Vancouver Island ...[that] was inhabited by the Comox Indians" and "the green and wooded contours that [still] slope down to the Salt Chuck--to the sea" (EL:170), Wilson effectively meets "the challenge for coastal writers...to evoke [the] extraordinary phenomenon of greenness and growth." ⁸ But although pioneer poet Eric Duncan recollects fifty-seven years later the indelible impression he received upon his arrival at Comox in June, 1887: "everything was a tangle of green. I had never seen such growth before, and I shall never forget my first sight of it--I can shut my eyes and see it now" ⁹, when Lilly first arrives in Comox, she is "more aware of the agitation within her than she was of the green beauty of the unfamiliar fields that border the dusty road" (EL:172). Years later Lilly remembers, "but not often," only the "grey of cold dawns" as she rows "under the slaty sky" on "the surface of the slaty sea" (EL:170). Despite her willingness to make every sacrifice for her daughter, Lilly's perception of her surroundings undoubtedly reflects her early feelings of subservience and loneliness. Nor is it assuring that the memories of "all the [other] people who lived [in Comox] and are there no longer" were of the little village lying green

and golden to the sunshine at the end of the trail." This suggestion of the pastoral mode reminds us of "Fern Hill," in which Dylan Thomas tells of "children green and golden" unwittingly but irrevocably losing their innocence and their youth. For although the cyclic seasons of nature hint at permanence and renewal, Time holds all living creatures at "the mercy of his means." ¹⁰ "Fern Hill" contains many images of hunting: "hunter," "spellbound horses," "foxes and pheasants," and we are reminded that neither we nor Lilly are like those other two hunters in "Lilly's Story", ¹¹ "the two ancient pieces of Chinese pottery, a hound and a horse, ... [who are] creatures detached from ordinary living" (EL:178), unscathed and unaging. Lilly, continuing her selfless sacrifice for much of her life, will only become increasingly lonely, "colourless," and "dowdy." Like the Matron whom she befriends, Lilly will not be immune from "lameness," "pain," "arthritis, or a fall or one of those things" (EL:240) thrust upon her by chance.

Nowhere, not even in "a beautiful dead end in the green of the countryside" is a person ever "secure" (EL:172). Indeed, whether or not Lilly subconsciously perceives the fleetingness of youth and beauty and innocence by her exposure to the beauties of her surroundings, the narrator and the reader certainly do, when on a "fair day of summer the fresh loveliness of the place with a light breeze blowing [brings] to Lilly one of those perfect moments of time that

seem to last forever but do not last forever, and are so fleeting that they make some people afraid" (EL:191). It is only moments later that Lilly witnesses the inherently cruel struggle for survival, "the small battle on the sand spit" that forms the central image of her story. A robin, who is trying to pick up and carry off a snake, is suddenly stalked by the kitten that has been "transformed into a ruthless hunting cat." The kitten almost becomes prey to a large eagle, who in turn is "assailed from the rear" by two of his enemies, a gull and a crow (EL:191-193). A scene of innocence can be transformed in an instant to the violence and terror of the hunt. Just as the little snake "slides, coils, and lashes out" to preserve its own life, so Lilly must do the same to protect the security of her offspring. Significantly, "the kitten did not see the eagle...the robin did not see the kitten... the eagle did not see the two enemies..." (EL;192). In life, too, one can never foresee Chance or Trouble. Life can be fearful, unpredictable. Even the normally imperceptive Lilly notices: "Everything after something...seems like everything's cruel, hunting something" (EL;193).

Although "the cycle which she [has] just been watching [creates] little philosophical stir in Lilly beyond this faint uneasiness" (EL:193), within hours she will indeed find that perfect moments are too good to last, and that she must leave the security of her home with the Butlers:

And Lilly, who had left the house that afternoon with her usual equability, and had lain half awake half asleep upon the sunny grass with never a care in the world, and had thought that life was perfect, and had watched the hunt of bird and beast and reptile, came back to the house alert, alarmed, hunted, and committed to a plan from which she would not turn aside. (EL:196)

Because of the "life of happy order" that her mother assures for her, Eleanor has very different memories and sensitivities about nature. She remembers the beauty and uncharacteristic innocence of "a great cat with beards on his chin and a strong tuft of hair on the end of each of his ears [who] sat proudly in the sun, owning the world" (EL:171). The lynx, despite opening "its mouth wide in a silent cry," leaves the small child unharmed in the "sunny glade." In her own innocence, she has no sense of being one of the hunted.

Ethel Wilson reminds us of the relativity of one's perceptions of nature when she tells of the "cat's mind [which would survey] the meaningless sea and shore, and then would vanish into the meaningful woods and grasses" (EL:186). Paddy, contented to have Lilly in the truck, appreciates that "scarves of mist and smoke lay upon a landscape of golden poplars, dark conifers, broad meadows, ...the winding river reflecting forest and sky... (EL:225-226), but after Lilly strikes him "across the face in a frenzy of fear of herself," he looks out "furiously over the dreaming landscape which he no longer [sees]" (EL:227). For Lilly,

"who [is] matter-of-fact, and in whom introspection, poetry, or contemplation [have] no place" (EL:187), "the world outside [does] not exist...or, if it [does], it [is] of no significance " (EL:209). To Eleanor, however, the sea, the shore, and the sand spit with its "blowing grasses eternally blowing" and its small pet cemetery--all have meaning. Even though to Lilly "the world of the invisible senses [is] closed," she provides her daughter with such an environment that "when her day should come, [Eleanor] would experience love and friendship and beauty, joy, sorrow and the poetry of experience" (EL:194). As Eleanor grows and is exposed to more of the beautiful natural scenes surrounding her, she becomes increasingly "aware of the incorporeal presence in air, and light, and dark, and earth, and sea, and sky, and in herself, of something unexpressed and inexpressible, that transcends and heightens ordinary life, and is its complement" (EL:194). Wilson emphasizes that this perception of a divinity in the beauties of nature is at the crux of a meaningful life, for "without it, life is uninformed, and life in Lilly was uninformed, without poetry or ecstasy or anguish, with little divination in human relations" (EL:194).

Psychologically, Lilly seems impervious to the seasons. Eleanor becomes "aware as time [goes] on...that her mother [has] little sense of humour and little of beauty. There is a wild disorder of nature which is beauty. Eleanor [can]

see it and feel it and Lilly [can] not feel it all" (EL:230). Yet Lilly seems instinctively attuned to the "cycle" of the seasons, for it is when "the air [softens] and spring and buds and birds [appear] all over the Valley" that she falls in love with Paddy. When Lilly realizes that she cannot succumb to her passion for Paddy, "autumn [comes] and the countryside [is] mellow and beautiful but Lilly [does] not notice the beauty" (EL:225). Even though "scenery [has] no charms" for Lilly, Ethel Wilson again uses natural imagery to parallel and illumine the time and the mood of Lilly's life, for she has now lived in years of planned and safe obscurity.

As always, we are reminded that life's pleasures are brief and fragile. Misfortune arrives in the form of Yow, and Lilly must once again flee. However, adversity also strengthens character and can bring its own rewards. For in Toronto, Lilly has no fear of being recognized, and she is assessed by Mr. Sprockett for what her life of sacrifice has made her--"a very very fine woman" (EL:269). Even one who reacts to nature on an instinctive level learns from its laws. Lilly decides that

if loving Mr. Sprockett meant looking after him and thinking for him and caring for him and guarding him from harm and keeping things nice like she'd always done for Eleanor and for the Matron, then she could love him, and she was his, and he was hers. (EL:277)

The tension of fear and flight, so prevalent in this novel

and in nature, is balanced by Lilly's growing sense of contentment and security.

Lilly has been so preoccupied with negotiating the "dusty road" through life that she has had no time or inclination to recognize the "unfamiliar fields" with their natural "green beauty." Unlike Mort, Lilly knows she can never be immune from Chance or Trouble, and is ever on the alert for it. Lilly has had a purpose and has not allowed herself to be swayed in this purpose by chance suggestions or encounters with others.

Through the choices she has made, Lilly has directed her life to the best of her ability. Like Maggie in Swamp Angel, she comes to understand that "a clean well-lighted place offers us the only security...in a vast impersonal complicated landscape that could overwhelm us with its immensity as well as its indifferent beauty, its inevitable darkness." ¹² Most of all, through her caring actions and the loving protection she has given Eleanor in face of all dangers, she has enabled her daughter to experience that very necessary dimension in life, the sense of being at one with the giant "web of creation."

CHAPTER 4

Swamp Angel and "The Miraculous Interweaving of Creation"

In the best known of her novels, Swamp Angel, Ethel Wilson contends that human identity and human interaction depend upon, and retain, an "essence of place." Especially susceptible herself to the influence of "place," she demonstrates how it applies to encounters such as those occurring in her novels:

A meeting in the desert, a meeting at sea, meeting in the city, meeting at night, meeting at a grave, meeting in the sunshine beside the forest, beside water. Human beings meet, yet the meetings are not the same. Meeting partakes in its very essence not only of the persons but of the place of meeting. And that essence of place remains, and colours, faintly, the association, perhaps for ever. ¹

Just as Hetty Dorval is associated with the flight of the wild geese, the sagebrush, the confluence of the Fraser and Thompson Rivers, so Maggie, the protagonist of Swamp Angel, is linked indelibly with Three Loon Lake, with its harmony and potential treachery.

But as the excerpt implies, "essence" is far more quintessential, valuable, and permanent than "association." We will appreciate, as the story of Maggie and the Swamp Angel unfolds, that Maggie has become so truly united with her natural surroundings that even were she to remove herself from Three Loon Lake for a time, the "essence" of it would remain a permanent, "unloseable" part of her.

An examination of the relationship between Ethel Wilson's characters and their environment in Swamp Angel reveals a wealth of comparisons and contrasts with similar relationships in her other books. Against the characters of the urban setting of "Tuesday and Wednesday", one can weigh from Swamp Angel not only the equally shallow and misdirected Eddie Vardoe, but also the well-adjusted Quong family and the relatively contented, philosophical Mrs. Severance. Even more significant comparisons can be made among characters who identify more closely with nature. Although the characters in The Innocent Traveller and Hetty Dorval can feel an emotional fulfillment and an identification or feeling of ownership for "place," and although Lilly has a vague consciousness of a lesson to be learned from nature, it is not until Swamp Angel that the impact of the environment on one's emotions and daily life is fully explored. The quality of one's relationship with environment determines whether place becomes an entrapment or a nurturing presence, determines whether time drags interminably or allows for release and contentment. More than in any of her previous works, Ethel Wilson develops in Swamp Angel the sensibilities of the characters and the philosophy of the narrator to make a strong statement on the harmony and disharmony existing between humanity and nature.

The author effectively exploits her stance as omniscient narrator to allow further insight into the

thoughts and emotions of the characters and to clarify the "existence and relation of [the] two worlds of man" alluded to in The Innocent Traveller--the "world of Time" in which "men [busy] themselves painfully about the present and the future" and "the timeless and impersonal world to which men [turn] and in which they [find] momentary refreshment" (IT:258). Ethel Wilson seems ever aware of the extent to which the environment, whether it be natural, social, or modified by man, embeds a symbolic scheme in human consciousness, defining its very being.² Just as Wilson felt a kinship with her surroundings when gazing out the windows of her apartment at Stanley Park, the North Shore mountains, the freighters in the bay,³ so "Mrs. Vardoe [has] become attached to, even absorbed into, the sight from the front-room window of inlet and forest and mountain" (SA:13). The human mind merges with nature. This psychological equation is established in the first two lines of the novel and is maintained throughout. "Ten twenty fifty brown birds" flying past the window coax "a fringe of Mrs. Vardoe's mind" to fly after them, to become one with the natural world (SA:13).

The "strong calculating, rapacious" seagull is the bird often associated by Wilson in her books, The Innocent Traveller and The Equations of Love, with having access both to the world of nature and the vicissitudes of urban life. Although Maggie has made elaborate plans to leave her

husband, Eddie Vardoe, and to disappear without a trace, she is not likened to the seagull "who does not love his own kind or humankind...who is slave to nothing but his own insatiable appetite" (IT: 260-261). Instead she is associated with the small brown birds also described in Wilson's short stories, "The Window" and "The Birds", birds noted for the passion of their flight, for their vulnerability, their ability to migrate. Maggie, like ✓ the brown birds, can be destroyed when confronted by a mere reflection of reality. As Eddie Hansen, the capable high rigger of "Tuesday and Wednesday", is out of his element in the city, so Maggie is divorced from her natural element of mountains, trees, and animals.

In a situation similar to Maggie's, the woman in "The Birds" is suffering from her decision to terminate her relationship with a man. She, too, becomes as one with the "living birds who were tossing themselves in the air and flying from tree to tree," for she exclaims, " I was a bird // ✓ and the birds were I." + But she views herself also as the little bird who dashes itself against the glass and falls, "its mouth split and its bones broken by the passion of its flight," for "yesterday [she] had bashed [her] head against the reality that was waiting for [her], invisible, and had broken [her] neck" (MG:64). The thought, for this young woman, "of the merry birds and the birds in the years to be, falling outside the window, [is sickening]" (Ibid.). She

recognizes, as do Maggie Vardoe and her alter-ego, Nell Severance, that life, even one of freedom and passion, is never predictable or safe. In life as in nature, chance and change are ever-threatening.

To emphasize her determination and resiliency, Maggie is further likened to the small birds--"she would build in time again, or again, like the bird who obstinately builds again its destroyed nest" (SA:14). She has come to the painful realization that she must leave the repression of both her hollow marriage and her stifling urban surroundings.

