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Ethel Wilson's
Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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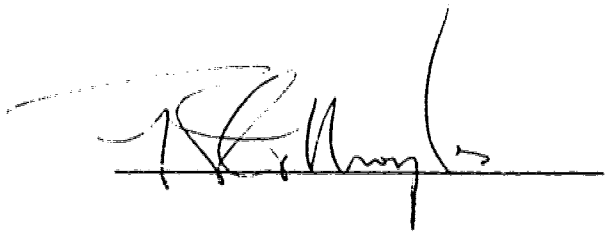

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Abstract

This thesis examines Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories, Ethel Wilson's collection of short stories. When Wilson began to write, modernism and genre were prevalent literary concerns. Thus, Mrs. Golightly shows an awareness of these issues by mingling traditional and experimental devices. It is consistent, however, in that it always illustrates the difficulties people face throughout life. Addressing these problems on a personal level, Mrs. Golightly explores themes of isolation and love, individualism and conformity, vulnerability and tenacity. Wilson presents her stories with unfailing wit and irrepressible style. Deceptively simple prose subtly integrate discriminating opinions about punctuation, irony, description, and symbolism. Although it includes a rich variety of well-written tales, Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories has not previously been the subject of an in-depth study. Therefore, this thesis approaches the book from a Formalist perspective which, focusing on theme and style, deals solely with the text.

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Introduction

First appearing in 1961, Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories is the last book published by Ethel Wilson and has been the least studied of all her works. Fictionalizing brief moments of insight with engaging style, it confirms that Wilson's reputation as one of Canada's superlative writers is well deserved. In the traditional, Formalist sense, her stories are truly well-crafted.

Her short fiction was not created as the result of a deliberate intention to write professionally. Rather, creating stories became an important rhythm, akin to eating and sleeping, which Wilson found necessary to repeat throughout her later adult life. She recalls,

> During the years before the war, 1937-38, I began to write. I did not contemplate a future in this occupation -- life as it was seemed already full -- yet now, for the first time, I found it imperative to write. (Wilson, "Cat" 16)

For her, writing short stories is an inherent aspect of living. And, as to how the stories arose in her mind, how they were created, and where they originated, Wilson herself cannot adequately explain. The closest she ever comes to outlining the origins of both her short fiction and novels is in the essay, "A Cat Among the Falcons: Reflections on the Writer's Craft." In it, she says,

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

Be it long or short, a story grows almost spontaneously in the artist's mind, and its genesis can only be explained as inspiration. Writing is, therefore, a very private and personal craft. But, once a piece is complete, its creator must acknowledge its independence and relinquish all possessiveness to gain what measure of objectivity is possible. Only then, at this point of separation, can a work of fiction exist in its own right, ready to be shared, appreciated, and, to some extent, repossessed by each member of the reading public. Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories, as a collection of numerous works, incorporates many incandescent moments and, as a result, is enjoyed and repossessed as a favorite by readers the world over.

Ethel Wilson is one of Canada's most brilliant authors. And yet, when describing herself, she does not acknowledge the importance of her role in Canadian culture. In fact, she says, "I am thinking

first and always as one of 'the Great Variety of Readers'; in a small but definite degree as a writer; but not at all as a qualified critic" (Wilson, "Cat" 19). With typical modesty, she downplays her own prominence and talent by highlighting her admiration for the abilities of others. Those she admires, and who respect her as an author in return, include such distinguished Canadian artists as Malcolm Ross, A. J. M. Smith, Mazo de la Roche, Dorothy Livesay, and Earle Birney. Margaret Laurence recalls, "She once said to me . . . 'There is a fountain in you. It will well up.' That was not only the most encouraging thing that had ever been said to me; it was also like a kind of responsibility, a trust" (Laurence in Mitchell, Wilson 10). For her contribution to Canadian literature, Wilson was awarded the Canada Council Medal in 1961 and the Lorne Pierce Medal of the Royal Society of Canada in 1964. Moreover, her works were translated into more than fourteen languages and sold internationally with great success. Finally, such well-known critics as Desmond Pacey, W. J. Keith, David Stouck, and Beverly Mitchell have seen in her fiction the insight and precision which distinguish excellence from mediocrity.

These and other critics regard her fiction from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives. They range, as Mitchell observes, "from the historical-biographical background suggested by P. M. Hinchcliffe's '"To Keep the Memory of So Worthy a Friend,"' to the archetypal analysis in Barrie Davies' 'Lamia: The Allegorical Nature of Hetty Dorval'" (Mitchell, Wilson 17). But the majority of articles, concerned with such traditional elements as character,

theme, structure, and style, utilize a Formalist approach. Since this thesis primarily examines theme and style in the short stories, it too adopts a Formalist approach. This somewhat old-fashioned theoretical perspective does not commit the fallacy of inferring authorial intention from the text. Nor does it conduct a deep psychological analysis of Mrs. Golightly and Other Short Stories. Nor does it seek evidence of latent feminism in Wilson's narrator. To the exclusion of politics, history, society, and biography, it deals solely with the text. Given that the stories are only mentioned as part of larger studies of all Wilson's works, and are independently addressed by only two articles, it would be premature to regard them from a highly specific, or specialized, viewpoint without having first assessed them from a general one. Therefore, it seems best to look at Wilson as a craftsperson, as a writer of stories in the traditional sense. From this viewpoint, we can say about the short fiction, as Desmond Pacey says about the novels, "Upon everything that [Wilson] writes is the mark of a fastidious and exigent craftsman: her art is quiet, gentle, controlled, exquisitely fashioned and finished" (Pacey, Wilson 15). Only after having achieved a qualitative conclusion confirming Ethel Wilson's skill as a writer of short fiction can we approach her short stories from a variety of critical directions.

Stemming from the type of epiphanies they themselves often describe, Wilson's stories are the products of a master craftsperson. Presenting the complex themes and accomplished style of one of the most skilled, decorated, and internationally famous authors Canada

has ever seen, they merit far more critical attention than they have received. They are, in the traditional sense by which the works of Thackeray, Austen, and Dickens were judged, undeniably good literature.

Chapter One
The Modern Short Story and Ethel Wilson

In a speech made at the University of British Columbia, Ethel Wilson modestly said,

> I have written a few short stories, and observe with respect and some pleasure the opportunity for economy of expression, for the recognition of line and contour, and the open opportunity for inference.
> (Wilson, "Address" 130)

Despite Wilson's reputation as a novelist, she actually spent a significant portion of her career writing short fiction. The opportunities she mentions refer in particular to the reduction of plot, interest in character, and manipulation of reality which delineate the modern story. Modernism was well established when she became an author, and her work reflects its impact. But her stories, which deviate from typical definitions of short fiction, also reveal a concern with genre. Showing her adoption and rejection of twentieth-century trends and theories, they inadvertently thrust Wilson into a critical debate.

Many modern authors, including Wilson to some extent, seem uninterested in plot. Paradoxically, this disregard is rooted in the late nineteenth-century, when the short story relied heavily on plot. Edgar Allan Poe says that plot prevents fictional narratives from

narratives from being mere fragments lacking both logic and significance. The prose tale is nothing without a strong plot, without the very "storyness" of the story. He defines plot as "that which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole" (65). It is an essential structural element around which a story develops, and all its parts are interdependent. Consequently, altering one aspect of plot alters it in its entirety. This interdependence stems, according to Poe, from its focus on achieving a "single effect" (61). The author, having conceived of a

> single effect to be wrought out . . . then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. (61)

Everything in a plot, right down to the individual words, must contribute to one desired impression. By focusing on a specific goal, plot creates unity and coherence. Transforming rambling text into a sequential series of events, plot was essential to nineteenth-century conceptions of the short story.

Toward the turn of the century, however, critical opinions of plot markedly soured. On the magazine circuit, plot climax was responsible for the dominant impression made by a story. But when it was incorporated into the formula for conventional story-writing, people associated it with literary mediocrity (Marler 171). Plot began to depreciate, and has continued to do so, until "At the present time 'plot' has become a pejorative term, reserved for

stories intended to evoke a simple kind of suspense" (Stroud 117). Moreover, the contrived nature of the single-effect plot, with its tendency to create highly artistic and unrealistic stories, only exacerbates negative critical reaction. Thus, it is not surprising that by the time Ethel Wilson began to write, plot had begun to be demoted from the short story's mainstay to a derided device reminiscent of unconvincing fiction.

As a result, the modern story is often accused of lacking plot. Al Bader, in his article, "The Structure of the Modern Short Story," says that its apparent lack of narrative structure makes it seem "fragmentary, and amorphous" (109). Manipulation of the timeline, including such devices as the flashback, further illustrates the unpopularity of sequential narratives. But, while modern short fiction differs most from its nineteenth-century predecessors in terms of plot, it is not plotless. Rather, its technique is far subtler. Plot is demoted to one of many narrative elements, such as tone, characterization, theme, and mood. Some of the antipathy between plot and realism is resolved by making the story less formulaic, less artificial. The twentieth-century author realizes that life is not always neatly organized into meaningful series of incidents but is frequently absurd. Retaining conflict, the only aspect of the "single effect" which is realistic, the modern plot is understated and sparse. Chekhov, Joyce, Anderson, and Mansfield are similar in "their minimal dependence on the traditional notion of plot and their focus instead on a single situation in which everyday reality is broken up by a crisis" (May, "Chekhov" 201). Therefore,

the "storyness" of modern short fiction can be, if nothing else, obscurely articulated.

Modern definitions of the story focus on what James Joyce called "the epiphany." By its very length, the short story demands a subject which establishes the primacy of an experience directly and emotionally encountered. Unlike the novel, which provides its characters with one long life, short fiction creates many "moments" of life. Nadine Gordimer writes that "The short story doesn't deal in cumulatives." It does not aim at "the moment of truth," but at "A discrete moment of truth" (Gordimer 265), thereby complementing subjectivity. Lifting incidents and characters out of the continuum of life, a story suspends them in the present. This "eternal moment" prevents narrative from being a tattered fragment; it provides plenitude and totality. In addition, it usually presents some knowledge to the characters which, regardless of whether they accept it or not, permanently changes them. Not a few critics regard the "moment of truth" structure as the canonic form of the modern short story.

This form is enhanced by the twentieth century's increasing interest in character. Whether expressed indirectly or explicitly, a focus on people, on character, is fundamental. In "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction," Charles E. May states that "the field of research for the short story is the primitive, antisocial world of the unconscious, and the material of its analysis" (133). Unprecedented interest in psychology has influenced literature to the extent that contemporary short stories typically dissolve the

superificial rhythms of life "into the purely psychic" (May, "Chekhov" 206). Or, at the very least, the superficial is enslaved to the psychic by what T. S. Eliot termed the "objective correlative" (May, "Chekhov" 202). An objective correlative is created when an internal, emotional state is expressed through the presentation of external, concrete details. Thus, a narrative can appear to be about something tangible when its underlying meaning is actually quite abstract. Chekhov created such an illusion of psychological reality by finding an event "that, if expressed 'properly,' that is, by the judicious choice of relevant details, will embody the complexity of the inner state" (202). Reality is thus significant merely for its psychological implications. Hemingway adopted the objective correlative to the extent that he completely refrained from narrative comment and remained consistently outside his characters. Like an iceberg which exposes one sixth of itself above water, his characterizations, if not his narratives, provide the reader with only one sixth of the story. Therefore, content which the text obscures or omits is at least as important as the text itself. And character, even when absent, is always prominent.

This focus on the individual renders the modern short story highly subjective. In "The Lonely Voice," Frank O'Connor proposes that "the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community--romantic, individualistic, and intransigent" (88). As a small, independent unit, it is ideally suited to depict individual perspectives. Moreover, characters in the short story exist in their essential aloneness, not in their social roles. Without any one

perspective being privileged over another, and lacking any faith in one grand "Truth," short fiction can only problematize objective knowledge. May says it "throws into doubt our idealizations of the 'interchangeability of standpoints' and the 'congruence of relevance systems'" ("Knowledge" 137). What is fact to one character is illusion to another, so that nothing can be known for certain. Subjectivity thus destabilizes the entire notion of reality.

Modern explorations of the notion of reality are rooted in the nineteenth century. At that point, the belief that right and wrong are distinguishable, and that people are what they appear to be, first began to erode. Art acted as a catalyst for this erosion when Wordsworth and Coleridge attempted to make the old seem new. That is, by presenting familiar objects and situations unconventionally enough in poetry, they could make those same objects and situations seem unfamiliar. They recreated the excitement of newness, "awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us" (Wordsworth in May, "Knowledge" 141). When art defamiliarizes the everyday to make it significant, it questions reality and suggests that both perspectives, the familiar and the unfamiliar, are valid. Conflicting and contradictory viewpoints exist simultaneously. If, as May points out,

> one feels that immanent in the everyday exists some other reality that somehow evades him, if one's view is religious in the most basic sense, then the short

> story is more "realistic" than the novel can possibly be. (141)

The subjective ego can present illusion as fact in a story because, unlike the novel, other characters are unlikely to interfere. Modern short fiction's focus on characterization can therefore address issues of appearance and reality more frequently, and in greater depth, than the novel.