For an urban environment has as equally an inscribing effect as a natural one. In Ethel Wilson's fiction both the influence and the perception of setting are subjective and relative. Wilson recognizes that a configuration of structures such as houses, gardens and mountain barriers imposes a habitual pattern on the movement, the social and temperamental disposition of people. Such was the patterning of "small" garden, "dusty" road, mountains that "rear themselves straight up" to form an escarpment" (SA:13) from which Maggie Vardoe determines to escape. Because Maggie has "endured humiliations" in this place, her "almost unbearable resentments" (SA:13) are projected all the more into images of confinement and restraint. Houses and mountains form barriers, and escape from this expanding city on its "tongue of land" (SA:22) is Maggie's only hope of attaining freedom and peace of mind.

Both Maggie and Frankie Burnaby are conditioned by their natural surroundings, but they perceive physical landmarks from differing psychological perspectives. Frankie, looking in a mirror, contents herself with a reflection of reality. She sees a confinement of mountains, of the world, and prefers the security of a predictable, unchanging environment. Maggie, whose mind projects forward to her escape into the interior of the province, views the mountains of Vancouver's North Shore as "slope behind slope, hill beyond hill, giving an impression of the mountains which was fluid not solid" (SA: 13).

Vulgar and pretentious, Edward Vardoe has aroused only pity and resentment in Maggie's heart. Interested only in his new real estate company, his new car and new clothing, he has taken no notice of Maggie's actions or emotions. The effect of Vardoe on Maggie's life has been as despoiling as the effect of the city and highways on the physical landscape. Upon leaving Vancouver, Maggie follows neither of the two roads that would have met the approval of her "discarded but still lawful husband." Along one road, the "delicate impression [of natural beauties] is crowded out and vanishes, obliterated by every convenience" (SA:21). On the other, "the landscape is being despoiled, as it must, on behalf of groups of small houses, a golf course, schools, a cemetery, all the amenities of living, learning, playing, and dying" (SA:21).

Is the phrase, "as it must," one of Ethel Wilson's swift thrusts of irony? Alexandra Collins has noted that Wilson, despite her link to British tradition, "shares with [American writers] a concern for maintaining the human past in the face of the frontier or the vulgarity of an urban culture which has developed too quickly." * In view of the present widespread destruction of British Columbia's choicest agricultural lands in Richmond and the Fraser Valley for housing developments, and the threat to wildlife preserves because of a desire for more golf courses, Ethel Wilson shows admirable ecological foresight in this novel of the early 1950's.

Even more ironical is Ethel Wilson's suggestion that she has listed "all the amenities of living, learning, playing, and dying." As we shall perceive through the remainder of the novel, characters such as Maggie and Mr. Cunningham learn infinitely more about life and death by experiencing a unity with the natural landscape and its cyclic growth than they would by being confined to a small house, a school or a cemetery. Although a golf course attempts to inject some natural landscape in the form of trees and bushes into an urban environment, merely "playing" there provides little of the intense spiritual and emotional identification with surroundings experienced by Maggie and Mr. Cunningham. For they derive such pleasure in casting over a lovely stream or a peaceful lake that they forget

their own existence as their identity with place becomes complete.

Maggie escapes from just such a setting of small houses and amenities of living, a place in which increasingly one can be only a spectator of, not a participant in, nature. She is one whose "pleasures were very few, and were not communicable, and she had long formed the habit of seeking and finding, where she could, private enjoyment of the sort that costs nothing but an extension of the imagination" (SA:24). Maggie departs with determination and self-confidence, telling the young Chinese taxi driver who delivers her to the New Westminster bus station, "I don't know where I'm going, but I know the kind of place I want to find and I know what I want to do" (SA:27). She takes with her a fishing rod, her most precious possession, and a yellow Chinese bowl, symbol to her of universal harmony. And indeed, when she is as little as seventy miles away from Vancouver, away from the place of her bondage, Maggie discovers a new place among the harmonies of nature. As she stays in a rustic "cabin under the dark pine trees," she feels "as free of care or remembrance as if she had just been born" (SA:34). She becomes again Maggie Lloyd, taking the name of her beloved first husband who had so soon been killed in the war.

In her contentment, Maggie senses the protection of nature:

An expanse of air in the night, endless, soft, fluent, still, blowing, moving, cleaving, closing, sliding through dark leaves and branches and past houses and lamp-posts and black silent areas and bright areas of sound, movement, and smell, separating lover from lover, victim from approaching thief, thief from hunter, mother from child, quite hid Maggie afar from Edward Vardoe... (SA:30)

The gentle, almost hypnotic flow of present participles serves to personify or animate the "expanse of air," giving it a crescendo of movement and a will of its own. The air assumes almost a divine presence that encompasses the senses not just of touch, but of sight, hearing, and smell. The frustrations or desires of those individuals it surrounds are heightened or soothed according to their rejection or acceptance of this isolating yet protective natural presence. Nature as equally and indifferently obscures thief from hunter as mother from child. Also as equally and indifferently, it allows the chance that thief will find victim, hunter will find thief. This expanse of air protects Maggie from Edward Vardoe. A permanent natural expanse also separates Maggie from both her beloved first husband and her child, but as she comes closer to accepting their loss and cherishing the essence of their time and love together, Maggie is able to project a benevolence to the envelopment of the night air. For the encompassing air becomes emblematic of the reality of self, of life, of environment, a reality that is ever "moving, cleaving, closing, sliding," ever synthesizing and adapting. Because Maggie has made a conscious choice in redirecting her life, *

has accepted full responsibility for her actions, and feels at peace with change, she is able to accept and embrace the everchanging reality embodied by the ever-moving air.

For Edward Vardoe, who cannot come to terms with reality, the night air is not kind. In a brief chapter, intensified by its insertion between images of Maggie's release and contentment, Edward Vardoe, in his "rage, hurt pride, and fury," appears all the more irrational and petty. His actions and perceptions of his surroundings are also coloured by his psychological state. While Maggie is lying in "sweet rough-dried sheets" (SA:34), Edward is shown to be a "poor human doll, running from room to room in the empty house" (SA:30), emptying drawers and throwing garments on the floor. Projecting his suspicions and his anger, Edward feels that "the whole small house [is] listening" (SA:30). Not for him is the "small safe world enclosing" Maggie. He hears not the "lovely sound of the wind in the fir trees" (SA:34), but the "small wind flapping in the dark garden" (SA:29). "Flapping" also most appropriately images Edward, who with "confused and angry mind," is running so irrationally throughout the house. Again Wilson underlines the unacceptability of Maggie's marriage. Maggie approaches, "serenely and alone," a major uprooting and rerouting of her life. By contrast, Edward swims "in a murky sea of emotions of hate and self-pity ("I've been done, done, had for a

sucker") (SA:31), experiencing a "humiliation that only venom could assuage" (SA:33).

Edward feels as if "his life [is] broken off, splintered like a stick" (SA:33). As is so common in Wilson's fiction, characters are likened to examples from nature. Topaz is equated most often with a "water-glider," but she, her sister, and niece, are also compared to "shore birds" (II:102) and "chickens" (II:118). Rose imagines herself as a dog or a seagull. Hetty and Lilly are both described as cats. Maggie becomes as a seal or a porpoise. How appropriate that within a natural landscape Edward Vardoe should be as inanimate and inoperative as a splintered stick!

As Maggie continues her odyssey of self-exploration, she follows the exploratory paths of fur traders and miners who used "the old Caribou Trail along the steep banks of the Fraser River" (SA: 35). Maggie is linked by association with others for whom Hope was also "a point of arrival, meeting, and departure." In the sprawling suburbs of Vancouver, any quality of permanence or natural beauty is "obliterated by every modern convenience." At Hope, however, one obtains a sense of continuity with the past. History "is implicit in the road; it accompanies the water and the air of the river" (SA:35). "When you [reach] Hope and the roads that divide there you have quite left Vancouver and the Pacific Ocean. They are disproportionately remote. You

are entering a continent and you meet the continent there, at Hope" (SA:36). Appropriately, it is here that Maggie reaches into the interior of her own being to establish once again her union with nature.

Maggie, like Frankie, could have acknowledged her "genius of place [as] a god of water" (HD:70). In British Columbian fiction, rivers are often associated with family or a search for family.⁷ Ascending a river in search of self, home and community, Maggie leaves the stultifying restrictions of arrested time, of enclosed space, to attain a "new time, a new space" (SA: 23), born of her freedom.

It is the solitude, the liminality of the natural surroundings at the Similkameen River that allow Maggie to undergo a ritual death, a period of transformation. In detailing Maggie's reorientation of self, Ethel Wilson parallels the philosophy promulgated by van Gennup in his Rites of Passage.⁸ Maggie withdraws from society, alighting from the bus where "there's nowhere near" (SA:37). Liminality allows her to deconstruct the self: "Time dissolved, and space dissolved... she was all but a child again. No, she was nothing. No thoughts, no memories occupied her" (SA:38). Only through the deconstruction of self can one get outside of self and look objectively at it, even ascertain its existence.⁹ After three days spent on that "margin of a world which was powerful and close.... [days that] had been for Maggie like the respite that

perhaps comes to the soul after death" (SA:40), she has reconstituted her self, has altered her social persona in becoming "Tom Lloyd's own widow again" (SA:36). Maggie, "after her slavery and her journey, and her last effort--made alone--stayed still and accustomed herself to something new which was still fondly familiar to her" (SA:40). Fondly familiar, for she had been raised by her father in a fishing lodge at a lake among the pinewoods of New Brunswick. She has reconciled herself with her own past, her own nature.

Maggie rejoices in the wilderness and the animals that inhabit it. More than that, she becomes a part of that wilderness when she indulges in her love of fishing: "she [forgets]--as always when she [is] fishing--her own existence" (SA:38). Indeed, Ethel Wilson cites her own love of fishing as the possible genesis for this novel:

As to Swamp Angel, I don't know how it originated except that I love fly-fishing which is a marvelous thing in life, unique in the deep communion of the senses and rich in contemplation and memory. ¹⁰

Frankie Burnaby recalls her contentment at casting in the pools of the Thompson, and the narrator of Swamp Angel echoes Wilson's own feelings:

There is a mystique in fishing which only the fly-fisherman (a dedicated sort of person, or besotted) knows anything about. All fly-fishermen are bound closely together by the strong desire to be apart, solitary upon the lake, the stream. A fisherman has not proceeded far up the lake, not out of sight of the lodge, before he becomes one with the aqueous world of the lake... (SA:133)

In tying flies, however, Maggie makes an imitation of life to kill it. When she catches a trout, and automatically "[breaks] back the small neck [so that] the leaping rainbow thing [is] dead" (SA:38), she realizes the cruelty inherent in her act. Conscious of the parallel between human activity and the natural world, she admits responsibility for "the dreadful thing she [has] done to Edward Vardoe" (SA:39).

A Christian dimension is given to Maggie's female quest and to the freeing of her soul. As if baptised by the river, she consecrates her life anew. She seeks divine forgiveness for the wrongs she has committed, "[lifting] her heart in desolation and in prayer" (SA:59). For three days she experiences "the respite that perhaps comes to the soul after death" (SA:40). Her union with nature has taken her to "that margin of a world which [is] powerful and close" (SA:40), has given her a glimpse of divinity. She experiences a rebirth of sight and smell, a renewal of energy and purpose, an impetus to begin life afresh.

Although, like Hetty Dorval, Maggie experiences a euphoric sense of freedom in the solitude of the wind, the river, the pine trees and the stars, she recognizes that she cannot succumb indefinitely to isolation, should not prolong her escape from responsibility. She seeks to determine her place in what her friend Nell Severance is to call "the everlasting web of creation." The reader is reminded

perhaps again of Christian imagery as Maggie once more returns to Hope, then passes safely by Hell's Gate.

Paul Comeau suggests that "the three small wooden crosses within the picket fence" on that "wild hillside" (SA:55) are evocative of the Calvary scene, thus maintaining the Christian imagery associated with Maggie's emotional renewal.¹¹ The crosses are also reminders of the three deaths experienced by Maggie-- those of her father, her first husband, and her "fair little girl." The "look of care and respect" that characterizes this lonely little graveyard not only suggests the care and respect that Maggie has ensured to the memories of her loved ones by severing her alliance with Edward Vardoe. It also signals the "strength, gentleness, and goodwill" with which Maggie will care for and respect the Gunnarsens and their clients in the new small community of the fishing lodge at Three Loon Lake.

A man on the bus contrasts the uninhabited stretches of the Fraser Canyon with "real places like Lytton or Ashcroft" (SA:56). However, these uninhabited spaces are significant, are "real," to people who value them as highly as do Hetty Dorval, Frankie, or Maggie. All three observe the movement and sounds of the coyotes and the wild geese. Both Frankie and Maggie appreciate the security embodied by the cyclic patterns of the seasons and of bird migrations, but Maggie, in her maturity, is able to apply what she learns of the

permanence of nature to strengthen her own philosophy of life.