Although some critics locate the development of the modern story between 1935 and 1955 (Pratt 99), others such as Charles E. May trace it back to Chekhov and the Impressionists. In his article on Anton Chekhov, May asserts that

> The primary characteristics of this new hybrid form are: character as mood rather than as either symbolic projection or realistic depiction; story as minimal lyricized sketch rather than as elaborately plotted tale; atmosphere as an ambiguous mixture of both external details and psychic projections; and a basic impressionistic apprehension of reality itself as a function of perspectival point of view. ("Chekhov" 199)

In simplified terms, modernism pares the story down, reducing it to a fundamental core stripped of extraneous details. Characters are frequently depicted through mood, creating enough ambiguity between

external and internal worlds to question the objective nature of reality. Ultimately, impressionists such as Chekhov see the story as a hazy, eventless "becoming."

However, being able to describe modern aspects of the short story does not make the problem of defining it as a genre any easier. Although genre should ideally be aesthetically based, the term is applied at different levels and according to different criteria. Nineteenth-century attempts at definition seized upon limited length, the short story's most obvious distinguishing feature. The quantitative approach was first introduced by Poe, who states that the short story, since it is entitled "short," should ideally "[require] from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal" (Poe 61). That way, fatigue and interruption are unlikely to detract from the impact of the work. Poe assumes, however, that people read at a uniform speed, and that most readers have the same tolerance for prolonged concentration. His definition is also based on shortness, which is not an aesthetic quality, and therefore cannot be used to classify the story as a genre.

Structuralist theory claims that genres are always defined relative to one another. Since the short story is a genre pre-dating the Bible and rooted in myth and fairy-tale, it could be argued that it is largely independent and may have greatly influenced the growth of other, younger genres. But, at least in terms of its present form, the short story is dependent too. Mary Louise Pratt goes so far as to say that, because it shares plot, characterization, and narrative viewpoint with the novel, it is more dependent than other

categories of writing. "The novel," she writes, "has conditioned both the development of the short story and the critical treatment of the short story, but the reverse is not so" (Pratt 96). Perhaps this one-way relationship developed because the novel is older than the modern short story and acts as a well-established contrast for its brief successor. Regardless, the story's dependency is frequently interpreted as immaturity. Often perceived as a training ground for amateur authors aiming to write longer prose, short fiction is labelled "lesser." Thus the definition of the short story as a genre relies not only on aesthetic qualities, as it ideally should, but is complicated by brevity, relativity, and quality judgements. Definition on such slippery ground is treacherous to say the least.

Wilson's awareness of the slippery questions posed by modernism and genre is amply illustrated in Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories, as well as in her letters and essays. Her short story plots, while largely imitating modern trends, are nevertheless somewhat old-fashioned. Like Poe, she recognizes the importance of plot, and especially those plots involving external action, as a means of achieving coherence and unity. "Hurry, hurry," for instance, shows how a woman unwittingly escapes from a murderer. Similarly, "Fog" reveals the effects of crime and random violence, and "From Flores" tells the story of a ship's being lost at sea. Not only do they focus on action and traditional notions of suspense, but these stories only include details relevant to a single effect created by the plot. Despite this conservatism, however, the majority of

stories in Mrs. Golightly illustrate Wilson's awareness of modern theories. She knows that contemporary plots focus on internal emotions rather than the external, and they reach a climax when the protagonist experiences a "moment of truth." Mrs. Golightly achieves this clarity in her final conversation with Mrs. Gampish. For the first time at the Convention, she is honest and stops pretending to be someone she is not.

> "I want to tell you, Mrs. Gampish," said Mrs. Golightly with true humility, and speaking very low, "that I have never been to a Convention before, and I want to confess to you my stupidity. I am not really rude, only stupid and so shy although I have three children that I am truly in a whirl. Will you ever be able to forgive me? . . . It would be very kind of you if you feel that you could. Oh, please do try." (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 22)

Only at this point, at the height of the story, does Mrs. Golightly learn that she will succeed best by being herself and not trying too earnestly to conform. Other stories likewise illustrate Wilson's familiarity with James Joyce's "epiphany," in which so many modernists were interested. But, unlike many of her colleagues, she does not subscribe to any particular theory. Combining nineteenth- and twentieth-century plots, her stories are uniquely nonconformist.

Characterization in them is similarly ambiguous. Without going

emotional conflict and, ever-so-cautiously, on the realm of the unconscious. The dissolution of superficial routines into the purely internal life of an individual is best exemplified by "Mr. Sleepwalker." It tells the story of Mary Manly's departure from everyday reality into the realm of her own paranoia and self-delusion. Achieving an unusual mixture of the psychic and external in this story, and creating a conflict between the presentational self and the "real" self, Wilson's characterization is distinctly modern. But her interest in modern psychology is limited. In "An Address to the Students of the School of Architecture, U. B. C.," she complains, "now that psychological states and reactions, [and] streams of awareness have moved in, structure frequently seems to be blown away by psychological emotional weather" (Wilson 131). Having noticed this danger inherent in the modern focus on emotion, she advocates moderation. Only then can characterization be balanced and well-rounded rather than leaning overwhelmingly in one direction. Wilson's interest in psychological characterization is merely one aspect of a broader interest in people. In an interview with Dorothy Livesay, she says, "of course a thing . . . fundamental, for a writer, is to have an interest in people, to centre as it were your whole eye and mind on people" (Livesay 36). Wilson wants to know not only about people's emotions but about their clothes, homes, families, jobs, behaviors, opinions, idiolects, histories, and educations. She is fundamentally a humanist, and it is this perspective, in conjunction with modern psychology, that renders her characterizations well-rounded and convincingly realistic.

Wilson's qualification of modernism extends to the objective correlative. While she does not use the objective correlative nearly so often as Hemingway, she is aware of it and employs it in a number of stories. For example, "Haply the soul of my grandmother" ostensibly describes a tour through Egyptian tombs and a subsequent bout of flu, but it actually explores the ambiguous emotional impact of time's magnitude and of cultural difference. This story, among many others in Mrs. Golightly, creates a sense of mystery, of menace, of something immanent, by submerging meaning beneath the smooth surface narrative. Since the objective correlative involves inanimate things representing emotions, values, and events, it closely resembles symbolism. And, since Wilson frequently criticizes symbolism, it is reasonable to assume that she had similar reservations about the objective correlative. She describes:

> Some years ago a student of the art or craft of the short story attended classes held by a young visiting lecturer and delighted me. The young lecturer was himself going through the "symbol" stage, and injected the awful power of symbol even into the trivia of the short story. Symbol became only a fashion and the stories became overloaded. The student was bewildered. He said to a friend of mine, "With all this symbol, I've got so that I can't look at a boiled egg without blushing!" This impedes work, as well it might. (Wilson, "Address" 130)

While acknowledging the "awful power" of symbolism, Wilson obviously thinks that the innocuous boiled egg, and other such "trivia," ought to remain just that. In addition to lending realism to the story, they are important in themselves. Wilson does not subscribe to the modern idea that the tangible is relevant only for its implications of the intangible. The objective correlative, then, is important because it creates layers of meaning, but it also holds great potential for pretention, and that is why Wilson uses it sparingly.

On the other hand, she does not hesitate to regularly use subjectivity. Her narrators and protagonists frequently describe their situations from highly individualized, if not humorously unique, perspectives. For instance, "The Birds" illustrates the subjective perspectives of both Cora and her sister, who says,

> How un-loving and un-trusting Cora must have thought me, because she did not know I think, that I had to protect myself. It is no wonder that she felt repulsed, and became, as before, so unaware, and thus I came to live again in the annex of my sister's mind. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 70)

In this statement, the narrator's interpretation of Cora is not only biased but assumes that Cora's interpretation of her is equally skewed. Self-interest prevents any comprehension of one another's motives or emotions. Without objectivity, they cannot sympathize with one another and have no choice but to remain isolated within

subjective perspectives which amount to little more than fantasy and assumption. As previously mentioned, this level of subjectivity renders objective knowledge unattainable, thereby destabilizing the characters', as well as the readers', notions of appearance and reality. In her essay, "Somewhere Near the Truth," Wilson writes about a man and woman, saying,

> "We never exchanged a word. They never saw me and I do not exist for them. . . . Yet I seemed to know wherein the fabric of their lives consisted. I say "I seemed to know," but, as far as I am concerned, I knew" (Stouck 88).

Although she admits that the subjective perspective on which she relies is based on imagination, Wilson nonetheless considers it real. And, conversely, her non-existence is real to the man and woman. In her work, therefore, all perspectives, no matter how contradictory, are equally valid, and objective knowledge ceases to remain significant. Like Wordsworth before her, Wilson employs art to make the familiar unfamiliar, to explore the overlap between illusion and reality, and to question life as we know it. Through individualism, she addresses a Romantic fascination with reality in modern terms.

In her stories, she also addresses issues of genre, albeit indirectly. The stories do not fit the usual definition for short fiction and deviate from the examples set by such traditional authors as Poe and de Maupassant. Although some of the works in Mrs.

Golightly and Other Stories exhibit strong plotlines, there are many which could easily be called plotless. "On Nimpish Lake," for example, verges upon being a sketch, or vignette. Two brothers row around the lake, enjoy the scenery, put in to shore for lunch with Mr. Leander, glimpse freedom in his urban confidence, and row off again feeling slightly alienated from their natural surroundings. With a focus on mood and emotional atmosphere, minimal conflict, and all but nonexistent action, this piece treads a fine line between genres. More obvious exceptions to the typical short story definition can be found in "'To keep the memory of so worthy a friend'" and "The corner of X and Y streets," which resemble travel writing far more than fiction. The former depicts a pilgrimage which Wilson and her husband, Wallace Wilson, made to the church of St. Mary the Virgin Aldermanbury, where Heminge and Condell, who compiled the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, are buried. Apart from the Wilsons' difficulty locating the church, the narrative is not conflict-based and largely resembles a nonfiction, creative essay. "X and Y" is about a moment of magic clarity Wilson experienced while watching some buskers perform during a sight-seeing visit to London after World War Two. Once again, there is little plot. By including these pieces, which are questionable as stories, and seem to be vignettes or travel writing, Wilson invokes genre as an issue for debate.

Because she includes the above-mentioned exceptions to the short story while excluding a travel essay entitled "On a Portuguese Balcony," we know she was keenly aware of genre. When presenting the

idea of a collection of short stories to John Gray, her editor at Macmillan, Wilson wrote, "Of course there is the Portugal piece that was in the first Tamarack [Review], but though it had good points I thought it was a bit smarmy. And it couldn't be called a 'story'" (Stouck 212). This quote proves that the decision to include in Mrs. Golightly stories which verge on the vignette and the essay was well-informed, thoughtful, and wholly justifiable. Although we don't know the criteria upon which she based her definition of the short story, this comment reveals nonetheless that Wilson knew enough about the genre issues surrounding it to develop her own definition. Instead of indicating a disregard for the short story as a genre, deviations from the norm, such as "On Nimpish Lake" and "The corner of X and Y streets," show how knowledge about genre determined the content of Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories.

The relationship between Wilson and genre is further examined by Desmond Pacey, who identifies three subcategories of story which occur in Mrs. Golightly, including the humorous, the horrific, and a third group, which blends both humor and horror. Pacey proposes that the comedies include "Mrs. Golightly and the First Convention," "God help the young fishman," and "I just love dogs." Then humor and horror are fairly evenly balanced in "We have to sit opposite," "A drink with Adolphus," and "Truth and Mrs. Forrester." However, the majority of stories develop an unremitting sense of horror, beginning with "Haply the soul of my grandmother," and continuing through "From Flores," "The Birds," "Fog," "Hurry, hurry," "Mr. Sleepwalker," "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...beware the Jubjub Bird," "Till death

us do part," and "The Window" (Pacey, Wilson 30-1). Although Pacey's subdivisions are reasonable, and useful in analyzing the stories, the frequency with which they overlap is problematic. For instance, Pacey, identifies "Beware the Jabberwock, my son..." as horrific, but it can be quite funny at times. By comparison, "God help the young fishman" is supposedly humorous, but it could also belong to the category combining humor and horror because the concluding sentence, "Sometime he will take the fish knife to the whole lot of them" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 55), lends sinister implications to the whole story. But, in all fairness, Pacey himself admits, "the categories are far from rigid: even the most purely humorous stories have undertones of horror, and the horrible ones are lightened with irony and tenderness" (Wilson 31). The overlap that forestalls any clear and universal definition of the short story similarly prevents the assertion of subcategories within that genre.

Debate surrounds the idea that short fiction is, for Ethel Wilson, an immature genre. Some critics, like Pratt, who consider the short story extremely dependent on the novel, think Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories amateurish. For example, knowing that Wilson wrote short fiction before she attempted writing novels, Dorothy Walker says, "most of the stories are too short and perhaps too slight to allow Mrs. Wilson to wield her charm as effectively as she does in her longer works" (Walker 69). Judging the stories relative to Wilson's novels, Walker considers the former inferior. However, as Walker's redundant use of "too short" and "too slight" proves, length is not a prerequisite for charm. Instead of being a

preparatory genre, short fiction is the literary form which best suited Wilson. Since she began writing stories in 1937, with "I just love dogs," and persevered until "A Drink with Adolphus" was published in 1960, short fiction spanned her writing career. We know that her novels represent a concerted effort to conform to a longer genre because every single one had its genesis in short fiction. The Innocent Traveller was submitted to Macmillan as a collection of stories and, although they were streamlined "to create a continuous narrative, the discrete units of short-story writing remain evident" (Stouck 212). Hetty Dorval, Wilson's first attempt at long fiction, could not be stretched beyond a novella, and she comments that she could not bring herself to write anything longer. She says, "Long on style and short on story. How true" (Stouck 173). And indeed it is true for The Equations of Love, which is not a novel but two brief novellas. Swamp Angel was developed from three stories, one about a swimmer, one about Chinese market gardeners in the Fraser River delta, and another about a woman journeying up the Fraser Canyon. Lastly, Love and Salt Water stemmed from a story about a female violinist entitled "Miss Cuppy." The final proof that the short story is, in Wilson's opinion, a challenging and mature genre rests on the fact that she only published Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories at the end of her career; only then did she feel experienced enough as a writer to edit them for collected release. They were her triumphant finalé.

Finally, Wilson's interpretation of genre departs from aesthetics to focus on content and style. Within the larger category

of the short story, she identifies subcategories which she also recognizes as genres. She writes to John Gray, "My genre is very limited. It seems to be uneasy human relations and 'Nature' and 'things' with relation to People. Not exactly animism but tinged with it" (Stouck 186). In this statement, she contends that her focus of interest in the short story is invariably people, and this focus encourages her to see everything, from nature to inanimate objects, only in terms of their relevance to people. One would expect, from the first sentence of this statement, that she would talk about her limitation to one type of prose, such as short fiction, long fiction, or the essay. But she simply uses the term "genre" to clarify her preferred type of subject. Moreover, Wilson uses genre to describe style. She said to Dorothy Livesay, in "Ethel Wilson: West Coast Novelist," "My first story, written in the thirties, was in the 'asinine genre'" (Livesay 20). As a comedy of errors, "I just love dogs" bases its humor on the stupidity of its characters. By identifying this specific type of humor as a genre, Wilson expands genre's meaning to include not only categories of writing and content but of particular styles. Tone, desired effect, irony, and rhetorical devices, among other stylistic elements, could therefore influence genre. Employing genre at once broadly and specifically, Wilson is not content to circle the periphery of theoretical debate but, in an unassuming and personal manner, enters into critical inquiry herself.

When Ethel Wilson began writing the works which later composed Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories, short fiction in general had

deviated greatly from nineteenth-century traditions. Following the trends of modernism, it focused on character and mood instead of plot, epiphanies instead of action, and became elusive in its economy and fragmentation. This elusiveness was only exacerbated by critics' inability to determine exactly why, and according to what criteria, short fiction could be considered a genre. In the midst of such growth and change, Wilson wrote stories both unique and typical. Grounded in tradition but obviously embracing modernism, they represent neither conformity to fashion nor thoughtless reproduction of the past. What they do represent is an exploration of the issues she saw facing short fiction as a genre and, more significantly, as an art.

Chapter Two
The Polarities of Theme: Coming to Terms with the Human Predicament

Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories shares with Ethel Wilson's longer works of fiction an abiding interest in the illogicality of human nature; its disturbing yet appealing juxtaposition of congenial and repellent characteristics. The epigraph from Edwin Muir, "Life '. . . is a difficult country and our home'" is appropriate for a collection whose themes reflect the paradoxes encountered in everyday existence. As Beverley Mitchell states, "[Wilson] illustrates those factors which make life 'difficult,' at the same time establishing principles which are demonstrably practicable for coming to terms with the human predicament" (Wilson 46). Based upon polarities of isolation and love, individualism and conformity, vulnerability and tenacity, her themes are an exercise in perspective. Indirectly defining humankind's place in the universe as a delicate balance, they suggest that reality as we know it may be nothing but an illusion concealing more divine possibilities.

All of Wilson's themes are developed through her characters. The protagonists in her short stories are frequently, but not exclusively, women. The women are usually upper middle class, white, married, and middle-aged, but their names vary from Mrs. Golightly, Mrs. Gormley, Mrs. Manly, and Miriam, to Mrs. Forrester, who appears in "Haply the soul of my grandmother," "We have to sit opposite," and "Truth and Mrs. Forrester." These protagonists all hail from Vancouver and are frequently alone because their professional

husbands must travel on business. Five of the nineteen works in Mrs. Golightly feature male protagonists, and "A drink with Adolphus" focusses upon both male and female characters. Transgressing not only boundaries of sex but those of age and class, Wilson also identifies with a ten-year-old boy, Captain Findlay Crabbe of the Effie Cee, a fish merchant, elderly Mrs. Bylow, a rejected spinster who is possibly a lesbian, and a young female shop assistant. This imaginative flexibility permits Wilson to write stories of nearly universal appeal and astonishing diversity.

Her protagonists are united, though, by isolation, if not by outright alienation. As expected, this feeling of isolation sometimes occurs when no one else is present. Mrs. Bylow in "Fog" "frequently sat alone and lonely." Age, "taking advantage of her solitariness . . . closed down upon her like a vice, no, more like a fog" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 103). Symbolic of her withdrawal into herself, this fog prevents people from reaching her as much as it restricts her view of the life which passes her by. Similarly,

> Mr. Willy was too often alone, and spent far too much time in that space which lies between the last page of the paper or the turning-off of the radio in surfeit, and sleep. Now as he stood at the end of the evening and the beginning of the night, looking at himself and the room behind him, he admitted that the arid feeling which he had so often experienced lately was probably what is called loneliness. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 203)

In Wilson's fictional world, aridity always indicates an emotional barrenness which stems from a lack of true connection with others. After attempting to withdraw into himself and sever all ties with life beyond his window, Mr. Willy must finally admit that he is not self-sufficient. He must change his lifestyle and attitude "Not for fear of death oh God not for fear of death but for fear of something else" (211). That "something else" is loneliness, and if it worse than death, Pacey is correct in observing that "The sense of individual isolation is the chief difficulty of 'the difficult land'" (31).

The type of isolation which occurs most frequently, however, is the isolation which characters experience when they are not alone. It too is traumatic and thematically important. In "God help the young fishman," for instance, the fishman is objectified by his customers into a mere instrument of service, while he in turn regards them as annoying representatives of self-indulgence. Both fail to recognize and embrace their common humanity. The presence of others can induce a sense of alienation which proves that being lonely is not at all synonymous with being alone. In "Hurry, hurry," for instance, Miriam only feels vulnerable and isolated when a man appears walking towards her. "In all their walks upon the dyke before Allan went away, they had never met another human being. Miriam was startled. She was almost afraid" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 114). Until he appeared, she was absorbed in the beauty of her surroundings, undisturbed by isolation and enjoying the freedom afforded by privacy.

Wilson further examines aloneness as a state of mind by repeatedly implying that one can be most alone in a crowd. When Mr. Willy is not alone, he is at parties "given by people younger and more animated than himself, and he realized that he was on his way to becoming old odd man out" (202). People make superficial small talk and play bridge but do not connect in any meaningful way. They are generic representatives of sex and number, as Mrs. Wardho points out by saying, "'I need a man for Saturday'" (201). Mrs. Gormley is equally alienated at Adolphus' party. As if being surrounded by strangers who have full mobility (unlike her) and being inanely talked at by Mr. Leaper weren't isolating enough, she appears to be the only normal person present. As a contemporary answer to forlorness, the party is exposed in all its futility. Similarly, when Cousin Max visits Mrs. Forrester in "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," his physical proximity cannot bridge the distance between them. "Her heart was, as always now, consumed with its anguish yet not consumed. She had seemed to attend with customary politeness" (123). Although Cousin Max does not cause her loneliness, his self-satisfied complacency serves as a painful contrast which throws it into relief. The loneliness of Mr. Willy, Mrs. Gormley, and Mrs. Forrester "is intensified as the presence of others augments rather than mitigates [their] original insecure solitude" (Clarke 57).

Isolation can also result from a sense of personal difference. This difference may be as minor as an unfamiliar social setting, such as Mrs. Golightly's convention, or it may be as profound as culture shock. Beneath our amusement at Mrs. Golightly's discomfort lies a

serious theme addressing the sense of being "out of place" among the members of one's own society. Precisely because it is her society, and she should therefore feel like a member of it, Mrs. Golightly is all the more devastated by her feelings of alienation. "[Tom] did not know how terrified she was of the Convention and all the crowds of people, and that she suffered at the very thought of going" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 10). Although it creates some humorous moments, her fear of not "fitting in" with the sophisticated convention wives is very real. More serious social isolation is illustrated in "Haply the soul of my grandmother." Mrs. Forrester is driven to the verge of hysterical panic by the alien nature of Egypt and its people:

> 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. (27)

The immense historical span of Egyptian culture, even more than its unfamiliar geography and society, threatens to overwhelm Mrs. Forrester's understanding of her own identity. A similar sense of cultural isolation can be observed in "We have to sit opposite." But this story is sinister because it depicts not just a foreign attitude

but one which is aggressive and inhumane. Confronted by the totalitarian mentality of a German family on a train, Mrs. Montrose and Mrs. Forrester are first amused and then increasingly horrified. As Pacey says:

> The Germans become the embodiments of all the prejudice and cruelty of Nazi totalitarianism, and we realize that the space between the train seats symbolizes an unbridgeable gulf between two ways of life. (Pacey 32)

Although we can call it cultural, the type of alienation Wilson addresses here is actually mental. Culture, nationality, and religion are merely the external indicators of perspective, and it is the alienation of different perspectives which concerns Wilson so deeply. We seem unable to overcome an essential solitude.

To bridge the gap between the seats, and the gulf between people, one must find mutual love. Indeed, it is the best way to overcome that chief difficulty of "the difficult land." Love can take many forms, but for most of Wilson's protagonists it can be found in marriage. When Mrs. Forrester discusses her husband in "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," she says:

> "One of the things I adore about your Uncle Mark . . . and one of the reasons why I cannot endure his still being in China, and life is not life without him, is that truth is never distorted

> between your Uncle Mark and me. . . . There is nothing that intervenes.
> (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 117-8)

Remedying that loneliness which is worse than death, marital companionship makes life worth living. Because they understand one another, and can therefore enter into each other's perspectives, Mr. and Mrs. Forrester escape isolation. Since fourteen out of the eighteen works in Mrs. Golightly feature married protagonists, it is safe to assume that marriage was, in Wilson's eyes, a primary means of preventing alienation.

Nevertheless, her appreciation of marriage is qualified. Marriage without true love, and the meaningful companionship it offers, is a poor remedy for isolation. If one marries without this essential love, marriage can be a very unhappy institution. Wilson recognizes this reality in "Till death do us part," which concludes with the protagonist's writing:

> I don't say I'd really choose Peterborough Edwards and I never thought I'd turn to Peterborough on account of these circumstances but he might be a comfort and anyway, what can you do.
> (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 195)

The young woman, frightened by the isolation she sees Kate endure with her alcoholic mother, turns to the very man who she sought to

escape by leaving Portage La Prairie. She marries him not for love, but because she is lonely and would seek security with anyone. Rather than a triumphal statement of joy, this concluding sentence is a gesture of defeated resignation in which the narrator relinquishes her independence, courage, and hope. Such inauspicious beginnings can only produce poor results, as Wilson illustrates in "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...beware the Jubjub Bird." Tom is desperately unhappy because

> Some time after their marriage, he became aware that sweet Dolly was stupid. She talked far too much. She could and did bore him almost daily. (156)

Gloomy and irritable, he emotionally withdraws from her, and they become more isolated in marriage than they were before. By illustrating her awareness of such marital pitfalls, Wilson reveals that her largely positive view of marriage is not blind approval but rather a faith in love. And, since, the highest ratification of companionship that our society offers is its institutionalization as marriage, marriage is the perfect medium for her message.