Again the differing psychological states of the individuals are projected upon their surroundings. Hetty, with her emotional immaturity, sees the wild geese in much the same way as does the lame man, with his physical disability, in the short story "On Nimpish Lake": "He felt a queer exaltation, a sudden flash that was deepest envy of the wild geese, strongly flying and crying together on their known way, a most secret pain" (MG:33). Hetty lacks the direction, the "known way;" the lame man, the freedom of mobility. That Hetty hears "coyotes baying in the hills to the moon... with [such] queer high yelling as they [make], on, and on, and on" (HD:110) indicates her agonizing loneliness and withdrawal, and her acknowledgement that there seems to be no resolution or ending to her own rejection that seems also to go on and on. Frankie, in her youth and sheltered innocence, perceives the coyotes as "pretty little [beasts]" (HD:11) "singing all together" (HD:110). It seems, therefore, that Maggie's vision, that the "coyotes would sing among the hills,...[that] the crickets would dryly sing.... [that] the skeins of wild geese would return... [with] musical cry" (SA:56), reflects her newly found serenity and optimism. Hetty claims, "I never loved anything so much in my life," but makes no effort to gain social acceptance in the area. Maggie

asserts, "This feels right, this is the kind of place I know, it's my kind of place," and determines to give unselfishly of herself so that she is able to integrate both with place and with the community that inhabits it.

Maggie's imagination has been fired by the "convulsion of rock and water" characterizing the Fraser Canyon, which Bruce Hutchison claims "stagger[s] the imagination, appalls the spirit of man or dazzles it with an instant vision of beauty, according to his individual nature."¹² For Maggie it is a "vision of beauty." Having recently freed herself from the physical and emotional restrictions of her life in the city, she must savour all the more a canyon in which

there is room and to spare for every trickle dripping from the snow in the western Rockies, for all the lakes and rivers the Fraser has swallowed across the interior plateau.... for all the rock slides it has scooped out of the mountainsides, for all the burden of earth, rock particles, sand and vegetation it bears westward and dumps into the ocean.¹³

Emerging from this gigantic but constricted canyon, Maggie internalizes the immensity of the landscape "flowing, melting, rising, obliterating" and her vision expands to "where her feet could not follow" (SA:57). This projection of an almost animated landscape and of rivers flowing "north beyond the Bonaparte, and beyond the Nechako and the Fraser, on and on until she should reach ...the endless space west of the Mackenzie River to the Arctic Ocean" (SA:57), evokes a sense of adventure, of newly charted lands such as Maggie herself is approaching. A similarly expanded viewpoint

hints at the vastness and challenges of Canada as Topaz and her relatives are advancing into what is, for them, uncharted territory. Although the train windows only permit a "travellers' vision" (II:105), Ethel Wilson lures the imagination beyond to suggest the immensity of the land:

All day the illimitable prairie spread before them and slipped behind them. Far to the north (and to the south) the prairie spread, defeating imagination, like eternity. They did not know that further north still were great irregular lakes and rivers, and a great river flowing to the Arctic Ocean... (II:118)

Even the description of such a land gives one a feeling of wonder, and a sense that life in these lands is open to unlimited possibility and adventure. Furthermore, this passage supports W. J. Keith's contention that there exists in Wilson's later works a "sense of two complementary viewpoints--the human one, bound by time and place, and another, authorial though verging toward the divine." ¹⁴

Ethel Wilson's enthusiasm is even more evident in her description of the convergence of the Fraser and Thompson Rivers at Lytton:

It is true. Say "Lytton Bridge"--and the sight springs clear to the eyes. There is the convergence of the two river valleys and the two rivers. The strong muddy Fraser winds boiling down from the north. The gay blue-green Thompson River foams and dances in from the east...the two rivers converge in a strong slanting line of pressure and resistance. But it is no good. The Thompson cannot resist, and the powerful inexorable Fraser swallows up the green and the blue and the white and the amethyst. (SA:58-59)

Here, as in Hetty Dorval, the narrator's change to the present tense suggests the permanence of the world of nature.

Like the salmon for which she fishes, Maggie ascends the rivers to their source. She leaves behind the opacity and power of the Fraser River to experience the clarity and liveliness of the Thompson, the peaceful tranquility of Three Loon Lake. No longer does the natural environment merely parallel or contrast the thoughts or actions of the characters. Three Loon Lake itself becomes a character. Haldar Gunnarsen, the owner of the fishing lodge, has "a fiercely possessive feeling" for the lake (SA:71). Conversely, his wife, Vera, conceives "a strong dislike" for it. Maggie develops such a personal attachment that "by the time that two months [have] gone past, [her] union with Three Loon Lake [is] like a happy marriage." Indeed, so complete is Maggie's "union" that she wonders in amazement, "were we married last week, or have we always lived together as one?" (SA:85)

Three Loon Lake is based upon Ethel Wilson's experiences at Lac Le Jeune, where she and her husband, Wallace, vacationed and fished for almost forty years. In one of her short stories, "Beware the Jabberwock, my son... beware the Jubjub bird," Wilson verbalizes the lake's profound influence on her:

I got a fellow to drive me up to Lac Le Jeune and when I got there, I tell you my heart rose up the way it does when you see your favourite lake away up in the hills all shining' and saying Come on, Come on, and the sky all blue and the reflections of the forest upside down in the water and everything as innocent as a kitten ... And right away when you see the fish jumping

and hear the loons crying on the big lake or Little Lac Le Jeune Lake you know--well, it's heart's desire, that's what it is. (MG:176)

Three Loon Lake is not the only area of British Columbia that Ethel Wilson has anthropomorphised in her writings. She expresses her deep feeling for all of the province and its natural beauties, "I have a life-long love of this province of ours which I share with many people, this British Columbia, as if it were a person, as it is--a person of infinite variety and inference." ¹⁵

Even at Three Loon Lake, however, the perception of the landscape varies markedly with the emotional state of the viewer. Maggie finds a contented refuge in "this freedom, this joy, this singleness and forgetfulness" inspired by the lake (SA:96). She and her consciousness become an even more contiguous part of her environment as she almost swells to the grandeur of her surroundings at the lake: "She is contained by the sparkling surface of the lake and the pine tree shores and low hills, and is covered by the sky" (SA:99). Indeed, Maggie becomes a syntâgm or metonym of nature itself as she submerges her body in the lake and becomes as "one with her brothers the seal and the porpoise" (SA:99).

Vera, driven by insecurity and a self-defensive bitterness, can neither communicate with humans nor relate to nature. Because she resents the lake, she experiences an unrelenting feeling of entrapment. Overwhelmed by her disharmony with all that surrounds her, Vera plunges into

"the black abyss of the woods," "beats her way against the hostile invisible branches" (SA:145). "Trees met overhead, and branches... struck at her." All reflect "the immense hostility of her world" (SA:144). Even though Vera is bent on her own destruction, she does not consciously say "in her mind, 'I shall find oblivion here'." Such is the extraordinary power of place that "the dark images [of the lake crowd] her and [impell] her to this place to find oblivion" (SA:144). But the "first singing stinging clarifying wet cold of the now invisible lake" returns Vera to some measure of control. Unable to drown herself in the lake, she seeks the comfort of Maggie's cabin. Not surprisingly, Maggie, who feels at one with the lake but knows its power, is able to offer warmth and humanity to both Vera and Mr. Cunningham, when both are so nearly claimed by its waters.

For in the lake and its surroundings, Maggie has found her "genius loci." Joey Quong, who like Vera is "city bred," does not find the genius of the lake inimical, nor is he particularly sensitive to the unfamiliar natural surroundings. He admits, "It's a nice place," but he misses the tennis courts and hot dog stands associated with the only natural space he has known, Stanley Park. Ethel Wilson does not show this to be any character flaw in Joey. Indeed, the narrator sympathetically details the large Quong family who live "in harmony from morning till night and [sleep] in

harmony from night till morning" as examples of people who, like Nell Severance, are much happier living in the city.

As Frankie Burnaby has noticed, everyone is different in the choice of "true home. There is no rule about it" (HD:69). Joey's brother, Angus, immediately feels at home at Three Loon Lake: "If I could just get out on that lake, thought Angus who had never been in a boat. If I could sleep in one of those cute little houses! If I just could!"

(SA:109) Two years later, Angus still feels that at the lake he is "regarded as a real person and responsible... He [is] more of a person than he would be on Fender Street" (SA:156). Although the narrator has shown that people can live adequately in the city, we are shown Ethel Wilson's true bias on the value of the natural environment: "Angus is right. A man, and even a man's dog, has a special value in a landscape with trees" (SA:156).

In Swamp Angel, Maggie notes a difference in time, between the time when, entrapped in an unpleasant marriage, she feels that "daily and nightly repetition marked no passing of time" (SA:23), and the time when she feels herself to be "in new time, in new space, because now she had got free." Joey is aware of "some enormous difference" between time in the city and in the tranquility of the lake. He "did not yet know Time that flowed smoothly, as in this place. In all of his life Time has jerked by with a rat-tat-tat, with the beating of a clock, with shrill cries

to come to supper, with the starting up of an engine, with the slamming of doors, with the change of radio programme, with the traffic, with voices..." (SA:108). Despite the variations in time experienced in Swamp Angel, it is still a linear time, extra-human, a force. Cause and effect still prevail.

Eagle and osprey, fawn and kitten assume symbolic proportions in Swamp Angel. Such is Maggie Lloyd's identification with the natural world that watching an osprey catch a fish, only to have it stolen by an eagle, causes her to equate the scene with her own situation, in which Vera has just faced her with open hostility. Maggie wonders, "Did a bird's rage or bird's acceptance possess [her]?" (SA:90). Learning from the example of the osprey, Maggie recognizes that there is nothing she can do either. No anger or revenge is necessary or desirable. "Lifted by this battle of birds with its defeat and its victory (SA:90), Maggie is able to return to reality, to feel that she has been able to swim around obstacles, "swim strongly, this way, that way, straight ahead, as [she shall] choose" (SA:90).

Those who are able to swim around obstacles are able to achieve and enjoy the most from life, for life necessitates continuous cycles of change, such as the seasonal changes Maggie projects when viewing the three crosses, and which Frankie Burnaby also senses on her rides through the remote countryside of the Interior. Furthermore, just as the

natural world demands competition for the survival of the fittest, as seen in the clash of the eagle and the osprey, it also promotes an innocence, openness, and respect, as seen in the playfulness of the fawn and the kitten.

Maggie prides herself on her ability to "swim past obstacles (Vera is sometimes an obstacle)" (SA:99), and tries to convince herself, "Now I am alone, and like a swimmer, I have to make my way on my own power. Swimming is like living, it's done alone" (SA:99). But she soon learns that she is neither a seal nor a "god floating there with the sun beating down there on her face... She is earthbound and is Maggie Lloyd who must get the fire going and put the potatoes in the oven" (SA:100). She is responsible to others. Despite the "irretrievable muddle and misery that Vera and her jealousy [create]" (SA:142), Maggie gradually acknowledges that "These people were now her family...One can say, To hell with the family, but the family remains, strong, dear, enraging, precious, maddening, indestructable" (SA:140).

Unlike Hetty Dorval, Maggie is determined to struggle against and to overcome any obstacles that might prevent her from staying in a place that feels right for her. Just as Hetty does, Maggie is the subject of growing rumours because she has "never said" anything of her past life. Gossip spreads about this "mystery woman" (SA:115). When Maggie tells her story "plainly and without too much emotion,"

Henry Corder, Halidar, and Vera are all "deeply moved."

Honest communication has laid gossip to rest.

Maggie has gained a much deeper understanding of the oppositions found in nature -- exhilarating and soothing, challenging and indifferent. The unhappiness of her past life is washed away by her closeness to nature, by "this air, this freedom, this joy, this singleness and forgetfulness" experienced at Three Loon Lake. But the lake can be deceptive in its tranquility. As Maggie knows and Mr. Cunningham soon learns, "The waves on this small, murderous lake unpeopled as a desert, were irrationally high and fierce....It is a terrible thing to be alone, weak, and in a storm far from the indifferent shore" (SA:134). The lake is insensible to the fate of those who enjoy swimming in it--"If she could not swim, ah...then...it would no doubt kill her and think nothing of it" (SA:100).

By extension, Ethel Wilson leads us to recognize that just as the surface of water conceals the frightening, the demanding, the important, so the surface of a fiction, the surface of life itself, masks the unknown, the essence of being. By changing the voice of the narrator, from past to present, from third person narrator to first person to authorial intruder, Ethel Wilson leads the reader away from true empathy with the characters, thus allowing a reconciliation of the differing points of view and differing ideas raised in the course of the novel. The focus of her

chapters also switches from Maggie to Nell Severance to Eddie Vardoe, from the present to flashbacks of the past, from Three Loon Lake to Vancouver. Discontinuous chapters indicate that the normal form of the human environment--family, sexuality, beliefs--are in chaos. Many chapters are short. But the shortest, most discontinuous are those dealing with Edward Vardoe after the dissolution of his marriage. Chapters 28 to 35 take the space of only three pages. Eddie's advertisement in the Personal Column includes the values he deems will be considered important in a man--"well fixed, with car," and the quality he demands in a woman--"good figure essential" (SA:124). In the two lines comprising Chapter 30, Edward compliments a "lovely little lady" while thinking also of another woman (SA:125). In Chapter 32, again two lines, one of Eddie's women appears to be expecting him to buy her a present in return for any favours she may be giving him, and in the following chapter, Edward shouts, "Well for Pete's sake, what did jever come for then!" The complete Chapter 34 stands out in center page, highlighted by spaces above and below: "'You go to hell,' said Edward Vardoe and banged the door of the flat behind him" (SA:126). None of these shallow people exhibit affection, respect, or even a minimal compassion for others.