Although love in all its manifestations is complex, it makes life worthwhile. By illustrating that characters are particularly liable to be hurt by the very people they love, Wilson acknowledges that emotional intimacy is not unproblematic. For instance, when Mrs. Golightly loses sight of Tom at the convention, "A lump that

felt large came in her throat because she was so shy" (12). Despite being caused inadvertently, such pain cannot be avoided: it is a risk one takes for love. The narrator of "The Birds" shows how much easier it is to reject love instead of letting one's guard down. She says:

> There were two things that I could do. I could hold onto my pride and not reveal myself; or I could yield to my desire to lean upon my sister's shoulder and accept her love, and weep, and weep, and always regret it. (69)

She chooses to safely conceal her emotions so that she will not later fear being hurt by her sister as she has been by her fiancé. While this attitude is logical, it is completely unrewarding and prefigures a life of deadening sterility. Beneath this apparent pessimism, however, lies the idea that the fear and pain inextricable from vulnerability are good because without them we cannot love. In fact, "From Flores" demonstrates that it is better to love at any cost than not to love at all. In this story,

> The little plunging boat was now the whole world and fate to Jason and to Fin Crabbe and to the Indian boy but not to Ed who had no fear. Perhaps he had no fear because he had no love. (48)

Without love and its corollary of fear, Ed is less than human, even less than animal. Jason, Fin, and the boy, as far more attractive characters, imply that if fear is the price of love, then it is worth paying. Without love we lose the essential human capacity for compassion, imagination, and fulfillment.

A thematic preoccupation with the relationship between isolation and love inextricably engenders concern about the role of the individual in society. This, then, is another major theme pervading Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories. Almost without exception, Wilson's characters are independent, original thinkers. The freedom afforded her female protagonists is especially noteworthy considering that the stories, written between 1937 and 1961, preceded the advent of second-wave feminism. The narrator of "Till death us do part," for example, moves from Portage La Prairie to Vancouver by herself, thereby assertively rejecting a suitor, and is self-supporting. She has no romantic delusions, until the ambiguous conclusion, about traditional female roles, and no intention of acting them out. This is not to say that she, or any, of Wilson's female protagonists espouse radical feminist values, but they nevertheless reflect feminism's increasing impact on Canadian society. Revealing this impact from a personal, rather than a political perspective, Wilson is most concerned with the nature of female identity. Mrs. Golightly, in "Mrs. Golightly and the First Convention," achieves a clearer sense of herself as an individual not defined by either her children or her husband.

> The entrancement of the sea and sky and wind and the strong playing bodies of the seals so transported Mrs. Golightly that she forgot to think, Oh I must tell the children, and how Tom would love this! (18)

Symbolizing freedom and change, the playing seals act as a catalyst to her development, so that she can soon say, "Now I'm not a bit afraid to be me" (23). Moreover, because she discovers her separate, independent identity in a moment of forgetfulness, Mrs. Golightly indicates that gender roles are the product of superficial social expectations, while individuality is essential.

Indeed, characters of both sexes reject social conventions to access their unique identities. Searching for personal freedom, Mr. Willy in "The Window" leaves his wife in England and retreats behind a window in Vancouver.

> 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 (and such a window), thought Mr. Willy. (198)

Not only does he think he can participate in life isolated behind glass, but he thinks that life looks better from behind it. He can largely retire from civilized life, its blue-haired, bridge-playing ladies, and its futile social chitchat. Permitting him unusual

control, the window represents a form of emancipation. Many of the stories indicate that Wilson sympathizes with such drastic individualism, and, to some extent, she does. The temptation to throw off the burden of duty, work, conformity, and the numerous other demands of society is strong. In "A drink with Adolphus," she seems to approve of, and identify with, Mrs. Gormley's stolen moment of self-indulgence.

> In ten cents' worth of time, [Mrs. Gormley] thought - and she was very happy islanded, lost, alone in this sight - there's nearly all the glory of the world and no despair. (73)

In this moment, as well as in many others, themes of individualism and isolation converge. Indeed, individual freedom is usually predicated upon isolation, and Wilson acknowledges that part of freedom's attraction is its dismissal of society with all its inherent problems.

Yet, while she does not propose subordination of the self to the human community, neither does she dismiss society's benefits. Wilson's society reflects Vancouver in the nineteen forties, when British notions of culture and social propriety predominated. As W. H. New states in his conclusion to The Ethel Wilson Symposium:

> Traditional uppermiddleclass rituals . . . constitute for the author . . . a public enactment of the cumulative values of civilization, part of a social contract that she

> regards as a necessity to carry on.
> (New, "Critical Notes" 142)

Without personal commitment to family, friends, and the community, society cannot function. And, despite its limitation of individual freedoms, it protects the interests of a majority of people by providing them some degree of order and safety. Social institutions, such as marriage, contribute to this achievement, as Wilson illustrates in "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...beware the Jubjub bird." After abandoning his wife, Tom comes to

> the certain knowledge of a bill to be paid. He knew without doubt that at home his wife lay awake, frightened, hurt, bewildered. He saw her very presence, small and crumpled in the bed. Pity invaded him and he tried to push pity away. He must go back.
> (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 169)

This section verges on the didactic. Pointing out Tom's awareness of both his commitment to a stable society and, more importantly, his commitment to his wife, Wilson implies that to uphold a social contract is to be moral. Unless people can compromise, civilized society in Mrs. Golightly, let alone in the real world, will disintegrate.

But, having said this, I think Wilson's opinion is far more complex than simple compromise. By advocating neither extreme of individualism or conformity, she challenges conventional views of both. Her story, "We have to sit opposite," deliberately deconstructs stereotyped representatives of individualism and conformity to show that no generic or fixed role for the individual in society is possible. Where the reader expects familiar values to merely be confirmed, they are challenged. By the end of the story, Mrs. Forrester's

> mind was greatly disturbed. Why had they permitted themselves to be baited? She pondered on the collective mentality that occupied the seat near to them (knees almost touching), and its results which now filled the atmosphere of the carriage so unpleasantly. . . . The whole absurd encounter had begun to hold an element of terror. They had been tempted into folly. She knew - as she screwed up her closed eyes - that they were implicated in fear and folly. (66)

Mrs. Forrester recognizes that the fascists' communalism is not solely to blame for the "fear and folly." She and Mrs. Montrose, by responding to folly with folly, are also responsible. Characters who initially seem to represent oppositional philosophies are ironically revealed to be quite indistinguishably confused. For example, by defending Canada so unnecessarily, the ladies exhibit excessive

nationalism, and by adopting the Germans' behavior, they additionally exhibit a basic human communalism. When Mrs. Forrester realizes that they "have gone too far," it is too late, and their only answer is to keep their "eyes shut tightly" (66). The problem is not differing philosophies but the shortsightedness, if not the blindness, of dogmatism.

Perhaps, then, Wilson's goal is not to propose any generic or fixed role for the individual in society. Rather, she encourages each character, and thereby each reader, to judge and improve herself before criticizing others. When co-existence with other people proves constricting, individuals must first consider how they might change to improve the situation. In "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...beware the Jubjub Bird," Tom

> could have wished Dolly to be more intelligent. He did not think of enlarging that wish to include himself and it did not occur to him that love and intelligence - or their lack - might have any relation to each other. (158)

While apparently sympathizing with Tom about his stupid wife, Wilson uses irony to indicate his own mental shortcomings. Acknowledging the temptation to judge others, which is easy, she nonetheless concludes that taking personal responsibility, the more difficult approach to life, is essential. This story, as well as most others in Mrs. Golightly, thus satirizes the realities of Anglo-Canadian culture. Performed with gentleness and humor, Wilson's satire is not

so strident as to threaten the reader but is acerbic enough to challenge established opinions. Clarke comments:

> No false moral indignation is permitted to smoulder; the middle class reading public is invited to question its own motives which often lurk undiscovered under an altruistic front. (Clarke 119-20)

Wilson knows that no one is free of guilt or liberated from making mistakes. Therefore, she fictionally presents universal errors, such as "moral indignation" and its consequences, to instruct the reader. Since self-righteousness has no place in the ever-fluctuating relationship between personal freedom and membership in society, responsibility is the satirical lesson of this theme.

Given that individuals must negotiate their own degree of liberty in community, Wilson's universe is highly subjective. In the midst of this confusing relativism, nature provides perspective. As a tangible, largely static reality, the natural environment literally "grounds" characters who otherwise feel overwhelmed by elusive and changeable human relationships. In her thesis, "A World in a Grain of Sand: An Appreciation of Ethel Wilson: A Canadian Writer with Identity," Dorothy Walker observes:

> the immanent forces of giant mountain, bare prairie, barren tundra, and rocky shield, all combine to keep reminding us of the comparative inconsequence and mortality of man. (Walker 110)

The magnificence and immensity of nature dwarf humans and their concerns, reminding us that our problems are not the largest things in life. Wilson's awareness of the larger environment prevents her, and the reader, from exaggerating the scope or importance of human tribulation. As a humbling force, nature encourages us to be open-minded and makes us aware of other points of view. Consequently, in Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories, environment is not simply a large element but an enlarging one integral to perspective.

In the short stories, environment can reflect the theme of isolation but usually serves as familiar companionship. In Wilson's fictional universe, being somewhere alone is not isolating, but estrangement from one's environment is. "Haply the soul of my grandmother," shows Mrs. Forrester

> [reflecting] again that [Egypt], where insects carried curses in their wings, made her uneasy. It was too old and strange. . . . But then, she thought, I am far too susceptible to the power of Place.
> (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 33)

Foreign geography, flora, and fauna possess the ability to make Mrs. Forrester distinctly uncomfortable. Strangeness, or unfamiliarity, is interpreted by her as a "curse." On the other hand, when characters are firmly identified with a familiar and beloved environment, they feel at home. Substituting for human companionship, place has the power to mitigate their loneliness.

Mrs. Forrester, for instance, thinks, "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" (33). The Canadian landscape offers her the security and companionship of home. Moreover, if characters find themselves in alien surroundings they cannot leave, their efforts to "fit in" intensify. Despite being intimidated by the world of the convention, for example, Mrs. Golightly attempts to make it her place by becoming more superficial and outgoing. In other words, she models herself on her surroundings. The need to have a place of one's own is fundamental, revealing that while humans are not territorial like animals, we are nevertheless products of our environments.

Ethel Wilson herself is a product of British Columbia. From the age of ten, she lived in Vancouver, and its impact upon her art is noticeable, especially in her longer works of fiction. The stories are only slightly less regional, with eleven of the eighteen pieces included in Mrs. Golightly set in Vancouver, two set outside the city but within the province, and with the remainder featuring Vancouverite protagonists. In "The Bridge or the Stokehold?," she says:

> my locale . . . 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. (Wilson 44)

However, her descriptions of British Columbia are not to be dismissed as just local color. In "'To Keep the Memory of So Worthy a Friend': Ethel Wilson as an Elegist," P. M. Hinchcliffe supposes that regionalism is

> an essential part of Ethel Wilson's writing because [it forms] the matrix in which the universally human conditions and actions of her characters take on their specific significance as the actions of a particular place and time. (Hinchcliffe 62)

While Hinchcliffe is correct, in that specificity makes Wilson's work more interesting, the opposite is also true. Specific actions located in a particular context gain importance because they signify universal human experiences and truths which transcend place and time. This paradox permits Wilson to be at once regional and universal, making the best of both worlds.

Her regionalism is not, however, indicative of an undiscriminating love of British Columbia. On the contrary, Wilson loves the wilderness but dislikes the city. The narrator intrudes in "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...beware the JubJub Bird" to describe nature as "Arcady" and the city as its antithesis. She says:

> (Among the advantages of cities there lie lurking massive areas of boredom waiting for inexpert dodgers. In cities there are no ponderosa pines with the children running calling between and the place so quiet that the loons'

> laughing and crying ejaculations sound clearly even from far up the lake. There are no dangers of any kind for these children on that mountain except bears and the occasional cougar which cannot compare with the dangers of cities. There are no traffic jams, no tall or squat buildings staring with nothing but right angles not even an inferred curve, no mass meetings, no mass appeals, no mass advertisement, no mass uglification, perhaps no mass destruction, no mass anything, no . . .). (159)

Wilson's criticism of everything urban from advertising, traffic, and architecture, to crime is vehement. As far as she is concerned, people and their civilization do not make British Columbia a wonderful place to live in and write about; it is everything free from human contamination which is so precious. She sees how nature liberates people from an existence regimented by time, work, school, and technology. "The Birds," for instance shows how one thin pane of glass can mean the difference between living in arcadian natural beauty and in a state of vulnerability and death. From her urban vantage point of disillusionment, the protagonist looks out the window to the lawn where

> Between the trees a path sloped down toward the beach and over all the sun shone. The trees were full of birds. Little birds cast themselves into the air as if they were wild with joy. (69)

The birds symbolize a magnificent free will at the heart of nature from which people are so frequently separated. As Wilson's regionalism attempts to point out, the natural world can act as a source of personal renewal in the urban existence we call life.

Once we can identify with nature, we stand a better chance of subsequently identifying with other people. Land and people are, after all, related aspects of any individual's context. In "Haply the soul of my grandmother," Mrs. Forrester temporarily achieves a moment of clarity and a sense of union when she sees Egypt's people and land as one:

> In the faint pearl of morning, peasants issue from huts far apart. The family . . . file to their work between the lines of pale green crops. There again is something hieratic, ageless, in their movements as they file singly one behind the other between the green crops, as the figures on the frieze had filed, one behind the other. Here and there in the morning stand the white ibis, sacred, unmolested, among the delicate green. How beguiling was the unawareness, and the innocency. Then, in that morning hour, and only then, had she felt no fear of Egypt. This scene was universal and unutterably lovely. (34-5)

The natural beauty of the country incorporates its populace, allowing Mrs. Forrester to recognize their attractiveness. She also overcomes

her sense of alienation by momentarily seeing the land and its people as a landscape painting, or frieze. Since landscape art is universally accepted and not threatening, "picturing" Egypt is easier for her than relating to Egypt as a country. Like the visual art it invokes, Wilson's literary art renders wilderness more accessible. It also illustrates that one of the aims of literature, as Northrop Frye states, is to bring mankind back into closer communication with nature (Frye, Imagination 12-3). Whereas literature could be expected to intervene between humans and their environment, it acts as a catalyst to their relationship. Examining the thematic sense of place in Wilson's work, Helen Clarke concludes that "It is Mrs. Wilson's belief that nature . . . stimulates and satisfies the poetic and aesthetic need in man, refreshing and comforting" (Clarke 19). Wilson's writing pays tribute to nature as the ultimate muse and confirms once again that art is but nature's follower.

Yet, even as she recognizes the positive aspects of nature, Wilson warns against it. She does not approve of a complete retreat into "Arcady" and away from society. Nature's predatory, and sometimes harsh, reality is not overlooked by her. Even the little bird so "wild with joy" "each day . . . dashed itself against the real glass and fell, with its mouth split and its bones broken by the passion of its flight" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 70). Freedom cannot assure it safe flight, just as an appreciation of nature in no way guarantees reciprocal kindness. On the contrary, it is completely unreliable. Samuel Robinson points out that Wilson, like Thomas Hardy, uses nature to create an unsympathetic, indifferent setting

for man's puny adventures. "From Flores" graphically illustrates how the elements act out their own agenda regardless of their effect upon people. "The storm rapidly accelerated and the waves, innocent and savage as tigers, leaped at the Effie Cee and the oncoming rollers struck broadside and continuously" (48). Be it in the form of tigers or water, nature acts out its own agenda in complete self-absorption. The plight of a small ship on a vast ocean symbolizes the human condition in which control over destiny is limited. Beyond actively trying to survive in a powerful and indifferent universe, one can only hope for luck.

Such emphasis on nature's superiority should not be confused with an emphasis on physical action. Despite the fact that much Canadian writing has been preoccupied with the land or sea, and consequently with setting and physical action, Wilson does not fit this tradition. As Dorothy Walker observes, Wilson develops characters who are not merely human manifestations of geographical forces (Walker 34). In fact, she usually reduces natural phenomena to an objective correlative to human emotion. For instance, while Tom is submerged by "waves of frustration" in "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...," "the sky had become darker, for clouds had begun to creep up over the edge of the hills and were invading the whole saucer of sky that capped the glowing valley which now had a different aspect" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 152). Wilson is not merely interested in the storm but in its psychological implications and emotional reverberations. Conversely, a character's response to nature provides a basis for moral judgements. When Mrs. Golightly and Mrs. Carillo see the seals in "Mrs. Golightly and the First Convention":

> They shouted at each other, laughing with joy, but could not hear each other, and stood arm in arm braced against the wind, looking down at the playing band of seals. (18)

The seals' happy frolicking proves infectious, and the two women reflect the animals' joy. Harmony with nature indicates moral goodness in a character and vice versa. Wilson's sense of place thus provides an important perspective on the natural world; how it influences us, and the ways we relate to it.

As it is ever-present in nature, human vulnerability is ever-present in Mrs. Golightly. The most obvious thing to which humans are vulnerable is violence, and the short stories, including everything from deliberate murder to senseless accident, are more violent than the novels. Man's inhumanity to man is illustrated in "Mr. Sleepwalker" when, for no apparent reason,

> Mary snatched up a small bronze vase, and hit the man hard upon the side of the head. He looked at her with infinite surprise and reproach, swayed, and sank to the floor. (142)

Her aggression is reprehensible in itself, and more so because Mr. Sleepwalker is defenseless. Despite possessing the capability to resolve conflict through logic and communication, humans continuously

resort to violence as a solution. Even middle-class, well-educated, and sociable Mary Manly is not above stooping to the lowest common denominator. With this event, and many similar ones, Wilson explores the evil inherent to humans, and the motives behind its eruption. "A drink with Adolphus" shows how an apparently civilized, self-controlled individual can suddenly become violent. The change only appears abrupt because, as Mr. Leaper explains in his diary, it occurs internally:

> I will mention an item in the paper that has touched and moved me very much tonight. A man in Illinois or Iowa is undergoing trial for the murder of his wife. The thing that impressed me was that he and his wife had seemed to live a devoted and harmonious life together. (83-4)

Motivated by such intangibles as accumulated frustration and a constriction of freedom, movement towards violence is rarely obvious. Mr. Leaper will only express his murderous inclinations in his diary because he fully comprehends that society will not condone them. Unable to trust ourselves, let alone our loved ones, we humans are indeed defenseless.

War is a larger example of the evil which results from mankind's involvement with man. It is a corporate aggression, for which no one individual may be held responsible, and it is therefore more difficult to control and eliminate. World war, which Wilson twice

endured, provides a backdrop for "Mr. Sleepwalker" and "We have to sit opposite." Although it cannot be pinpointed as the cause of conflict in each story, it certainly provides an atmosphere conducive to aggression. The violence that fascist totalitarianism imposes is especially insidious because it is mental as well as physical. In the latter story, Mrs. Forrester

> pondered on the collective mentality that occupied the seat near to them (knees almost touching), and its results which now filled the atmosphere of the carriage so unpleasantly. . . . What of a world in which this mentality might ever become dominant? Then one would be confined with it without appeal or relief. (65-6)

Simply sharing a railway compartment with a fascist family upsets Mrs. Forrester, and the physical violence of which this collective mentality would be capable is unthinkable to her. To prevent such a corporate evil as Nazism, war is justified. A short period of violence to achieve peace and freedom for all is the lesser of two evils.

Even when violent conflict is unavoidable, however, both parties must accept responsibility. No matter how justified it is, retaliation is always a choice one makes and for which one is held accountable. Mrs. Forrester, for example, thinks:

> The whole absurd encounter had begun to hold an element of terror. [She and Mrs. Montrose] had been tempted

> into folly. She knew - as she screwed up her closed eyes - that they were implicated in fear and folly. (66)

Despite the Germans' inconsiderate rudeness, the ladies are at liberty to choose their reactions. Without thinking about consequences, they decide to retaliate in kind, returning rudeness for rudeness. By discarding compassion and charity, they only exacerbate the problem and are equally responsible for the unpleasantness. Incapable of creating peace, war can breed only evil and more war. Beneath their complacent exteriors, then, Mrs. Forrester and Mrs. Montrose possess the same "heart of darkness" as their enemies. We must all learn to "sit opposite" our own evil, and to respond to it constructively. Shutting one's eyes to it, or looking for it in someone else, only makes the task of distinguishing evil from good in society more difficult.

Violence on both interpersonal and corporate levels only occurs in Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories because Wilson's fictional universe is ruled by chance. Anything can happen to anyone at any time, as a proliferation of accidents attest. Regardless of planning, calculation, and caution, chance events impose themselves, often changing the course of a character's life for good. In her article, "Companion in a Difficult Country," Helen Sonthoff writes, "The course of any life, in Ethel Wilson's work, can be, and often is, suddenly altered by the most trivial-seeming circumstance" (Sonthoff 103). Chance becomes causality, linking together

incongruous chains of events. For instance, Mrs. Bylow dies because, "on the fifth day of fog," she "needed a cup of cocoa and she had no cocoa" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 105), so she goes to the store, which is being burgled. Her untimely demise is all the more tragic because it is senseless, and is all the more frustrating because if any element of her day had been different - if she hadn't felt like cocoa, if she hadn't run out of it, if she had gone to another store, if she hadn't entered during that exact minute - she wouldn't have died. But "There's no protest, no rationalizing, no philosophical speculation" (Sonthoff 102) because Wilson does not share the reader's frustration. Accepting chance as a defining feature of life, she can matter-of-factly observe that Mrs. Bylow is "wiped out by forces quite outside herself like a moth in a storm" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 109-10). Wilson is not interested in violent acts as such, but rather in their psychological implications. Violence easily replaces all meaning and purpose with incomprehensibility and a sense of futility until, stripped of their security, people are reduced to vulnerability and instinct. Since pain is more frequent and prominent than pleasure in Ethel Wilson's fictional world, it is easier to notice evil, sorrow, futility, and the tragedy of human existence than to discover a reason for hope.

Everyone encounters tragedy, accident, or unhappiness at some time and must decide how to cope with it. Many of the short stories' protagonists do not cope well, and their unpleasant fates are often foreshadowed as a result. Mary Manly's hysterical panic in "Mr. Sleepwalker" not only causes her to unjustifiably injure someone but

makes her a victim of circumstance throughout. This helplessness is made explicit in the conclusion:

> "My...! my...!" stammered Mary, and sprang to her feet. She stood for one moment looking down at Mr. Sleepwalker. Then she turned and the patients saw her running like a hare out of the ward. (150)

Whereas Mr. Sleepwalker's self-control makes him a fox with survival skills, Mary's timidity renders her a hare to be preyed upon. She ultimately exacerbates the problems chance presents. Nothing is quite so destructive as the fearful indecision easily exploited by chance. As Helen Clarke affirms:

> The only defence man has against an indifferent providence and a seemingly malicious chance rests in his own inner strength to react with equanimity, thought, and vigour to the unexpected, the unwelcome, the unjust. (Clarke 33)

Self-assertion which combines reason and emotion enables humans, despite their vulnerability to external forces, to declare their individuality. For instance, when Mrs. Gormley is confronted by the odd society of Adolphus' friends, including the young man who offers her a kiss, she reacts with a mixture of good humor and common sense, saying, "'I need a kiss badly. I think it would do me good. How did

the moonlight feel? And then will you get me a taxi. I want to go home'" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 78). Although the odd social situation is a mild example of chance, the manner in which Mrs. Gormley conducts herself exemplifies the confidence bestowed by emotional integrity and intelligence. Making the best of a poor situation, each person has the responsibility to try to succeed regardless of "an indifferent providence." In the existential world of Ethel Wilson's short fiction, only the fittest seem to survive.

This harsh reality can only be tempered by compassion. Her approval of self-assertion does not prevent her from also approving compassion for the unfortunate, the helpless, and the victimized. Without love to provide courage, and compassion to dignify the human condition, Wilson's characters would lack motivation to live vigorously. In "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...," the description of Dolly waiting for Tom reveals a sympathetic imagination. Wilson writes, "She turned out the light, curved herself into the habitual curve that followed Tom's body, and in the dark she began to cry" (173). Although Dolly is not an intelligent or assertive character, and would probably fail any existential tests, she merits pity. It is not enough to be strong and decisive: to survive one must also have love and compassion. They are the qualities which, providing hope and faith, distinguish humans from animals.

However, Wilson's most sympathetically presented characters do not subscribe to a blind humanism. Undiscriminating compassion has the tendency to embrace the "morally weak, the lazy, the stupid and the habitually and criminally careless, fostering at best a dull

mediocrity, at worst a superiority of coercion" (Clarke 23). Supporting such undeserving "victims" would contradict the idea that, within the scope afforded by an indifferent providence, each person is responsible for herself. "Till death us do part" illustrates how the blind acceptance of good qualities, such as love and compassion, perverts them into negative qualities. The narrator thinks of Kate "and that mother going on for ever and ever together and no escape till death comes for one of them, whatever way it comes, but some way death will come" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 195). Out of a mistaken sense of duty to her abusive alcoholic mother, Kate compromises the possibility of her own successful survival. Love and compassion are not sacred in a reality which requires selective action. While such a policy is sometimes cruel, it is neither indifferent nor undiscriminating.