Although Nell Severance holds beliefs similar to Maggie's, the beauties of the natural world are of little significance to her. When asked to accompany her daughter

on a vacation, she replies, "I don't enjoy drooling over scenery or listening to drooling--Oh look at the mountains! How sweet the clouds! Behold the cows!" (SA:66) Large Mrs. Severance shuffles between her bed and her "vast accustomed chair" (SA:46), almost never venturing beyond her "objectionable little house on the thirty-foot lot" (SA:77). In fact, "Mrs. Severance no longer [observes] the outside appearance of her house which [has] long been simply the structure that [contains] her chair, her table, her bed, and her kitchen" (SA:76). She is similar to the characters of "Tuesday and Wednesday" in her lack of interest in the natural world. However, her thought, insights, and beliefs transcend theirs because she attends to "the human scene which, from the chair where she habitually [sits, is] both constricted and universal" (SA:65). She claims that she exists in "her heart and her head" (SA:149), her feelings and her thoughts. Her compassion, even for such pitiable objects as Edward Vardoe, and her belief in life itself, "her faith in God [as her] support... makes old age bearable, happy, and fearless" (SA:151).

Paradoxically, Nell Severance has also been a most selfish woman. Her daughter, Hilda, accuses her, "You are so used to playing God and playing so cleverly that you make gross mistakes" (SA:65). Mrs. Severance comes to realize that the greatest mistake she has made was putting the

happiness of her beloved Philip ahead of the needs of her daughter, but as she explains to Maggie, "It takes God Himself to be fair to two different people at once" (SA:151). One of the other "things [she] should have known, things [she] should have seen" (SA:119) was the unhappy feelings constantly aroused in Hilda by the sight of her mother twirling the Swamp Angel. For the little pearl-handled gun, that reminds the mother of a time when she was attractive and was loved, reminds the daughter of a time when she was consigned to boarding schools and teased by her classmates for having a juggler for a mother. Because Mrs. Severance constantly fondles it, or presses "the hard shape of the revolver against her great thigh within the bed" (SA:80), the Swamp Angel seems also to be a sexual symbol to her. As her name implies, she has isolated herself from her daughter by clinging to the past. Her severance from the past is necessary to free her daughter to marry and to produce future generations.

Nell Severance, however, is as little trusting of symbols as is Ethel Wilson. In a letter to John Gray, "who assumed editorship of Mrs. Wilson's fiction in 1947 and over the years became a close friend and confidant,"¹⁶ Wilson voices concern:

I am in danger of making the S.A. too symbolic, and I have a horror of symbol unless it is an honest symbol and an inevitable portent to the writer. If it seems at all contrived, it is of all things the most phoney and pretentious, and easily recognizable as such.¹⁷

When Nell Severance has been sedated, after her fall and her public exposure of the Swamp Angel, she murmurs, "All this nowadays of symbol symbol symbol...destroying reality...too much power, people worship symbol...obscures something..."

(SA:79) It is then that she determines, "I shall lose it and save it" (SA:80) by sending it to Maggie for safekeeping and ultimate disposal. She realizes that when "her endeared symbol has gone, ...[she has] nothing now but the reality" (SA:83). She has given up her sanctuary in a past life to accept the natural cycle of aging and death.

When Maggie suspects that something has happened to Nell Severance, and that she, Maggie, will "never go back to the coast," she sees "as on a wild day, the shallow sea of English Bay torn up by the roots and flung down again, and the petulant seagulls floating, suspended, high up in the wind, and the tall trees on the park shore reeling in the sea wind" (SA:111). Wind is a signal of change, and Maggie knows that the world of the Coast has been wrested from her forever. Significantly, it is the natural world of the seashore that she misses, but now that she has found new roots at Three Loon Lake, and now that she retains the essence of all that she has loved of the coastal environment, "it doesn't really matter" (SA:111).

Although Nell Severance contends that "everything of importance happens indoors" (SA:149), two of the most significant events in the closing years of her life happen

outdoors. Her fall on the sidewalk near her home gives her a foretaste of her own mortality and forces her to come to terms with her attachment to the Swamp Angel and with her responsibility towards her daughter's happiness. Her second venture, a trip to Kamloops, allows her to visit Maggie, to share with Maggie her philosophy of life, and to ensure disposal of the gun.

Nell Severance, with her "acid good sense," chides Maggie for presuming that "once out into the fresh air, everything would be easy" (SA:149). She reminds Maggie that "We are all in it together. 'No Man is an Iland, I am involved with Mankinde' and we have no immunity and we may as well realize it" (SA:150). Maggie has already learned that she will never be immune at the lake. Moreover she recognises that if she lets human relations defeat her, she will be no less immune even if she flees to a new job at Mr. Cunningham's lodge. No longer can she simply ignore ✓ obstacles and swim around them. Hetty Dorval tries to emulate the wild geese in their apparent freedom to flee. But Maggie learns that it is useless to flee. One must face up to human relations, counteract gossip and ill feelings. One must build community with cheerful resolve. Maggie faces a new spring sensitive to Vera's needs. She encourages the others to "do a little more petting, a little more helping" (SA:153).

Maggie, who has realistically worked to build her own future, has shown herself to be the ideal recipient of the Swamp Angel. She assures her friend, Nell, "I am so sure that our ability to throw away the substance, to lose all yet keep the essence is very important" (SA:129). The Swamp Angel belongs to the temporal, human world, and eventually it will be "not even a memory, for there will be no one to remember it" (SA:157). But Maggie is quick to ponder, "Yet does the essence of all custom and virtue perish?" (SA:157)

Thus, Maggie is able to relinquish the Swamp Angel, which for Nell and her daughter, Hilda, has been a symbol of stasis, of the past, of barriers to communication. Just as Arthur admits his mortality when he has Excalibur thrown into the waves, so Maggie, in consigning the Swamp Angel to the lake, accepts the inevitability of change and mortality. Just as Nell Severance is able to sever her ties to the past, to surrender her symbol of power, to allow her daughter a life of her own, so Maggie is able to lay to rest the ghosts of her former family, to temper her need for personal solitude, to focus resolutely on building the present and future. The implied promise of renewal and success for Maggie is inherent in the images of movement and change as "floating cloud, drifting scent, tree, wild creature, curving fleeting hill--each made its own statement to Maggie in the imperishable spring" (SA:155).

The very name, Swamp Angel, is appropriate in a work that exposes and resolves oppositions. It contrasts the corporeal and the divine: whence humankind has come, to what it aspires. This chaotic, hurtful, disorderly world full of death must be ameliorated by the healing and inspiration of nature, by the compassion and community of humans. There is no angel without the swamp, no rebirth without death. Both Maggie Lloyd and Nell Severance are necessary components of the web of creation, for participation is necessary in both the natural and the human worlds.

As Brent Thompson asserts, "Man creates symbols--- angels--from the swamp of his existence, but God creates man. Man's symbols can only be approximations of what he and his environment are, approximations which destroy reality when they are relied upon too much."¹⁸ Because of her closeness to nature, Maggie learns about reality and change earlier in life than does Nell Severance. In the action of returning the Swamp Angel to the "ooze" of the swamp and of the past, Maggie has affirmed the natural and divine cycle of life as embodied by the fish "flickering, weaving curiously over the Swamp Angel, [then] flickering, weaving, [resuming] their way" (SA:157). The images of migrating birds and of flickering fish, images that open and close the novel, evoke movement and suggest the rhythms of life that crowd the narration of Swamp Angel. The essence of the novel Ethel Wilson has written is its affirmation that both

the human and natural world are inseparable parts of "the miraculous interweaving of creation... the everlasting web"

(SA:150).

CHAPTER 5

Love and Salt Water: "The Unplumbed, Salt, Estranging Sea"

None of the characters in Love and Salt Water will experience as strong a relationship with nature as that developed by Maggie, the protagonist of Swamp Angel. However, Ethel Wilson's last novel does capture the "essence" of new landscapes not experienced in her earlier works. In discussing her reasons for writing Love and Salt Water, the author affirms that the British Columbia she loves so much is a "person of infinite variety and inference." ¹ She explains her desire to further explore that variety and commit it to paper:

I have already written with some verisimilitude about the Upper Country which I most love, but there is that about the salt sea and our own coasts, especially with a life-long association of summers, summers, summers, and changing seasons, which one assimilates. ²

She labels Love and Salt Water "a temperate affair like the water and climate of our shores" ³ The protagonist, Ellen Cuppy, travels also to the Okanagan Valley and to the Prairies, but the setting of most importance is the sea that touches on Stanley Park, on English Bay, on the Gulf Islands, "the sea that so much enters our lives here if we care intensely about it." ⁴

As Ethel Wilson was probably familiar with the works of Matthew Arnold, a family friend of her great-grandparents,

some of her attributes of salt water may have been based on Arnold's poem, "To Marguerite:" =

Yes: in the sea of life enisled,
 With echoing straits between us thrown.
 Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
 We mortal millions live alone.
 The islands feel the enclasping flow,
 And then their endless bounds they know.
 ...
 Now round us spreads the watery plain--
 O might our marges meet again!
 Who ordered that their longing's fire
 Should be, as soon as kindled, cooled?
 Who renders vain their deep desire?--
 A god, a god their severance ruled;
 And bade betwixt their shores to be
 The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.

Sixty-eight years old when Love and Salt Water was published, Ethel Wilson was a much more "experienced traveller" than young Ellen Cuppy. In this novel, therefore, the third person narrator appears truly omniscient, verbalizing Wilson's mature perceptions throughout. We will examine these perceptions and how they are exemplified or reinforced by natural imagery such as light and darkness, and especially by the many and conflicting qualities and forces exhibited by the ever-present, ever-changing influence of the sea, or salt water. We will trace Ellen's secure self-absorption as a child and young adult, through two "sea changes," to a measure of self-knowledge and a willingness to trust others.

Like so many of Wilson's heroines, Ellen embarks on an odyssey of self-discovery. The first paragraph, always so

important in Wilson's fiction, alerts us not only to the idea of a journey--"packing...suitcases," but also foreshadows Ellen's critical view of marriage, and more importantly, affirms Ellen's zestful, imaginative, and curious approach to analyzing all that surrounds her.

Because of the imagination and sense of adventure that they share with the narrator, Ellen (or Gypsy, as she is more appropriately called) and her mother are fascinated with ships of all kinds plying the waters near their home. They exclaim over "large deep-sea freighters which are also passenger boats," "tugs travelling slowly...or tearing out alone...seiners, and gillnetters, tankers, coasting vessels" (LSW:6). But, lively themselves, they admire most "the tugs and the freighters [which give] most life to the scene" (LSW:6).

Early in the story, then, salt water is associated with the challenges of life -- activity, change, responsibility. Perhaps it even encourages one to plan for the future, for Mother, looking at the sea and the freighters, often says, "Some day, when Father has time, Gypsy, we'll go on a freighter" (LSW:7). The author, ever aware of the unexpected and irrevocable blows dealt by Chance in a world where "most things are dangerous. Nothing is safe" (LSW:72), warns ironically and ominously, "and so we confidently plan our lives" (LSW:11). In a room where tricks of light and

darkness make it difficult to determine reality, Ellen, at the age of sixteen, discovers her mother dead.

Ironically, it is to speed recuperation from the shock of Mother's death that Gypsy and her father sail alone on a freighter out of Vancouver. Even by the second day, the ship begins its "insidious assuagement":

Frank and Ellen walked round and round the deck...and the wind whipped them and rain stung their faces and the great grey waves came slowly toward the ship from as far west as one could see till mist closed down.

(LSW:24)

Life after the death of his wife is for Frank Cuppy "a stale ditch." The whipping wind, the stinging rain, and the great grey waves may still parallel his emotions, but at the same time they restore and invigorate. Being encapsulated and isolated by the vast ocean, the Cuppys are also removed from the debilitating though well-meaning sympathy of relatives and friends and are able to direct their healing processes in ways most appropriate for themselves. Recovery can be gradual, for passengers of freighters also find that

they are of no importance whatever, and their movements are conditioned entirely by the freight which the ship will pick up and discard...and there is no guarantee whatever that the passengers will arrive at their ultimate destination at any given time. They find the sensation pleasant, and are surprised. (LSW:32)

What is so healing for Ellen and Frank Cuppy, and for many passengers fatigued, pressured, or distressed by life, is that "all personal responsibility ceases, and the period of private arrangements and decisions slides into the past" (LSW:33). We see a parallel between the experiences of

Maggie Lloyd at the Similkameen and those of the passengers at sea--one must have the time and privacy to deconstruct the self before one can look objectively at oneself and reconstitute the self yet again.

But "an intimacy grows when people share...long hours... together each day for about thirty consecutive days from nine in the morning until midnight in the peculiar isolation of a ship at sea" (LSW:34-34), and unwittingly, Francois Cuppy begins to feel an attraction for Nicola Gracey, who like he, has been named after a geographical location in British Columbia. As Frank's emotional turmoil increases, the weather too becomes increasingly more stormy. In "this cave in the ocean full of sound, the sea beating on the ship, and the great dark unknown fish around and beneath the ship" (LSW:41), in this fearsome, unfamiliar, almost primordial atmosphere, Frank is confronted by deep, conflicting emotions, and finds himself unable to reconcile his divided loyalties. He senses his deceased wife, Susan, on one side of him, Nicola on the other. In the "near dark" and the "broken light," Frank's perceptions become confused.

The Christmas hymns of the sailors have a power like that of prayer. As Gypsy's mother has earlier counselled, prayer "won't always take trouble away but it makes it easier for you and me to understand and manage...it makes us all one family" (LSW:104). This human community is necessary in order to oppose the destructiveness and

unpredictability of the salt water, described as "a curious lion colour, not to be trusted" (LSW:43). Nevertheless, the passengers later regard three "irresponsible" waterspouts as entertaining because, despite their appearance of "irresistible force," they stay "like tigers at a safe distance" (LSW:43). As long as their "ox is [not] gored," as long as they feel they are above or beyond the laws of the salt water, the passengers continue in the same escapism, irresponsibility and superficiality as embodied by the waterspouts. Most do not acknowledge that, in vast elemental waters, at any unforeseen moment some individuals may sink or some may survive. And indeed, a young "sea-boy," the only youth aboard the ship other than Ellen, is snatched overboard by a wave and drowns.

Nevertheless, confrontation with the powerful and unpredictable salt water builds courage and demands self-assertion. When a life-threatening storm batters the ship, smashing portholes, causing lacerations and fractured bones, their attempts to help fellow passengers engender in Frank and Nicola a respect and admiration for each other that will grow to affection. Only love effectively protects against the stormiest passages of life.

However, Gypsy, who now feels she has lost both her mother and father through circumstances beyond her control, feels "very much alone on this sea, and yet very much

together with all the other people who were also alone" || ✓
 (LSW:46). The conflicting isolation and intimacy imposed by the sea is a puzzling dichotomy that will take Gypsy many years and many voyages to resolve.

After returning from her sea voyage, Ellen enters numerous "years of elision." The narrator explains philosophically and at length:

There is a curious semblance of reality in those of our years which are certainly valid, but seem to elide, and differ from our years of reality. During those years of elision we live, of course, with relative intensity, and those years mark, retard, hasten, improve, or worsen us, and, alas, may affect some of those with whom we come into touch..., but then the true years of our life arrive--or do not arrive--and we forget those other irrelevant years which may, since Time is an agent, some day stir, and take their unexpected vengeance in a variety of ingenious ways. Such, at least, was Ellen's experience. (LSW:60)

Desmond Facey denounces the "lameless" and "muddled thought" of this passage, and labels it an "artistic blunder, since it tells us that nothing of significance ...is going to happen to Ellen until...the very last pages of the novel" ⁷ Although the passage may be somewhat intrusive in context, this surely is a shallow interpretation of Wilson's intent. Exciting or dangerous events will happen physically to Ellen before the end of the novel, especially her disfigurement and near drowning, the most gripping portion of the entire work. Her struggle to rescue her nephew and her near-death in the salt water prepare Ellen for those "true years" which occur when she meets George at the train. For then, as when she experiences her first physical contact with salt water

on her ocean voyage, she will need to allow intimacy while at the same time demanding personal space and respect. Above all, she will need to force herself to face and attempt to resolve life's problems-- change, aging, death, knowing oneself and others, to name but a few. Unlike Ellen, many of Ethel Wilson's characters do not emerge from their years of elision. As William H. New observes, "For Hetty and Edward and Myrtle Johnson, no 'true years' ever arrive; because of death or fear or a restricted imagination they never do break out of the 'semblance of reality' " ^e It is Ellen's psychological growth and her clearer perception of reality that Wilson views as ultimately significant.

Facey also contends that there is "nothing in the remainder of the novel...[that clarifies] the reference to Time taking its vengeance." However, had Ellen not retreated from those "water matters" which constitute life, she would have developed a greater compassion and understanding of Nora, whose first baby has died, whose second son is deformed and mongoloid, and whose last precious son is growing deaf. Ellen never does learn that "Morgan [is] moved always by something that [is] pity and compunction and responsibility and paternity and therefore he [visits] his idiot son and [drives] there alone" (LSW:142); hence, she is unable to distinguish between the appearance and reality of Morgan Peake: "If she had known of

Morgan's visits she would have been deeply touched, and would have looked at him with informed and interested eyes" (LSW:143). Because Ellen has retreated into those years of elision, she is more critical of Nora's over-protectiveness of Johnny, more eager to give him interesting experiences away from his mother. Her years of unconsciously irresponsible behavior do take unexpected vengeance, for they lead to her submersion in the violent depths of the salt water.

In Love and Salt Water, Ethel Wilson constantly examines the conflict between appearance and reality. As early as the third page of the book, our perceptions of reality are challenged:

The freighter, moving slowly along the dividing line of sea and sky..., gradually turned toward Vancouver and changed its appearance to an amazing degree. The ship which had appeared excessively long and elegant became foreshortened, and was transformed to a large squat black object approaching upon the ocean. (LSW:5)

By extension, not only objects, but relationships between people, depend on individual recognition and interpretation. As we have noted earlier, shades of reality are often equated in this book with shades of light. This is especially affirmed when Ellen is analyzing the reality of her relationship with Huw, a former prisoner of war to whom she is affianced. When she reflects "upon the nature of reality, [she finds it] to be one (or almost one) with the nature of light--light implying, of course, also the absence of light, that is, darkness" (LSW:67).

Watching the "curious irregular wedge-shaped quadrilaterals of light and dark," in reality reflections made by cars passing her bedroom windows, Ellen appreciates how difficult it is to interpret degrees of light, for "some overlay others, rendering them light as seen through a veil, or dark as seen through a veil" (LSW:68). Such is the difficulty of determining reality which, because it relies so completely on personal interpretation, is obscured by so many overlying nuances:

Such a number of things arise between two people, [Ellen thinks], looking up at the rectangles which continued gliding across and out, which onlookers do not know;...If one could only read the other's true mind, she thought...if there were only no mistrust, no veil between... (LSW:70)

Ellen becomes alarmed as the "wedge shapes of light and dark" fade with approaching dawn, and her mind crowds with existential concerns, "What happens to them? Are they still there but in the presence of light do we not see them? ... What is around us?" (LSW:71) She rejects the hidden, recoils from the unexplained. Part of the maturity that Ellen will gain from her "sea-change" is a knowledge that her desire to "read the other's true mind" with "no veil between" is often neither practical nor desirable. Even families and lovers "have to have reticences" (LSW:149). The narrator advances speculations that extend even beyond Ellen's present comprehensions:

there was somewhere some parallel of light and darkness, of illumination and blotting-out, and perhaps our whole existence, one with another, is a trick of light. That

may be somewhere near the truth, which is often hard to determine because of the presence of the lights and shadows of look, word, thought which touch, glide, pass or remain. Sometimes the light falls, and rests, with a beautiful clarity, and the truth lies clear.

(LSW:71)

The narrator is correct. Ellen, who as yet sees events only as they apply to her, is still unaware of the "whole" existences, not only of her fiancé, Huw, but of her sister, Nora, and her brother-in-law, Morgan. All human relationships raise the difficult problem of discriminating between appearance and reality. Only sometimes does the light fall "with a beautiful clarity, and the truth [lie] clear." Indeed, one most often can not know the truth of one's own existence. As George Gordon ponders when his first marriage fails, "How can a man know himself until the unexpected worst arrives?" (LSW:92)

Unwilling to "take a chance again" with further emotional involvements, Ellen deprives herself of just such an opportunity --to know herself. She withdraws from the life and activity and stimulations and risks of the "salt water which she [has] lived beside all her life." Like Maggie Vardoe, she assumes the blame for the unhappiness of a discarded partner. Although she misses the salt water, she punishes herself for what she and others, drawing from values based upon appearances, perceive as "wanton and cruel ...treatment of Huw who had been a prisoner [of war] for days and nights and weeks and months and years" (LSW:83). Ellen unconsciously imprisons herself for a comparable

length of time in the flatness of the Prairies, in a flat life of "sameness, less-brightness" (LSW:102), in an impersonal job with an eccentric old employer appropriately named Mr. Platt, the German or French term for "flat." Although unwilling to accept change or to make commitments, Ellen never descends to the passivity of Mort, for whom:

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

Despite her "free life-without-an-object" that gives her such security, Ellen begins "to be teased sometimes by the discrepancy between the trivia of life and its purposes. Unexpected results [come] from insignificant happenings; significant moments [bring] revelation; history and time and change [disclose] these things" (LSW:102). Mort never does become aware of himself, of others, of reality, until the very moment of his death. Ellen's near-drowning will dramatically alter her perceptions of life, but even before then, her rehabilitation begins.

We are prepared for Ellen's further progress in her odyssey of self-discovery when the narrator emphasizes the beauties of our vast country as seen by the "interested traveller" -- "the country with its sleeping past, its awakened future... the extravagant forests, prairies, lakes, and mountains [in a land which] enchants and speaks to him. The land is full of question. The journey

disturbs and exhilarates" (LSW:97). From her very early identification with the movement of birds and salt water, Ellen has demonstrated herself to be an "interested traveller." Surrounded by a living, changing world of awakening and becoming, Ellen likely will be disturbed, exhilarated, lifted from her years of elision to her "awakened future." When Wilson also informs us that "western people [who] live on the periphery... continually ...move and return, move and return, very like birds (LSW:98), we are prepared, when Mr. Platt dies, for Ellen's release from the flatness of her existence and her return to the margin of the sea.

Like Maggie Lloyd, Ellen experiences the healing and contentment of being at one with nature. Gazing at the "hundreds of small nameless ducks," the solitary cormorants, the mallards, the "dazzle of water," she exults, "I shall never tire of these water matters...it's life, and more than ordinary life and motion'...The simple scene conveyed to her that although by her humanity she was excluded, she was a part of these things" (LSW:130). As yet, however, she is still an observer of life, not a true participant.

It is Chance that once again changes the direction of Ellen's life. A sudden illness of George Gordon's boss prevents George from flying to Vancouver to vacation with Ellen:

The circle of life is extraordinary, and Miss Cuppy [is] drawn up into the circle of Mr. Prendergast's life

when his secretary [has] to telephone the doctor that he [is] ill, ...and the doctor [telephones] and [makes] arrangements at the hospital, and the lives of George Gordon in Montreal and Miss Cuppy in Vancouver [are] affected, perhaps temporarily, or perhaps permanently and fatally. (LSW:133)

Previously unwilling to make a decision to marry George, Ellen now recognizes, in her overwhelming disappointment at his delay, just how much she loves him. The effects of Chance are far-reaching. Because Ellen is unable to take George with her to the Okanagan, she becomes free to take her young nephew to the Gulf Islands while his parents are called away on what subsequently turns out to be unnecessary political business. Chance governs all. Once again, Ethel Wilson warns against planning life too confidently: "The change of plan now caused [Ellen] no concern; anything that would happen between now and George's arrival was immaterial because her mind was set" (LSW:155). Little does she realize that the terrible disfigurement of her face in an accident will, with its shadow, change yet again the composition of her reality, and cause her to doubt her abilities to retain George's affections. "Nothing is safe" (LSW:72).

As in Swamp Angel, the narrator establishes a geographical, historical and temporal perspective for the setting. In evoking the Gulf Islands, Ethel Wilson satiates the senses with the sights of elegant juniper bushes, shaded green and grey with shadows of purple; of smooth arbutus trees with a skin the "shade near chartreuse" and a bark of

glorious copper colour. One feels the sensation of lying on dry moss, of casting oneself into the sea, of drying in the sun. One smells the aromatic scent of junipers and cedars, the seaweed and the salt sea. One appreciates that "you do not count by days which slide, shimmer, coalesce, and become one summer day in such a place" (LSW:168).

However, in keeping with the thematic emphasis of Love and Salt Water, appearances do not always reflect reality, for:

On a flight from Vancouver to Victoria the traveller looks down on those innumerable tree-filled islands of dark green colour...The traveller thinks, Down below me is a life which is idyllic, and so, from the air, it would seem. But life on ever so beautiful an island can cease to be an idyll when the island is storm-bound, or repairs cannot be made, or the boat's engine breaks down...or the dweller becomes bored. Nevertheless, life on these islands must be as nearly idyllic as life can be. (LSW:160)

Having warned the reader that all is not as it seems, the narrator builds an ever-increasing sense of impending disaster. In this story, one becomes exceedingly wary of projected events being taken too much for granted. Suspicions are strongly aroused by the announcement that "Ellen Cuppy [is] a strong swimmer and careful. She [is] good in a boat. It [is] reasonable that Nora should trust her..." (LSW:137). The "strong swimmer" reminds one of the capable, decisive Maggie, but in Wilson's books, life seldom follows reason.

Moreover, the pleasant scents of Gabriola Island are contrasted with the strong "stench of decay" that Ellen had

noticed on her voyage through the Panama Canal: "There must have been death there too, because many huge carrion birds floated high and low. She knew then that she was a northerner, and only a visitor to such strange smells and places" (LSW:167). Familiar with Wilson's sense of irony, one is alerted immediately that neither northerners nor northern climes are exempt from cycles of death and decay. Soon Ellen will be faced by death even in a place where scent of seaweed and salt sea evoke an apparent permanence and continuity of "summers gone away and summers to come" (LSW:166).

The sense of foreboding intensifies. Frequent references to Johnny as "the cherub" cause one to associate him with the "Botticelli angel in bathing trunks" who was so tragically drowned on the Christmas freighter voyage. The summer that Ellen takes Johnny to Gabriola, a beautiful sunset reminds Aunt Maury of the 'Amen' at the end of Rossini's "Stabat Mater." The "Stabat Mater," Latin for "Standing Mother," musically commemorates Mary standing at the cross mourning the crucifixion of her Son and suggests perhaps a further tragic and unwarranted loss of a beloved son. Narrational asides warn even the most imperceptive reader. Ellen dreams that, when George arrives, "then of course life would be happy and endless -- opening like a fan (never shockingly closed in death)" (LSW:172). When the boat capsizes, then, one fears for the worst. In their

disjointedness, Ellen's thoughts seem somewhat like Mort's. We are aware that Mort dies, and so suspect that Ellen and Johnny may also. Indeed, Ethel Wilson wrote an alternate version to the novel's ending in which both characters do drown.