Despite the proliferation of accident, coincidence, and selective action in Ethel Wilson's work, not all critics agree with Helen Clarke that she adheres to existential philosophy. In A Sense of Style, W. J. Keith writes:

> In the formal sense, Wilson's books are all comedies celebrating continuity and coherence--not divine comedies, to be sure, but aspiring towards a sustaining spiritual dimension. (Keith, Style 45)

Contrary to the bleakness of chaos, Keith sees signs in Wilson's fictional reality of an overarching and regulated, if still

mysterious, pattern. This pattern implies that an eternal world beyond human understanding but not beyond human experience influences life on earth. "The Window" presents the idea that

> there might be some meaning in creation, which Mr. Willy supposed must be the place where some people seemed to find God, and perhaps a personal God at that. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 204)

Since Mr. Willy's life is saved by his perception of the Divine, we can infer with some certainty that Wilson's beliefs largely informed her work. Although this aspect of it can be called "religious," it does not follow the philosophy of any organized religion, and would therefore be more accurately called "spiritual." Her spirituality cannot, however, be disregarded as an old-fashioned sentimentalism. Brent Thompson notes, in "Ethel Wilson, Wary Mythologist":

> Wilson is not just a remodeled nineteenth-century romantic searching for transcendence. . . . She is a twentieth-century writer in that she strives to reconcile that very necessary urge with Einstein's relative universe of lonely, subjective islands of humanity. (25)

Spirituality lends her optimism in an era of disillusionment, enables her to see mythic overtones in the subjectivity of a relativistic reality.

Rather than following any beliefs, or obeying any particular dogma, her characters live for brief moments in which they feel, even if they do not know, the meaning of life. The entirety of "The corner of X and Y streets" describes one such inspirational moment, and at the end the narrator writes, "I do not understand these things but for ten minutes there had been something simple and complicated and timeless on the corner of X and Y streets" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 93). For a brief moment, she experienced a vision of something eternal and true which transgressed logic, hinting at the existence of a Divine reality. Such flashes of inspiration, while short and infrequent, reverberate through a character's life and can permanently alter his/her perspective.

In his thesis, "The Novels and Short Stories of Ethel Wilson: An Examination of her Symbolic Technique," Samuel Robinson goes so far as to suggest that Wilson's mysterious spirituality constitutes mysticism. He suggests that, to counter death's negation of life and to affirm the beauty of existence, Wilson believes in reincarnation. "Haply the soul of my grandmother" shows Mrs. Forrester thinking that the elderly mendicant attempting to sell her a "mummy hand" is "too remote in being, but he was too close in space" (31). Later she wonders, "Marcus, whose was that little hand . . . whose was it?...Did it ever know you...did you ever know that hand?" (35). Pointing to these examples, Robinson questions whether there is "a bond, a mystical association, between this Egyptian, old and strange, and Mrs. Forrester, modern and socially proper?" (76). Could the soul of Mrs. Forrester's grandmother, or some past associate of

Marcus, who is "dark" and "Phoenician" in appearance, reside in the hand (Robinson 77)? The transmigration of souls would explain the affect Egypt has on the protagonist, and it would complement Wilson's belief in a larger, eternal reality. Moreover, it would question death's finality with an optimistic, if not irrefutable, alternative.

But this argument seems altogether too convenient. First, Wilson is not so determinedly optimistic as to avoid or ignore the unpleasant facts of life. On the contrary, as my previous discussion illustrates, she is well aware that the human condition is largely tragic, and develops the tragedy as a theme pervading Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories. While she is open-minded in general, and ostensibly could espouse a belief in reincarnation, "Haply the soul of my grandmother" does not. When she thinks the mendicant "too remote in being," Mrs. Forrester simply means that his cultural orientation is completely foreign to her. His effort to sell a dead human's hand, rather than reducing her alienation, only exacerbates it. Moreover, Wilson never suggests that the hand could hold the soul of Mrs. Forrester's grandmother, and Marcus' Phoenician appearance simply points out that he may have Egyptian heritage. By asking him whose hand it is, Mrs. Forrester refers to his military service in Egypt, wondering whether the mendicant is a charlatan selling not a mummy's hand but that of a First World War casualty. While many mystical scenes and stories throughout Mrs. Golightly promote the idea of an ultimate truth lying beyond man's limited comprehension, Wilson "favors an intelligent, flexible acceptance and enjoyment of the natural, social, and individual worlds" (Clarke

121). Never do her characters live in hopes of an afterlife. They live for the joy to be found in nature and mutual love, and for brief epiphanies confirming the presence of the divine in mortal existence. The subjective truth of the present that each individual must discover and live by is, to Wilson, far more interesting than the possibility of one all-encompassing inspiration in the hereafter.

The means by which she approaches human truth is language. But not all language is equal, and Wilson distinguishes limited, mundane communication from that with greater potential. While language should ideally form a bridge between people, it can easily separate them by creating misunderstandings. In "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," for instance, Mrs. Forrester relates a conversation she had with Mrs. Lee Lorimer Smith, in which the latter misinterpreted her altogether:

> "I said a terribly stupid thing. I said, 'Do you like Dylan Thomas?' And Lee stopped short and said, 'Do I like what, who?' and I said, 'Dylan Thomas,' and Lee said 'Does he live in town?' and she was terribly upset and thought that there was someone I knew and she didn't, and she said 'For goodness sake Fanny, if this Thomas man is nice, do bring him to dinner. . . . sometimes I do need an extra man so badly.'" (Mrs. Golightly 126)

By missing Mrs. Forrester's reference to the famous poet, Mrs. Smith exhibits her own ignorance. And, from what she says, and how she says it, the reader can infer that she is petty, trivial, and

narrow-minded. Conversation is thus carried out on three levels, one about poetry, one about dinner guests, and the other about the two women's incompatibility. Superficial "small talk" is ultimately damned by Wilson because all her chattering characters are annoyingly vacuous. In "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...," Dolly stupidly says, "'I simply can't tell you...'" but nonetheless "proceeded to tell her. Dolly talked all afternoon" (154). Talking conceals both her lack of anything important to communicate and her loneliness, if not her spiritual sterility. Speech thus becomes a shield and disguise instead of a tool for approaching truth. The overuse, or abuse, of talking for social rather than communicative purposes forestalls any genuine, lasting pleasure.

Wilson is a self-conscious storyteller, drawing attention to the act of writing through her work and questioning whether language can approach anything verging on the truth. The characters of her stories tell their own stories, like Mrs. Forrester informing the Germans in "We have to sit opposite," "In Canada I have a bear. I have two bears" (61). By withholding true stories and concocting false ones, the Canadian women assert their independence and construct their own version of reality. Reflecting the author's ability to present fantasy as fact, they encourage the reader to question what is true. In "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," for example, the latter says:

> "I don't object to truth being stranger than fiction . . . what I object to is that truth is so hard to tell, while fiction is the easiest thing in the world." (116)

Whereas the truth can be unpleasant, lies can make life easier and are generally more palatable. Their predominance in language is reflected by fiction's dominant position in literature. In spite of being a writer, Wilson recognizes the unreliability of words and does not trust them. When characters find communication and union it is, ironically enough, in silence. Two people's ability to be silently companionable indicates that they know each other so well as to not require speech. Mrs. Forrester says "that truth is never distorted between your Uncle Mark and me, whether we talk or whether - I assure you - we stay whole days silent like male and female Trappists" (118). She implies that language is only necessary for mundane, practical matters and cannot do justice to those which are more profound.

The storyteller's confusion of lies with truth dramatizes how indistinguishable illusion and reality really are. If truth seems stranger than fiction, and fiction seems convincing, nothing is certain. "Objects and facts have really no existence in themselves, depending for their being on individual recognition and interpretation" (Clarke 104). Logic assists humans in their attempts to distinguish reality from illusion, to use empirical knowledge to prove the validity of their perspectives. In "I Just Love Dogs," the narrator says:

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

> the dog, and the next minute there was the dog alive and gone, and us all feeling pretty silly. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 89)

When the crowd's perception is proven false, they get "the queerest feeling" because it had informed their sense of identity, both as individuals and as a community. Challenging their assumption that "seeing is believing," the dog actually reduces their concept of reality to mere perception. The opening paragraph of "Hurry, hurry" eloquently describes the powers of perspective in nature.

> For a few moments of time the austerity vanishes, and the mountains appear innocently folded in furry white. Their daily look has gone. For these few moments the slanting rays curiously discover each separate tree behind each separate tree in the infinite white forests. Then the light fades, and the familiar mountains resume their daily look again. The light has gone, but those who have seen it will remember. (111)

In this description, Wilson suggests that no isolated interpretation is adequate. To comprehend life as fully as possible, and in all its possible beauty, a flexible outlook is ideal. Multiple viewpoints enable one to better comprehend and adapt to the tenuousness of reality. As the world changes, and as we change along with our perceptions, everything becomes relative.

Having searched for one absolute truth, many of Wilson's characters realize that the only thing which is real and enduring is change. Holding forth the promise of an absolute standard by which to measure individual interpretations of virtue, honesty, and reality, truth symbolizes perspectival security. In "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," Laura smugly thinks, "We do understand what each other means, and what is true, and what is false, and what is terribly . . . ridiculously funny" (117). Being young and confident, she imagines she has found the truth. But, after considering that "in order to preserve one's integrity - that is, truth - one proceeds to act, which is to lie" (117), she is plagued by doubt. How does illusion necessitate reality, and vice versa? The quest for truth is an endless, repeating riddle which cannot be answered. People are most inauthentic when they think they know the meaning of life and most real when they confess to doubt. Because it is unnerving, doubt displaces smugness and forces people to ask questions which may never have occurred to them before. In "The Window," for instance, doubt haunts Mr. Willy everywhere:

> There was a good deal of wood ash at these parties--that is, behind him the spectre arose, falling to pieces when he looked at it, and said, "So this is what you came to find out on this coast, so far from home, is it, or is there something else. What else is there?" (202)

While Mr. Willy is attempting to sequester himself away from life, and leads a boring existence, the spectre of doubt disturbs his complacency. Forcing him to seek a fulfilling spirituality despite himself, doubt is an invigorating force with unexpectedly positive implications. It encourages the growth critical for survival on an orbitting, spinning planet which fosters the evolutionary cycles of birth, growth, and death in species which endure continuous mental and physical flux. Where there is no stasis, there can be nothing absolute, and the sole truth is change.

In other words, reality can only be found in what people do, what happens to them, and how they relate. In Mrs. Golightly, Wilson records how people survive, despite their innocence, on the brink of an uncertain existence and an unpredictable future. Her perspective, which Desmond Pacey describes as "the innocent eye" (Pacey, "Innocent" 42), sees hope, beauty, and wonder even while it registers the toll taken by tragedy and violence.

Chapter Three
The Intricacies and Ironies of Style

Like de Maupassant, O. Henry, Somerset Maugham, and Anatole France, whose styles she greatly admired, Ethel Wilson writes with an "artlessness that is very artful indeed" (Wilson, "Address" 130). Although she is not a self-conscious stylist in her short stories, she is a conscious one. Aware of writing as a craft, its intricacies and possibilities, she deliberately concentrates on style. But education and effort would not enable her to achieve such admirable prose if she was not already an innately intuitive stylist. For her, then, to learn about style is to cultivate a natural ability. Focusing upon Wilson's literary technique in Mrs. Golightly, this chapter examines her prose to discover what makes it unique, extrapolates stylistic motives from elements of the text, and derives her attitude toward symbols from essays and letters.

Wilson herself admits how difficult it is to be a writer. A love of language, and a wish to use it skillfully, are no guarantees against poor writing. As she comments to Pacey, aspirations do "not mean that I cannot make a fine and awful mess of writing--for there is usually a wide span between what one does and what one would desire to do" (Stouck 184). To excel at her craft, she must constantly reassess and revise an original draft until it becomes a finished product. Moreover, revision is guided by the ideas of economy, precision, and clarity. Writing to Margaret Lawrence about editing, Wilson comments: "About 'excess verbiage'--I have run into

several aspects of Elizabeth Bowen's statement lately--'for the form's sake, one must make relentless exclusions,' and I think it's awfully true. Awfully true" (144-5). In other words, well-written material, or material that the author simply likes, is deleted as frequently as the poorly written when its inclusion is not essential to a story. Fulfilling her literary potential is not, for Wilson, always an easy task but a relentless one.