But Ellen and Johnny live. Ellen's racing thoughts have been in reality very unlike Mort's. Mort thinks of himself, blames Eddie, continues to function in a fantasy world, dreaming about the "white house" rather than facing reality even in his last moments. Ellen, however, holds herself responsible for the accident, feels as if she has become the boy's mother in her desperate attempts to save him. She is "consumed with the misery of her folly" and is ready to "forgo this her life, for, if Nora's child [does] not live, she [will] go back into the sea" (LSW:179).

The closeness to "great ultimate sorrow" that so humbles and humiliates Ellen enables Nora and Morgan to forgive her. Ellen "could hardly refrain from tears in her abasement, so great was Nora's kindness, and Morgan's, when they might have met her harshly and with upbraiding" (LSW:187). Ellen recognizes that she has misunderstood Nora, underestimated Morgan, misjudged the realities of their lives and personalities. She also learns that "she had better mind her own business. Everyone had better mind their own business" (LSW:188). By allowing a gap between

self and others, Ellen discovers that "a gap had closed" (LSW:188).

After the near-drowning of her son, even the normally imperceptive Nora ponders, "Do we always live on the brink then? ...Yes, I believe we do" (LSW:192). We have seen that all characters in Ethel Wilson's writings live on the brink. Chance, misunderstanding, changes in reality mean that life is never certain. But if reality were always knowable or governable, individuals would cease to search, to change, to become. Reality must continue to be explored, just as the reality of George's love must be tested. Ellen must confront her fiancé with her scarred cheek. As Ellen recognizes, lives cannot be patterned after maxims from Butler's Notebooks. One must learn from personal experience. Withdrawal, boredom, years of elision are not the answer. Only when we plunge into the destructive elements in which we live can we truly be alive. The salt water may be dangerous and unpredictable, but at the same time it restores and rejuvenates.

As the title, Love and Salt Water, implies, compassion, love, and forgiveness make life ruled by chance more tolerable. As we learn from the experiences of Ellen Cuppy, the dangers, challenges, and isolation of "the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea" ¹⁰ must be faced with love of parent, of spouse, of child, of friends. In life, one must choose a course, weather the storms, accept the consequences. Though

life may still be chequered, only then does one experience the "true years" of one's existence.

Chapter 6

Mrs Golightly and other stories: "Survival in a Difficult Country"

"Life is a difficult country." Thus begins the epigraph to Mrs. Golightly and other stories, the last of Ethel Wilson's books to be published. Many of the themes and techniques employed in her novels become more readily discernible in the concise form of her short stories. The isolation engendered by lack of human communication, the difficulty in apprehending reality, the ever-threatening incidence of chance and accident--all have made life a difficult country for Wilson's characters. In the short stories, death and violence become more noticeable, animals assume a greater significance, the landscape becomes a more causative agent. In the short stories, too, there is a more concerted search for truth, for a transcending divinity that gives meaning to life.

Ethel Wilson, as early as 1947, claimed that her "role may be [that of a] short story writer." ⁴ Not only did she write a number of short stories and essays, but she originally decided to "relegate Topaz to the short story class" (EW:SEL:139). Furthermore, Swamp Angel, "Tuesday and Wednesday," "Lilly's Story," and Love and Salt Water were either developed from a short story or amalgamated

from two or three stories, some of them previously published. Only Hetty Dorval, itself relatively brief, was written as a complete novel in its first draft.

The works in Mrs. Golightly and other stories span the length of her literary career. Tales such as "I Just Love Dogs" and "Hurry, Hurry" appeared as early as 1937 and 1939, whereas others, such as "Fog," "From Flores," and "Till death us do part," did not appear until this collection. Examination of these stories will thus provide a fitting conclusion to my study of the themes and styles in Wilson's writings.

Ethel Wilson emphasized the importance of writing about what one knows and about what one feels strongly: "I'm against conscious nationality in a novel (for a novel is about people and is universal) and for regionalism, if region means a lot to the writer...A region, [a] small country town...[can be] your country town and mine-- anybody's Region is universal and unifying--not a divider."² In a letter to Malcolm Ross, literary critic and editor of Queen's Quarterly, Wilson expands on her susceptibility to the influence of place:

I could only write at length about Canada, although I know some other countries fairly well. I could only write about British Columbia (this includes people of...), although I know Canada from here to Prince Edward Island. Therefore everything I attempt to write is Canadian, and even regional, in its aspect.

(EW:SEL:182)

Wilson's "association, affection, and apprehension of place and people" (EW:SEL:182) are especially evident in her collection of stories. Of the eighteen, twelve are set completely or partly in Vancouver, and two in other parts of British Columbia. The strong sense of place, developed by Wilson's identification with the natural splendour of her own province, also allows her to vivify scenes previously untouched in her earlier novels--a lonely street corner or overgrown churchyard in London, an airless confining tomb in Egypt, an equally confining European train compartment, a stretch of "swirling, sucking rock-bound bays and caves" on the California coast. Wilson's emotional response to her surroundings is typified by her reaction when viewing "the strong bodies of the seals playing in the translucent water, [for she exclaims,] "Whatever happens to me on earth, I shall never never forget it" (MG:11).

Wilson goes a step further. Perceptions and thinking patterns are not just conditioned by our immediate surroundings and culture. These patterns may be passed on to future generations, just as British, Roman, early Greek civilizations strike a chord in Mrs. Forrester, in "Haply the soul of my grandmother":

However high the trees and mountains of her native British Columbia, they were native to her. However wide the prairies, she was part of them. However fey the moors of Devon, however ancient Glastonbury or London, they were part of her. Greece was young and she was at home there... And Socrates, drinking the hemlock...was that last week...? (MG:25-26)

What is the influence of past generations long forgotten? For Wilson emphasizes that it is not just immediate physical and cultural landscape that determines us as human beings. She, through her narrator, postulates that she who is "Canadian and [is] fair and [has her] roots in that part of England that was ravaged and settled by blond Norsemen" (MG:26) finds Egypt strange. The past that has shaped an individual still lives within. On the other hand, her husband, who "is Canadian and is dark and before generations of being Canadian he was Irish, and before generations of being Irish--did the dark Phoenicians come? --and he finds no strangeness" in Egypt (MG:26).

For the first time in her writing, Ethel Wilson hints at an extra-sensory world of illusion or reincarnation. In "Haply the soul of my grandmother", she chose a literary reference to animals to increase this sense of otherworldliness and the unknown:

CLOWN: What is the opinion of Pythagorus concerning wild fowl?

MALVOLIO: That the soul of our grandam might haply inhabit a bird.

-TWELFTH NIGHT, Act IV, Scene ii.

We are prompted to ponder, "What force lies behind the persistently attacking insect? Whose was the mummified hand?"

In the short stories, Ethel Wilson overtly expresses her interest in death and immortality. Even kings can be completely forgotten by "generations of living men, know-

alls, philosophers, scientists, slaves, ordinary people" (MG:18). In the Egyptian tombs, "all that was mortal of a man or woman who had been all-powerful had lain...sealed away by a generation from other generations (men do not trust their successors, and rightly)" (MG:18). Mrs.

Forrester, an alter-ago of Wilson herself, is terrified by

a strong persistence of the past into the now and beyond the now...It was not the death of the place that so invaded her, although there was death; it was the long persistent life in which her bones and flesh and all the complex joys of her life and her machine-woven clothes and her lipstick that was so important to her were less than the bright armour of a beetle on which she could put her foot. (MG:19)

Her insignificance is doubly reinforced by a knowledge that the armoured scarab has for millenia been associated with resurrection and immortality. In this airless valley, unfit for the living, but in which some pharaohs have succeeded in immortalizing their names, the visitors are alarmingly reminded of their mortality once again, when several times "two great burnished-winged insects ...attacked them like bombers, ...the two vicious bright winged insects charged them, one here, one there, with a clattering hiss" (MG:22).

Mummification was another attempt by the Egyptians to immortalize themselves, but like tombs, mummies too can be desecrated. When an aged, bearded man tries to sell the Forresters a small mummified human hand, cut off below the wrist and wrapped in a tatter of grave-clothes, and when the husband admits to having felt something brushing them in the tomb, brushing them all day, we are not surprised at Marcus'

becoming ill and trancelike, dreaming of the little hand and speaking a foreign tongue. With Mrs. Forrester, we are forced to wonder, "whose was that little hand...Did it ever know you...did you ever know that hand?"

In many of Ethel Wilson's short stories, setting not only profoundly influences characters but is central to the plot. In "A Drink with Adolphus," Mrs. Gormley's identification with the scenery enables her to feel "very happy islanded, lost alone in this sight" (MG:68). She views "the inlet shimmering like silk with crawling waves where the tidal currents through the Second Narrows [disturb] the waters" as displaying "nearly all the glory of the world and no despair" (MG:68). This interpretation shows her remarkable optimism despite her lameness, her husband's illness, her lack of enthusiasm for spending a boring "afternoon admiring Dolly's house." The delight she experiences at the sight of Jonathan Pascoe "dancing in the scented moonlight like a gray flannel moth" (MG:73) disturbs her just as the tidal currents disturb the inlet "shimmering like silk," for Mrs. Gormley longs "to be out there dancing with the free slowly dancing wedding guest. She [longs for] it until (sitting there smiling, with immobile hips and legs) she nearly [bursts]" (MG:73).

Mrs. Gormley's appreciation of the glory and her lack of despair with either the human or natural world is contrasted greatly with the overwhelming hostility and

despair Mr. Leaper expresses in his diary. He admits that "whereas some people are born to joy, [he] was born to sorrow" (MG:78). Although Mr. Leaper and Mrs. Gormley both attend the same party, they each form very different, very subjective interpretations of their experiences there. Mr. Leaper, like the tidal currents disturbing the inlet, alarms Mrs. Gormley and makes her feel "uneasy." Just as the ripples under the Second Narrows Bridge do not reveal the destructive forces concealed beneath the water's surface, so no one--the Leapers, Mrs. Gormley, the party guests--is aware of the murderous thoughts that Mr. Leaper subconsciously harbours towards his wife. The contrast of placidity and disturbance, and of brightness and darkness in the natural setting in "A Drink with Adolphus" highlights opposing attitudes of Mrs. Gormley and Mr. Leaper, and embodies isolation and lack of communication between individuals.

Throughout Ethel Wilson's prose, animals have also been important, not just for the qualities they embody, but for the mood they help to evoke, and for the character traits they illumine by the human reactions they provoke. The duality of nature, now inspiring, now dangerous, is suggested by the abundant and varied bird life at Nimpish Lake:

When you reach...Nimpish Lake you will see the gray whiskey-jacks who love the neighbourhood of man...and magpies sometimes, and the pretty kingfisher, the

osprey and the eagle. The rapacious hawk keeps to the open country. Before you see the lake...you will hear the loons laughing and crying on the water. The loon is the true owner of the lake, and the loon's melodious unhappy cry is the true voice of these regions. (MG:30)

The mischievous, cheerful whisky-jacks and magpies balance the "rapacious hawk," the loons both laugh and cry, the brothers are both contented and at one with the lake and its wildlife, and envious of the wild geese in their freedom to escape the remoteness and isolation of its "primitive and charming shores." In a similar manner, "the entrancement of sea and sky and wind and the strong playing bodies of the seals so [transport] Mrs. Golightly" (MG:10) that it initiates the first stirrings of her own freedom to be herself.

In some of the short stories, animal and human attributes become almost interchangeable. The oddity and surreality of the party on Capital Hill at which people's thoughts and conversations fail to connect are aptly embodied in animal imagery: "a black poodle dog, walking on his hind legs, pushed past them, strode down the library, out of the french windows, and disappeared" (MG:70). The unnatural, affected pose of such a dog mimics the affected posturing of the guests at the cocktail party. The vulpine odour and fox-like appearance of Mr. Sleepwalker in a story of that name renders the man's isolated condition all the more fearful and disagreeable, even though "the unhappiness of repeated separation in a world whose essential limit is

bounded by the life and love of two people closely united... may have made [Mary] susceptible to outside influence of a esoteric, supra-human, or even sub-human kind" (MG:127).

Perhaps one of the most beautiful and powerful evocations of mood by use of landscape and animal life occurs in "Hurry, Hurry". There is poetry in Wilson's multi-sensual portrayal of the salt marshes--"The salt wind blew softly from the sea...A multitude of little sandpipers ran along the wet sand as if they were on wheels." But the sandpipers "whispered and whimpered together as they ran," the two terrier dogs become "little earnest monsters" bearing down on the little birds "in futile chase," and the birds "whispered and wept together as they fled in a cloud" (MG:107 Emphasis mine). There is incipient sadness in the little birds. The call of the soldier blackbirds contains "something sweet and something very ugly" (MG:109). The light on the distant mountains and the fog making the peaks appear to lie unsupported in the clear spring sky...[is] beauty which passes even as she [looks] upon it" (MG:106). Appearances are deceiving. Beauty is transitory.