Wilson attributes her skill as a writer to education and reading. By education, she does not mean taking classes in creative writing. In "A Cat Among the Falcons," she actually says:

> . . . the course known as "Creative Writing" renders me uneasy and year by year I am apprehensive lest the results in our country may be marked by a current mode or--contrariwise--a straining after difference, and lest our writing may become derivative and undistinguished. (Wilson 13)

Both trendiness and deviance are undesirable because they are predicated upon external influences. To develop an individual style, an author must develop independently, learning by trial and error. Unlike the creative writing course, which Wilson thinks might harmfully bury, or limit, original ideas, an education which teaches general writing skills is desirable. Outlining the ideal course of study for a would-be writer, she says:

> Before the young student leaves school, he should be early familiar with the function and construction of a sentence (the sentence is a bridge, or it rests), and the paragraph. He should be familiar in a simple way with précis work, which trains thought and manipulation of language. He should begin to recognize that the sentence is something in itself which can be expanded and sometimes reduced in a variety of ways. His spoken and written language should be flexible and fairly easy through the medium of conversation, answers to questions ("True or False" will not help), and through frequent simple well-corrected exercises in the form of tales or essays. Then he can say what he has to say in the way he wants to say it. This is a great deal but not too much, and it can be assimilated, and should be and often is not, before a student leaves school, whether or no he proposes to enter a university. If the student proposes to enter a university he then finds the ordinary use of language no barrier, but an approach. And if he is the story-teller, here are his tools to hand. (12)

Learning basic grammar and rhetorical devices, and practising them through regular written and verbal exercise eventually provides the

student with great potential. He has the ability to write in any style he wishes. The earlier such training begins, and the longer it continues, the better. While a practical education in language teaches the student to think critically, it does not address, and therefore does not impinge upon, creativity.

According to Wilson, the creative impulse is best taught indirectly. By reading widely, the student learns almost by osmosis to identify quality writing. He can discover which styles appeal to him, and think critically about them, without being told what to do. Learning through example, or, as Horace would say, instructed by delight, the reader's love of language only improves the author's use of it. Wilson advises Dorothy Livesay, her friend and fellow-writer, to:

> Read and read and read, not for the purpose of emulating any style, but to develop a critical faculty so keen that you yourself cannot write badly. You will know by instinct, what to leave out. (Livesay, "Wilson" 36)

The originality of one's creative impulse is not compromised when influenced by a diversity of styles and genres. In a letter to Desmond Pacey, she acknowledges, "when you have read a good deal and rejoice in such varied styles as Fielding's and Conrad's, Henry James, Trollope and and and . . . I think you are not haunted by a 'style'" (Stouck 238). Wilson's own style, while certainly not

derivative, draws its inspiration from numerous authors. She admired Shakespeare greatly enough to write "To keep the memory of so worthy a friend" and to undertake the pilgrimage described therein. Her own witty, ironic style reflects those of E. M. Forster and Jane Austen. By emulating numerous techniques used by numerous authors, and combining them with her ideas, Wilson creates a style which is very much her own.

This style is based on the love and reverence she felt for the sentence. It is, she says, "what I most like--I like the English sentence, clear, un-lush, and un-loaded" (Stouck 184). Essential to communication, the root of meaning, and the basis of prose style, it plays a crucial role. In a talk given at the University of British Columbia entitled "Somewhere Near the Truth," Ethel Wilson spoke at length about the sentence, describing it as "a strong humble bridge crossing a small stream" and "a thing of beauty" (84) regardless of whether it is simple or complex, plain or ornamented. Presenting limitless possibilities for variation and innovation, the sentence is the key to style. Unless it is a well-constructed bridge, it cannot support the weight of an entire written work, as Wilson acknowledges when she says, "I may fail, and my sentences, my bridges, may be weak, ugly, pretentious, and shoddily constructed. Well, then, I have failed indeed" (84). In her eyes, a story is no stronger than the sentences of which it is composed.

Wilson's stories are composed of a wide variety of sentence styles. This variety is not random but deliberately and carefully chosen. Each style reflects the meaning of the story by contributing

to characterization, revealing education or the lack of it, and indicating each character's perceived social role. The beginning of "Mrs. Golightly and the First Convention," for instance, exhibits sturdy sentences of almost childlike simplicity. The narrator says,

> Mrs. Golightly was a shy woman. She lived in Vancouver. Her husband, Tommy Golightly, was not shy. He was personable and easy to like. He was a consulting engineer who was consulted a great deal by engineering firms, construction firms, logging firms in particular, any firm that seemed to have problems connected with traction. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 9).

The sequence of short sentences that describes Mrs. Golightly resembles the choppy, stilted conversation of a shy person. Moreover, their simplicity, which precludes even the use of basic conjunctions such as "and," reflects her naivety and lack of confidence. As the narrator begins to describe Tommy, though, the sentences becomes increasingly long and complex, indicating his confidence, ease with conversation, and general relaxed sociability. So closely do they match style with content, Wilson's sentences are completely coherent. This characteristic holds true throughout the collection of stories, and in "Haply the soul of my grandmother" Mrs. Forrester thinks in complex sentences about complex ideas. She ponders,

> It's odd (and she returned to the thought of this country which in spite of its brightness and darkness and vigour was fearful to her), that I am Canadian and am fair, and have my roots in that part of England which was ravaged and settled by blond Norsemen; and Marcus is Canadian and is dark, and before generations of being Irish - did the dark Phoenicians come? - and he finds no strangeness here and I do. (34)

The "stream-of-consciousness" style of this sentence captures the rambling pattern of Mrs. Forrester's thoughts. Yet, despite its length and apparent disorganization, this complex sentence is carefully and accurately structured, indicating that the narrator's education not only included history but also extensive reading, writing, and grammar. In fact, it can only appear disorganized because the narrator finds difficult sentences easy to compose. Here too, then, style and content enhance one another in Wilson's sentences.

Her intuitive feel for language and skill in writing permit Wilson to practice her theories about the sentence. While all sentences are, as she observes, bridges linking words and ideas, if not readers, together, many of hers exhibit their bridge-like structure with exaggeration. In "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," for example, the description of Miss Riley's visit to the city joins the farm to the city and vice versa.

> Miss Riley lived in the country, but came to town every Friday morning and shopped for her family household at the farm, then she cooked Mrs. Forrester's dinner rapidly and then went with some friends to a show; she did some cleaning and cooking on Saturday and, encumbered with parcels, left on Sunday morning, arriving at the farm fresh and invigorated by her exciting and profitable trip to the city and full of continuous conversation. (127)

Necessarily long, this sentences forms two real paths, one to the city and another back to the farm, along which Miss Riley travels. In addition, it creates an imaginary bridge returning once more to the city as Miss Riley reflects on her adventure and tells her rural family about her urban experience. Thus, Wilson shows that her theories about the sentence's unifying ability translates directly into practice. Through experimentation she also fulfills her own prophecy that the sentence offers endless possibility for innovation. One such novel permutation is evident when sentence style contradicts meaning. The beginning of "The Window" uses this device in the description:

> [The window] was constructed in sections divided by segments of something that did not interfere with the view; in fact the eye by-passed these divisions and looked only at the entrancing scenes beyond. (196)

Not only does this sentence divide itself in two sections, using a semicolon as the "something that did not interfere with the view," but it goes on at length about the divisions which the eye supposedly bypasses. In other words, the sentences makes the reader focus on something that Mr. Willy is overlooking. Whereas he does not consider the window a confining wall until much later in the story, the reader is encouraged to recognize it as a solid wall right away. Using a variety of styles and techniques, Wilson creates in her sentences microcosms of larger themes and issues in the stories, thereby developing a strong foundation for the text as a whole. Analysis of her sentence structures reveals a unique combination of established technique and personal innovation.

Central to this innovation is punctuation. Skill enables Wilson to ignore convention and omit punctuation as she sees fit. In many descriptions, for example, numerous words are run together without being separated by commas. In "The Window," Mr. Willy sees "sea sky mountains," and in "God help the young fishman," there is a "fine thick silver red-fleshed fish" (197, 53). The commas are deliberately deleted so that the reader can perceive in groups of words what the eye would perceive all at once. If one were to actually see the fishman's fish, for example, one would simultaneously see it was fine, thick, silver, and red-fleshed. Written sequentially, words can never quite achieve this ideal of simultaneity, but the omission of commas enables them to approach it. The omission of all punctuation, in conjunction with the frequent use

of "and," creates run-on sentences in character dialogue. In "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...," Dolly is introduced by the word "and." She drones on and on to Tom, saying:

> . . . and you know when I looked at her I said to myself Mercy I've seen you somewhere before and then I though you remember Tommy that time we were at La Jolla and there was that woman named Nolan no was it Finnegan and she had . . . (151)

The lack of punctuation in this monologue, and in those of similar chattering characters, suits their tedious garrulity. Wondering where the sentence will end, the reader can identify with Tom, who impatiently wonders when his wife will be quiet. In this way, Wilson injects realism into the written version of Dolly's idiolect. Unhampered by intervening marks, the words can race breathlessly along, and the reader speeds up his pace.

By the same token, a proliferation of punctuation slows the writing down. In the afterword to Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories, David Stouck observes that "There are places where the punctuation simulates the pace of the character's thoughts" (213). Moreover, it forces the reader to match the character's speed. Stouck points to an example in "Mr. Sleepwalker," in which Mary's attention is distracted from a movie "by the scent, slight at first, then stronger, of, perhaps, an animal, or, perhaps, rotted wood, thick and dank (but how could it be rotted wood?)" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly

137). The terror which physically immobilizes her also slows her thoughts until they creep cautiously from comma to comma. The addition of unnecessary punctuation thus provides subtlety and layers of meaning to otherwise straightforward statements. When Mrs. Manly later thinks, "I don't call hitting . . . Mr. Sleepwalker . . . deliberate" (149), ellipses indicate that there is more to the matter than simple instinct. They imply that, although her act was not premeditated, part of her wanted to do it. Without ellipses, this nuance would be lost. Punctuation thus affects not only how we read Wilson's words but what meanings we read into them.

Her most frequent omission, in terms of punctuation, is the quotation mark. In three stories, "The Birds," "I just love dogs," and "Till death us do part," she does not write dialogue in a conventional manner. Instead it looks like this:

> You don't mean what you're saying!
>
> Yes. I do.
>
> But what . . . what - and her eyes swept my hands - you've kept that ring!

Hardly delineating between spoken phrases and narrative description, Wilson only indicates who is speaking with indentations. This somewhat confusing style was, nevertheless, deliberately employed. When Kildare Dobbs, a copy-editor at Macmillan, corrected her quotation marks, she wrote him an emphatic letter stating, "And, if it's a matter of expense (unjustifiable, perhaps) I'd rather pay for

fresh galley of Golightly in the form that I wrote it." She wrote the three stories, as well as "Mrs. Golightly and the First Convention" and "God help the young fishman" free of quotation marks because they are "talked" and "race along in that fool-talking way without waiting for quotation marks" (Stouck 217). She wanted to integrate all aspects of conversation, from facial expression and body language to actual speech, without elevating any particular one with distinguishing marks.

As all these idiosyncracies reveal, Ethel Wilson not only usespunctuation precisely, but according to strong opinions. To her, it is not a minor textual matter but an issue worth considerable amounts of money and time. If her punctuation is not to be taken seriously, then eventually her sentences and her work in general will also be dismissed. Thus, within the issue of punctuation lies her reputation as a serious writer. To Ellen Elliott, an editor at Macmillan, she wrote:

> How kind of you to realize that I mean what I write. The charming woman who types for me used to correct my punctuation. But as I always intend it for purposes of phrasing and significance, she kindly blindly copies now. (Stouck 126)

This tactful yet pointed letter confirms once and for all that Wilson does not thoughtlessly make any marks upon a page. In a subsequent letter, she elaborates upon the opinions which inform her idiosyncratic punctuation. She writes:

> I dislike the use of the "dash" except where unavoidable, also noticeable "dots" . . . and undue use of italics, also of question and exclamation marks, unless a real question is posed, or exclamation is emphatic. It has, to me, a popular magazine look, but I defer. Often a reflection or an undecided thought is couched in question or faintly exclamatory form, but is in itself vague. A question or an exclamation mark gives it too solid and positive form, takes away its quality of reflection. So may I retain a few of my "periods," with your permission, while conceding others. (130)

Questions which arose about Hetty Dorval in 1946 surfaced again years later, in 1961, about the short fiction. Despite Wilson's dislike of the dash and dots, they do appear in Mrs. Golightly, albeit usually as part of dialogue. Sentences such as "'Then how's this,'" and "Where does he live" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 52, 91) end with periods, illustrating Wilson's wish to limit the question mark to "real" questions. While thoroughly useful in reference to punctuation, the letters to Miss Elliott are an equally valuable insight into the external editing and revision process. On the whole, Wilson defends her work, explaining why she does what she does, and requesting Macmillans to defer. This stubbornness is rendered palatable by her less frequent, but nonetheless humble,

agreements to change. She shows a sense of humor, too, by concluding her final question to Miss. Elliott, if it truly is one, with a period. Glancing at her obviously skilled, yet often unusual, style of punctuation, the casual reader would never guess how much thought, effort, and compromise preceded its final publication.