The image of a "melancholy heron settled...in a motionless hump" foreshadows the unexpected image of the young woman who has just been murdered and who lies "humped beside the salt-water ditch" (MG:110). The description of the "unlikely heap of something... [also] at the edge of the salt-water ditch" adds to the increasing horror of the story:

This thing was about the size of a tremendous hunched cat, amorphous, of a rich reddish brown. It was the rich brown of a lump of rotted wood. Although it did not move, she had instant warning that this creature was alive and had some meaning for her. (MG:108)

The "large wounded hawk" also assumes alarming significance for the reader. Perhaps, also, the murdered woman's "eyes were bright with comprehension" (MG:108). Perhaps she was at that moment experiencing a "lingering death on the marshes, but there was nothing [Miriam] could do" (MG:109). Miriam also equates the hawk with the murderer: "The strange hawk. The strange man" (MG:109). Just as the "hawk steadily watched her..., [the man] held her with his eyes" (MG:109). Just like the hawk, the man will experience being both the hunter and the hunted.

In her novels, Ethel Wilson distances the reader from violence and death. In The Innocent Traveller, members of the family slip suddenly and with surprise behind the curtain of Time. Rachel dies a sudden, unpleasant, but unexplained death. In Hetty Dorval, the death of Frankie's friend, Ernestine, is described in one sentence; the death of her beloved father, in three brief sentences. Hetty's fate, behind a "wall of silence," can only be intuited. The violence of nature--the "sullen Fraser" in which Ernestine drowns, or of man's nature--the war in which Hetty may have been interned, is not explored. Violence is much closer to the surface in Wilson's short stories. In "From Flores," we feel the terror of the occupants of the

fish boat as the boat's nose plunges into the waves and the water streams over, as humans and boat alike struggle for control before the boat [strikes] the barnacled reef, and [splits], and the following seas [wash] over" (MG;83). We learn the anguish of the captain's wife "paying the exorbitant price of love," the despair of pregnant Josie who commits suicide, the confused and distraught Indian family who can find no trace of their only son. We recoil at the senseless murder of the Chinese grocer, knifed and pistol-whipped in "Fog," and view with alarm the raised arm of the intruder about to crash a blunt instrument into Mr. Willy's skull in "The Window."

In the short stories, death is explored in its many guises. All living things are susceptible to chance and accident. Natural forces such as wind and ocean can destroy human life or can offer surcease from pain. Human violence can parallel animal predation, snuffing out another's existence. Some creatures only appear to die, as in "Mr. Sleepwalker" and "I just love dogs." Others, as in "The Birds," die because they misinterpret reality. One must risk chance, accept change, and demonstrate one's responsibility to self and others in order to live life to its fullest.

The sea that appears benign and attractive when seen from a view window can also provide an "appropriate solution" for an individual as isolated as Josie. The pregnant girl,

deprived of hope and faith and without the consolation of the love of Jason, who is also drowned by the sea, decides, "Then I think its the best thing for the Baby. I should drown myself its quite easy in Vancouver its not like the prairies I do mean that" (MG:38). Again, it is accident that the radio of the Effie C becomes "bust," chance that the storm "rapidly [accelerates], and that the waves, innocent and savage as tigers, [leap] at the small vessel," unfortunate chance that "Josie [does] not read the papers, [and she does] not know that Jason [is] dead" (MG:43). With greater resolve, greater desperation and loneliness than experienced by Vera in Swamp Angel, Josie takes "secretly and with terror what she [deems] to be the appropriate path" (MG:44).

Fog, in the story of the same name, actually embodies the isolation, the death in life experienced by old Mrs.

Bylow:

Sleeping, getting up, making and swallowing small meals, belching a little, cleaning up (a little),... going to the bathroom, going to the Chinaman's corner store, reading the paper,...and not much more was her life as she waited for the dustman and the ultimate box...Age--taking advantage of her solitariness, her long unemployment of vestigial brain, her unawareness of a world beyond herself, her absence of preparation for the gray years--closed down upon her like a vice, no, more like a fog. (MG:98)

Just as "billowing banks" which swallow up the land prompt tugboats to cry shrilly and sharply, "Keep away! I am here!" (MG:97), so does the loneliness that engulfs Mrs. Bylow cause her to recall memories or to pass judgements at such

length that she frightens away the two visitors who occasionally do check on her. When she is "wiped out by forces quite outside herself, [she expires] like a moth in a storm (not much more and no less) (MG:105). With no family and only two acquaintances to keep her memory, Mrs. Bylow's "death [is] obscure and pitiful" (MG:105).

Mr. Willy, in "The Window," has consciously consigned himself to a similar life of obscurity and non-existence. His concern for the little birds who die when they fling themselves at his window, is no substitute for a concern for his fellow humans. Unlike the bird, who at least dies having experienced "the rapture of its flight," Mr. Willy has embraced an existence as stultifying as the one from which he has escaped, in which "his wife and her three sisters play bridge together until death should overtake them" (MG:194). Unlike the young narrator of "The Birds," Mr. Willy does not perceive the smashed bones, broken heads, and split beaks of the little birds as a sign of his own vulnerability or mortality.

His view of "sea sky mountain" coalesces and forms a banner of his "emancipation" and arouses reveries of "immense release." But he deludes himself by thinking that he is "at peace, seeing out of the window the crimped and wrinkled sea and the ships which [pass and pass] each other, the seabirds and the dream-inducing sky" (MG:195). There becomes almost a restlessness in the way that the high white

mountains "[toss], static, in almost visible motion against the sky" (MG:195), and he is "shocked at the newly realized decline of his physical powers which had proved good enough on the whole for his years of success, and by the fact that now he had, at last, time and could not swim (heart), climb mountains (heart and legs), row a boat in a rough enticing sea (call that old age)" (MG:195-196). When Mr. Willy wonders how he could "endure to be old and rich and able only to look at these mountains which in his youth he had not known and did not climb" (MG:195), we begin to see the mountains as representative of the human and spiritual challenges that Mr. Willy has never addressed. He is as unaware of the "craggs and crevasses and aretes and danger" of the North Shore mountains, "deceptive in their innocency," as he is deceived about the protection afforded by the glass that separates him from humanity. Now that he is older, his personal aspirations are becoming as the mountains in winter, white and much higher, simpler but less attainable.

When a storm lashes wind and salt spray against Mr. Willy's window, assaulting his view of the world and his reflection of himself, "within him something stirred and rose and met the storm and effaced the spectre and other phantoms that were really vague regrets" (MG:198), for he is reasoning falsely to conclude:

Fly from one shore to the other, fly and fly back again, fly to a continent or to an island, but you are no better off than if you stayed all day at your own window." (MG:196)

Just as for the birds, a false reality is reflected in the window, so for Mr. Willy, a view of life is transmitted through the window only as "an illusion produced by influences such as wind and water" (MG:200).

Significantly, there are "no people to spoil this fine view" (MG:201). Mr. Willy has escaped from the encumbrances of married life to an independent but sometimes unnerving solitude. Unlike Maggie Vardoe, he leaves humanity behind. Instead of experiencing contentment and release, he begins to sense vague regrets:

Sometimes a thought or a shape (was it), gray, like wood ash that falls in pieces when it is touched, seemed to [tease] him and [communicate] to him that he had left humanity behind, that a man needs humanity and that if he ceases to be in touch with man and is not in touch with God, he does not matter. "You do not matter any more," said the spectre like wood ash before it fell to pieces, "because you are no longer in touch with any one and so you do not exist. You are in a vacuum and so you are nothing." (MG:197-198)

Like Hilda Severance, he has gradually come to recognize what Ethel Wilson emphasizes in all her writings, that "we are all in it together. No man is an island..." By erecting barriers against human intercourse, individuals gradually succumb to an anaesthetizing mental and spiritual aridity.

Mr. Willy finds with dismay that he has "entered an area of depression unknown before, like a tundra." The meaningless chatter of evening parties only leaves him feeling more restless and lonely. After uncharacteristic

self-analysis, Mr. Willy determines that beyond his tundra there must be an "area where there might be some meaning in creation...where some people seemed to find a God, and a personal God at that" (MG:202).

The view from his window, "the purveyor of illusion," is not enough. Just as the window, on a moonless night, becomes "a mirror which [reflects] against the blackness every detail of the shallow living room," so Mr. Willy is forced to search within his shallow self. He finds himself

looking this way and that way out of his aridity for some explanation or belief beyond the non-explanation and non-belief that had always been sufficient and had always been his, but in doing this he came up against a high and solid almost visible wall of concrete or granite, set up between him and a religious belief... His death did not trouble him as much as the increasing tastelessness of living in this tundra of mind into which a belief did not enter. (MG:202-203)

He has set up a stone wall of isolation, non-involvement, non-belief. But if he could "break through the wall which bounded the area of his aridity and his comprehension, he knew without question that there was a light (not darkness) beyond, and that this light could in some way come through to him and alleviate the sterility and lead him, lead him" (MG:207).

It is not until Mr. Willy sees the raised arm of an intruder and perceives his imminent death reflected in the dark mirror of the window, that he knows "he must in some way and very soon break the great wall that shut him off from whatever light there might be. Not for fear of death

oh God not for fear of death but for fear of something else" (MG:209). As Ellen Cuppy has experienced, an individual must come close to death before he can truly be alive. Mr. Willy knows that "this will be the hardest work of his life--in his life but out of his country" (MG:209) One must believe firmly in life and in living, but one must draw from personal strengths and from examples in nature to determine one's spiritual foundations. An individual cannot just float like mountains in the sky. One must be rooted, like Hilda Severance, in some kind of faith. Ethel Wilson has said, "I am indeed a Christian, and very grateful, but not a good enough one and not entirely conventionally a Christian--in formal belief and observance." ³ Ethel Wilson's "special gift of religion" (II:185) was evident, not in a personal relationship with God such as enjoyed by her Grandmother, but in an interest and love for others, and in her sense of the relationship between humankind and the natural world. Nature provided her with a sense of the unity of life, the hope of regeneration. Self-examination, participation in nature and in humanity will allow Mr. Willy to extract some meaning from this life which "...is a difficult country, and our home." By breaking the glass cage with which he has surrounded himself and by increasingly searching "out of his country," he may, like Ethel Wilson, find consolation and inspiration in the glories of a Divinely planned universe.

It is appropriate that the last of Ethel Wilson's short stories to be published deals with the ultimate isolation, death. Perhaps because of the early death of both her parents, perhaps because of her possessive love for her husband, Wilson was afraid that her beloved Wallace might precede her in death. Although a number of her works include discussions of death and the ways in which we keep or fail to keep the memory of those who have died, "A Visit to the Frontier" is her only excursion into a landscape of the "afterworld." It is also a nightmare landscape because in the late 1940's, when her husband suffered a lengthy illness, Ethel Wilson experienced "a terrible dream of [her husband's and her] death at a place called Cut-off" (EW:SEL:248). The dream remained so real that "some time later" she was driven to write an account of it. Indeed, when more than sixteen years later Wallace did die, Wilson wrote that the terrible dream was "not nearly so bad as the reality." After they had "shared the whole of life together--the big, the trivial (which is so seldom trivial), the light the dark, the sad the funny,...when the impossible happened and Wallace was not [there], it was too terrible to bear" (EW:SEL:248).

As in all of Ethel Wilson's novels, a central image of this short story is a journey. While the train carrying Lucy and her husband, Marcus, traverses the Canadian

prairies, Lucy is prompted by the passing natural beauties to philosophize on patterns of settlement, on the influence of people on the environment. Her train of thought is suddenly halted by a crash:

If it was a crash. It was a shattering, a physical impact, a screeching, a settling, a cessation in which she was seized and shaken and lost. It was for a millionth of a second--or forever--fear and helpless panic to the obliteration of everything that had been Lucy. There was at last this settling down again to the irregular motion of the train and the assumption that something had happened and something was over.

(EW:SEL:48)

Is Lucy dead, as "forever" and "the obliteration of everything that had been Lucy" implies? The train continues onward to a stop called "Cut Off," and appropriately, nearby stations are called "The Leavings," "Ghost River," and "Spirit River." The train, like the community Lucy will climb to visit, is simply made from natural wood.

The landscape is nature perfected--"dark comely firs, shapely cedars," a "whitely brilliant" river with "fountains of springing water." A serious man, who has "lost his fountain pen," regards his surroundings with "slow sweeping glances which were also inward glances," actions indicative of the powers of observation and interiority or self-examination desirable in a poet or author. Impressions ravish Lucy, and "taste [is] the only faculty unemployed" (EW:SEL:50). In this revivifying water and vigorous air, "air that was like water or wine compared to earth or stone" (EW:SEL:52), Lucy experiences a "sense of well-being that

was beyond anything she had ever felt before" (EW:SEL:51). In this idyllic setting, free of all anxiety, walked "Indians and other people..., separately or together" (EW:SEL:51). In this Paradise, self-sufficiency and community co-exist without conflict. Racial discrimination does not exist. Disabilities are forgotten, and "even a crippled man...making his way on crutches by the river bank seemed to swing along in an easy debonair fashion and whistled as he swung" (EW:SEL:52). (It is significant that Ethel Wilson includes exclusion from pain in her conception of Paradise, as she was badly crippled for many years with arthritis.) People are noticeable for "the freedom and elasticity in their steps, and the certainty and serenity of their faces" (EW:SEL:52). Lucy feels, "We are free like birds" (EW:SEL:52), birds which will not destroy themselves crashing into reality or the illusion of reality. Because illusion, possibility, and change have ceased, this is a "country of truth."

But Lucy is recalled from her exploration of this intoxicating landscape by the very loud ringing of a bell: "Something in her spirit and spirits descended and became confused, and she remembered the time, and the train." Although her essences may have been dispersing, Lucy seems to have been temporarily recalled to mortality and temporality. The bright, previously buoyant air becomes "too strong for her and now [presses] her down,... the

dazzling jets of water...no longer [invigorated] her but [are] too strong" (EW:SEL:53). She has not come to know the language of the inhabitants. What was exhilarating becomes oppressive. Her Paradise becomes almost as a Hell, foretelling the Hell of impending separation from her husband. For when she gets on the train and finds "no-one there, ...her one desire [is] to get off." She does not wish to reboard the train of life if her husband is not also there. Jumping from the train, she lands on "the flat head of a large polar bear" (EW:SEL:55). She feels assured then that "this must be the true north" (strong and free? Are the northern expanses of Canada a paradigm for Paradise?)

Lucy may be beginning to apprehend some disadvantages to living in this country of the afterlife. Natural surroundings, which she so loves, are not normal. Animals such as polar bears are not dangerous. Worse, "living in this country would, of itself, inescapably exclude the memory of much sorrow and much joy that made up the uneven fabric of her life as she had known it" (EW:SEL:55).

Lucy scrambles to their earlier train, only to find once again that Marcus is not there. She returns with great difficulty to the steps and it "seemed as though she fell and lay there, on the tawny prairie" (EW:SEL:55). Did she really fall to a flattened landscape lying in fallow, or did she only seem to fall from the train of life to a death in life?

To understand Ethel Wilson's personal experience perhaps explains why it takes, in "A Visit to the Frontier", "a time," or an interminable "time and a time" before "all memory and strange pictures and confusion of human experience" (55) leaves her and she dies. After her husband, Wallace, died of a heart attack in March, 1966, Ethel Wilson wrote two lines to her publisher and friend, John Gray: "My darling died yesterday. How glad I would be to join him" (EW:SEL:248). Two weeks later, she refers to the dream she recounted in "A Visit to the Frontier": "Now I find it is too extraordinarily true--the transition--from life through death" (EW:SEL:248). Ethel Wilson's enormous feeling of loss can be gauged by the unrelieved sorrow she admits to in almost all of her future correspondences. When she tells Margaret Laurence, in September, 1968, that "Each morning I wake and long for my life and further life with Wallace" (EW:SEL:250), we recognize that she is experiencing the incompleteness of "death in life." In Spring, 1969, she still admires the beauties of "masses of daffodils, lovely things, and yellow forsythia," but continues in the following sentence to grieve, "I still long for real illness (e.g. heart etc.) that would take me off, and end this wearisome wasting condition of exhaustion, afflicted joints, annihilated memory etc. etc. and a perpetual longing for my Wallace. May you be spared anything like this--lost love, yet permanent" (EW:SEL:251). We know that Wilson voices her

own desires when she hypothesizes, "it may be that some of [those who die, will meet] again with a transfigured delight in that beautiful and happy country, with death past and over" (EW:SEL:55).

Just as Ethel Wilson witnesses an order and continuity in nature, so we have traced these qualities in her writing. As nature itself is detached, so the author too remains aloof. As the ever-changing surfaces of a landscape destabilize a view, make the viewer adjust his or her perception of reality, so the surface serenity of Ethel Wilson's writing destabilizes her reader, makes the reader reconstruct the novel.

Throughout her works, Wilson continuously searches for greater insight into the co-existence of humans and their natural and built environment. She uses a vocabulary of vision and of searching, but stresses that appearances can be deceiving to even the most experienced eyes. In analyzing Ethel Wilson's fascination with truth and illusion, Blanche Gelfant explains: "The confusion of lies with truth celebrates the story-teller's power to convince us of the reality of fiction. It also dramatizes the mysteriousness of life whose essence we cannot know with certainty."⁴

Indeed, people assume various personae throughout their lives, in accordance with the contexts in which they interact with others and with their environment.

Individuals such as Lilly and Mrs. Forrester attempt to structure their reality in much the same way that Wilson structures her novels, and discover that "Truth is so hard to tell...while fiction is the easiest thing in the world" (MG:111). People such as Lilly Hughes and Maggie Vardoe, by actively seeking change, actually become the projections of their imaginings. They do not permit themselves to be distracted by any temptations that would be at cross-purposes to their goal. Ethel Wilson shows her admiration for strong, purposeful individuals. We cannot be passive or flee from change and interaction as do Hetty Dorval and Mr. Willy. We cannot, like Vera Gunnensen, dwell on the past. Soothed, inspired and exhilarated by the beauties and continuing metamorphosis of our natural surroundings, we can learn to share in human sympathy and communication, and to face our fears of life and its passing. Then, despite chance or accident, we can actively seek to facilitate a world that allows us to experience what measure of happiness we can.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Ethel Wilson, Love and Salt Water (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1956), p. 99.
2. Ethel Wilson, "The Bridge or the Stokehold?", Canadian Literature 5 (Summer, 1960), pp. 43-47. Reprinted in Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters, ed. David Stouck (Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1987), pp. 103-107.
3. Epigraph to Hetty Dorval, taken from John Donne's "Meditation XVII."
4. Ethel Wilson, The Innocent Traveller (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1949), p. 255.
5. Ethel Wilson, The Equations of Love (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1952), p. 194.
6. Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1954), p. 100.
7. Matthew Arnold, "To Marguerite", quoted in Desmond Pacey, Ethel Wilson (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), p. 163.

Chapter 1

1. Ethel Wilson, Love and Salt Water (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1956), p. 98. All subsequent references to this text will appear in the body of the thesis as LSW.
2. Outlines for ideas later incorporated into The Innocent Traveller were found among the collection of Ethel Wilson's papers in Special Collections, at the University of British Columbia Library, and reported by David Stouck, in Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters, Introduction, p. xiv.
3. Ethel Wilson, "A Cat Among the Falcons", Canadian Literature 2 (Autumn, 1959), p. 16. Reprinted in Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters, pp. 94-103.
4. Ethel Wilson, The Innocent Traveller (Toronto: Macmillan, 1949), p. 255. All subsequent references to this text will appear in the body of the essay as II.

5. Ethel Wilson, "Somewhere Near the Truth", talk given Jan.24, 1957. Published in Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters. pp.81-91.
6. Sheila Watson, "What I'm Going to Do", Sheila Watson: A Collection. (Open Letter, 3rd Series, No.1, Winter 1974-75), p. 183.
7. F.T. Flahiff, "Introduction", The Double Hook, by Sheila Watson (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), p. iv.
8. Ibid., p. iv.
9. P.M. Hinchcliffe, "To Keep the Memory of So Worthy a Friend: Ethel Wilson as an Elegist", Journal of Canadian Literature, Vol.11, 2 (Spring 1973), p.64.
10. Ibid., p.64.
11. David A. Napier, Masks, Transformation and Paradox (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), p.12.
12. As discussed by Margaret Atwood in Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972).
13. David Stouck, "Ethel Wilson's Novels", Canadian Literature 74 (Autumn, 1977), p.82.
14. Ibid., p.77.

Chapter 2

1. Ethel Wilson, Hetty Dorval (Toronto: Macmillan, 1947), p.70. All further references to this work will appear in the text as HD.
2. Desmond Pacey, Ethel Wilson (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), p.149.
3. Desmond Pacey, p.51.
4. Underlining mine.
5. Desmond Pacey, p.51.

6. Beverley Mitchell, The Interested Traveller: Themes in the Fiction of Ethel Wilson (University of New Brunswick, 1976), p.22.
7. Howard O'Hagan, Tay John (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p.114.
8. Beverley Mitchell, p.99.
9. Desmond Pacey, p.56.
10. Bruce Hutchison, The Unknown Country: Canada and Her People (Toronto: Longmans, Green & Co., 1943), p.315.
11. W.J. Keith, "Overview: Ethel Wilson, Providence, and the Vocabulary of Vision", in The Ethel Wilson Symposium, ed. Lorraine McMullen (University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p.105.

Chapter 3

1. Ethel Wilson, The Equations of Love (Toronto: Macmillan, 1952) All further references to this novel will appear in the text as EL.
2. W.H.New, "Critical Notes on Ethel Wilson: For a Concluding Panel", in The Ethel Wilson Symposium, p.142.
3. David Stouck, "Ethel Wilson's Novels", p.79.
4. Bridgwater, William, ed., The Illustrated Columbia Encyclopedia, Vol.14 (Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 4164.
5. David Stouck, "Ethel Wilson's Novels", p.79.
6. Desmond Pacey, Ethel Wilson, p.112.
7. Desmond Pacey, Ethel Wilson, p.112.
8. Allan Pritchard, "West of the Great Divide: A View of the Literature of British Columbia", Canadian Literature No.94 (Autumn, 1982), p.108. Other writers such as M. Allerdale Grainger, Malcolm Lowry, Jack Hodgins, Roderick Haig-Brown, Cliff Kopas, Eric Collier, and Susan Allison also describe with almost Edenic imagery the splendour of the British Columbian landscape.
9. Eric Duncan, From Shetland to Vancouver Island, Recollections of Seventy-five Years (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1937), p.128, cited by Pritchard, p.128.

10. Dylan Thomas, "Fern Hill", in The College Survey of English Literature, Revised Edition (New Haven, Connecticut: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951), pp. 1337-1338.

11. David Stouck, in "Ethel Wilson's Novels", also sees the horse and hound as hunters.

12. Blanche Gelfant, "The Hidden Mines in Ethel Wilson's Landscape (or, An American Cat among Canadian Falcons)", in The Ethel Wilson Symposium, ed. Lorraine McMullen, p. 130.

Chapter 4

1. Ethel Wilson, Swamp Angel (Toronto: Macmillan, 1954), p. 93. All further references to this work will be included within the text as SA.

2. P. Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 89.

3. Ethel Wilson, "The Bridge or the Stokehold?", p. 46.

4. Ethel Wilson, Mrs. Golightly and other stories (Toronto: The Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1961), p. 64. Henceforth, all references to this work will be included within the text as MG. The story of "The Birds," also found in the Special Collections at the University of British Columbia Library, was part of the first draft of Love and Salt Water, describing Ellen's shock and guilt about extricating herself from Huw.

5. Michael Jackson, "Thinking Through the Body: An Essay on Understanding Metaphor", in Social Analysis 14 (1983), p. 135.

6. Alexandra Collins, "Who Shall Inherit the Earth? Ethel Wilson's Kinship with Wharton, Glasgow, Cather, and Ostenso", in The Ethel Wilson Symposium, p. 71.

7. Both James Potter, of The Double Hook by Sheila Watson, and Cy Pitt, of Mist on the River by Hubert Evans, descend a river to seek a new identity in a familiar town before returning to assume a new position in the community. Like Maggie, Ma Potter, in The Double Hook makes a metaphorical journey upstream.

8. A. van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, Trans. M. B. Vizedom and G.L. Caffé (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

- 9.T.S.Turner, "Transformation, Hierarchy and Transcendence: A Reformulation of Van Gennep's Model of the Structure of Rites De Passage" In Secular Ritual, ed. S.F. Moore and B. Myerhaff (Assen: Van Borcum, 1977).
- 10.Ethel Wilson, "Somewhere Near The Truth", talk given Jan. 24, 1957, recorded in Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters, p.87.
- 11.Paul Comeau. "Ethel Wilson's Characters", Studies in Canadian Literature 6 (1981), p.32.
- 12.Bruce Hutchison, The Fraser (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1950), p. 214.
- 13.Ibid., p.221.
- 14.W. J. Keith, "Overview: Ethel Wilson, Providence, and the Vocabulary of Vision", in The Ethel Wilson Symposium, p.108.
- 15.Ethel Wilson, "Somewhere Near the Truth", in Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters, p.89.
- 16.See Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters, p. 133.
- 17.Ibid., pp. 189-190.
- 18.Brent Thompson, "Ethel Wilson, Wary Mythologist", Canadian Literature 102 (Autumn, 1984), pp.31-32.

CHAPTER 5

- 1.Ethel Wilson, "Somewhere Near the Truth", in Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters, p.89.
- 2.Ibid., p.89.
- 3.Ibid., p.89.
- 4.Ibid., p.90.
- 5.Quoted in Desmond Pacey, Ethel Wilson, p.163.
- 6.Ethel Wilson, Love and Salt Water (Toronto: MacMillan Co. of Canada, 1956) p.5. All further references to this work will be included in the text as LSW.
- 7.Desmond Pacey, Ethel Wilson, p.162.

8. William H. New, "The 'genius' of place and time: the fiction of Ethel Wilson", Journal of Canadian Studies (November, 1968), p.46.

9. Edward A. Tiryakian, Sociologism and Existentialism, (N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p.67.

10. Matthew Arnold, "To Marguerite", quoted in Desmond Pacey, Ethel Wilson, p.163.

Chapter 6

1. In a letter to the managing publisher at Macmillan, Ellen Elliott, on May 28, 1947. In Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters, p.139. Further references to this work will be included in the text as EW:SEL.

2. Ibid., p.200. Letter of August 20, 1955.

3. Ethel Wilson, "A Series of Combination of Events, and Where is John Goodwin?", Tamarack Review 33 (Autumn, 1964), p.6.

4. Blanche Gelfant, "The Hidden Mines in Ethel Wilson's Landscape," in The Ethel Wilson Symposium, p.137.

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- _____. Mrs. Golightly and other stories. Toronto: Macmillan, 1961.
- _____. "Of Alan Crawley," Canadian Literature 19 (Winter 1964) : 32-42.
- _____. "On a Portuguese Balcony," Tamarack Review 1 (Autumn 1956) : 7-17.
- _____. "Reflections in a Pool," Canadian Literature 22 (Autumn 1964) : 29-33.
- _____. "A Series of Combination of Events, and Where is John Goodwin?" Tamarack Review 33 (Autumn 1964) : 3-9.
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