Dialogue in Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories owes its success not only to the manipulation of punctuation but to Wilson's ear for conversation. She asks Miss. Elliott:

> Is it too much to ask you to let me know whether you disapprove of the theory that "Oh no," . . . [is] more natural and spontaneous . . . than the conventional "Oh, no." . . . The former is spoken, and is therefore alive, to me, and the latter stilted. (130)

Correctness which serves no purpose, and may in fact detract from the realism of her stories, is rejected in favor of a natural flow which is more true to life. To capture speech on paper exactly as it sounds, Wilson spells phonetically, making Miss Riley, in "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," say, "'the baby came in yesterday from Noo Westminister and Bertha said for us to go over and see the baby and bull-eeve me that is the kee-ootest baby you'd ever see'" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 128). Almost able to hear Miss Riley's accent and intonation, the reader can infer, as one could in reality, her lack of education and overbearing personality. When necessary, Wilson

relaxes her precise, economical style to recreate the repetitive rhythms of speech. "I just love dogs" would be far less funny without the characters incessantly repeating, "'Inspector Snape is dead'" and, "'I just love dogs. I'm crazy about dogs. I like dogs a whole lot better than I like people'" (86). After all, real conversations have this tendency to circle the same topics over and over again. Finally, and perhaps most impressively, Wilson captures the awkward moments which occasionally disrupt discussion, embarassing and confusing those involved, but which are not usually evident in polished fiction. In "A drink with Adolphus," for example, Mrs. Gormely asks Mr. Leaper,

> "You were saying when you were in Spain?"
>
> "We had too many eggs."
>
> "I thought so too," she said, "but" (warmly) "there are compensations - what about the El Grecos?"
>
> "We never had any of those," said Mr. Leaper gloomily. "Of that I am sure, as I noted down our meals very carefully in my diary." (76)

What makes this interchange bizarre is that, although Mrs. Gormley is talking about art, and Mr. Leaper thinks she is referring to a Spanish dish, the conversation continues regardless. This non-sequitur, or gap in communication, is so odd, and so amusing, that the reader may not believe anyone could pluck such an absurd conversation out of thin air, as it were. Such is Ethel Wilson's skill.

Using punctuation, phonetic spelling, and grammar all together, she creates ideolects by which each character is recognizable. Whereas Mrs. Forrester says, "'I admire your large dark eyes like an odalisque's (no, not by Cézanne or is it Matisse)" (116), in an educated, articulate manner, Dolly prattles on about the "awfully hard book to tell the story of because first the story is here and first it's there and sometimes in a room but you can just hear them talking it's so real . . . " (153) without arriving at any conclusion, let alone one which could reflect intelligence. While the ideolect of Wong Kee's wife, who cries, "'I tarryphome . . . I tarryphome my son,'" cannot illuminate her personality, it does shed light upon both her emotional state and the difficulties she faces as an immigrant. Whatever the short fiction lacks in visual cues to identification, it more than compensates with vivid colloquial dialogue.

Wilson's writing is also well known for the double-takes and juxtapositions which are her particular stylistic trademarks. By "double-take," I am referring to the technique of inverting the entire meaning of a sentence in the last few words. For instance, Mr. Sleepwalker's "eyes were sad like a little bloodhound's eyes and pink under, but he was not sad" (42). Although the reader may wonder if such self-contradictory, or at least self-doubting, statements serve any positive function in the story, they are justified by the comedy of such situations as Mrs. Golightly attempting to "make out whether she had no headache at all, or the worst headache of her life" (16). The reader cannot help but smile

at this narrative indecision which belongs more in the confusion of reality than in a streamlined plot. Double-takes constantly thwart expectation, providing surprise endings throughout the stories rather than at the conclusions only. This tactic not only amuses the reader but maintains interest by creating internal tension in the text. Similarly reflecting the paradoxical nature of everyday reality, the juxtaposition of opposites occurs even more frequently. On a large scale, the stories sometimes juxtapose one another. Having completed "We have to sit opposite," which deems [illegible] a vice, the reader is then confronted by "The Birds'" endorsement of it as a virtue. Which message does Wilson really support, or does she support any of them? A microcosm of this contradiction is found in oxymorons such as Mrs. Bylow's "unpleasant part of Mount Pleasant" (103), and Mrs. Forrester's "good bad French" (125). The juxtaposition of words within a phrase, or immediately next to each other, is a technique that, rather than resolving conflict between opposites, simply highlights conflict as the characteristic most true to life. Wilson does not pretend to have answers.

Double-takes and juxtaposition, with which Wilson "[pricks] the bubble of her own drama," necessarily bring irony to mind (Clarke 103). And, indeed, Wilson is an ironic writer because, as discussed in Chapter Two, appearance and reality are a major theme in her short fiction. Irony enables the ironist, or ironic observer, to manipulate them at will. When Josie believes that Jason, in "From Flores," has knowingly abandoned her, it doesn't matter that her belief is incorrect. She exhibits the blind unawareness, accompanied

by varying degrees of naivety, innocence, complacency, conceitedness, and arrogance, which typifies victims of irony (Muecke 29). While the reader knows Jason only appears callous, his irresponsibility represents reality to Josie. In Wilson's fiction, however, reality frequently corrects appearance, and the entire story of "I just love dogs," is based upon this idea. For four pages, all the characters think the dog is dead, and only in the second-last paragraph is their error revealed. This situational irony, while greatly amusing, is simultaneously serious because it questions the type of assumptions behind everyday existence. Chaos underlies this irony because, once reality is destabilized, people are reduced to subjective egos, and the universe becomes an alien, illogical void. Without taking this idea to an extreme, Wilson's irony is nonetheless self-conscious, aware of the implications it creates. Her fascination with this blurring of the delineation between appearance and reality prompts her to write ironically, to write fiction which "says more than it seems to be saying" (Muecke 32).

Irony does more, however, than introduce elements of uncertainty, chaos, and violence; it paradoxically introduces the understatement which reduces their impact. Understatement is a type of impersonal irony frequently occurring in Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories. In one unobtrusive sentence a woman can commit suicide or war can erupt in Munich. About the death of Wong Kee, a loving husband, good father, successful entrepreneur, and brave citizen in "Fog," the narrator simply concludes that "This was now over" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 107). While this statement is correct and

honest, its bluntness and lack of emotion strikes one as chilling. The seeming inhumane tone makes understatement itself seem violent, but, on the other hand, it mutes tragedy, rendering it less shocking and perverse (Gelfant 120). Buried in detailed description of life's continuing continuum, grisly details and disturbing facts are distanced from the reader. We are distracted and reassured by the customer's phoning an ambulance, and by Wong Kee's wife coming in with a bundle of firewood and telephoning her son. The calm, detached tone and urbane attitude counter volatility by providing perspective. What W. H. New might consider a sign of "unsustained mood," Blanche Gelfant considers evidence of Wilson being a "master of understatement: of irony . . . creating a discrepancy between tone and meaning" (Gelfant 128). Tragic events which would be the focus of many authors' stories are not the focus of Wilson's. Instead, she is interested in the human contexts surrounding tragedy. Ironically, this approach humanizes what might otherwise be anonymous accidents as much as it asserts an unshakeable faith in humankind's resilience.

Dramatic irony also plays a significant role in Wilson's short fiction. While enabling the reader to comprehend a complete pattern in each story, she prevents the characters, despite their involvement in that pattern, from viewing it. "A drink with Adolphus," for example, shows Adolphus, busy with his lists, blissfully unaware of the personal dramas which transpired at his own party. After numerous pages carefully outlining Mrs. Gormley's boredom and loneliness, not to mention Mr. Leaper's emotional instability and interest in spousal homicide, Adolphus' concluding one-liner, "'I

must have another party'" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 84) is a terrible, if terribly comic, irony. Unlike Adolphus, the reader appreciates each character's conflict and additionally grasps the larger issues of the entire story. R. D. MacDonald says that Wilson's

> innocents, who occupy a central position in her fiction, "float" or "slide," unaware and easy, on an unmeaning surface and flow of time--while their creator . . . questions and explores the dark depths below. ("Time" 66)

For dramatic irony to function effectively, the victims of irony must remain unaware. Only the reader perceives the pattern of light and darkness behind apparently irrational and unrelated events in life. Providing logical, asthetic shape to life's messiness, dramatic irony thus lends each story structure.

What makes Wilson's ironic style personal is her penchant for narrative intrusion. These intrusions are not merely extra description or character thoughts, although those appear too, but represent a distinct change in tone and opinion. They pull the reader back from the specific into the general, distancing him from the text. Of all the stories, "The Window" best illustrates how the narrator, dissatisfied with "showing" what happens, as fiction usually does, succumbs to "telling" as well. For instance, Mr. Willy

> was 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).
> (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 198)

This continually interposed private commentary, sometimes counterpointing the flow of the plot with parenthetical asides, and sometimes incorporated into descriptive passages, is ripe with irony. Further "pricking the bubble of her own drama," the narrator undermines, corrects, and occasionally pokes fun at the characters. Mr. Willy's wife, endlessly saying, "'I simply can't tell you,'" is interrupted by the sardonic comment, "No, she could not tell but she did, by day and night (Wilson 197). Dissatisfied with simply showing Mrs. Willy's inconsistency, the narrator cannot resist highlighting it with a remark. Used throughout the book, this intrusion is perhaps the most significant trademark of Ethel Wilson's style.

Moreover, ironic narrative intrusion helps prevent lapses into sentimentality. The faith, optimism, and appreciation of beauty which make Mrs. Golightly a pleasure to read occasionally deteriorate into a sugary sweetness. The description of the happy family living in a natural arcady in "Beware the Jabberwock, my son..." exemplifies this weakness. It begins:

> (We should all be happy and hardly ever bored, like that family of five beautiful children who live at

> Blue Lake Mountain in the heart and heights of British Columbia. They are so happy that they do not know they are happy. They say, "Oh do we have to go away? Do we hafto?" They are busy all the year round, and are never bored, these beautiful Renoir children and their young parents.) (158-9)

This cloying tangent exemplifies a weakness Wilson identifies in her own work. To John Gray she admits, "As for the writing--that is the only way I can write--of beauty and emotion, and then with a horrid fear of sentimentality" (Stouck 184). This fear prompts her to "[tip] it back on the other side with a flat statement. The thing is to get the balance" (184). In other words, to write successfully of beauty and emotion, one must match them with dry wit, cold facts, or a matter-of-fact tone. As we have seen, Wilson prefers wit, and her sometimes snide narrative comments instantly deflate any possible pretensions. The second sentence of "Mr. Sleepwalker," for example, stops the plot with:

> I should like to say that up to the time that her husband went to the war, Mrs. Manly had never shown any tendency to undue imagination, nervousness, hysteria, nor to any of those weaknesses which are supposed to be the prerogative of her sex, but are not -- any of which might have been considered responsible for the mounting episodes which

> culminated in her nearly killing Mr. Sleepwalker.
> (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 131)

In a measured tone at variance with the main narrative, this intrusion also interrupts itself with a wry comment about gender stereotypes. This irony lends credibility to Mrs. Manly's "peculiar" experience, placing it squarely in the realm of the logically possible. Without such an interruption, exaggerated emotion and inexplicable mysteriousness could reduce the story to a corny thriller. Although they cannot eradicate all sentimentality from the short fiction, narrative intrusions certainly seem to reduce its frequency.

The intrusions themselves, however, are not without problems. Ostensibly, Wilson scorns consciously didactic fiction, and describes it as "that unprincipalled and distastefully inartistic thing - a novel with a purpose . . . should not be allowed!" (Watters 26). Vehemently criticizing didactic fiction, which aims to pleasantly instruct and disseminate information, she is slightly hypocritical. Obviously, the short stories do not comprise a novel, and they are not didactic overall, yet they do include didactic interludes. One narrative intrusion in "Fog" becomes a long harangue against the "idiot" parents of delinquent youth, which concludes:

> Wong Kee's blood was on [the boys'] parents' hands too but they, being irresponsible, did not know this. And on their hands was the blood of Mrs. Bylow who was soon to die, and of Mrs. Wong Kee who could

> no longer be said to live, and of their children. (109)

This commentary verges upon the kind of propagandist fiction which supposedly repels Wilson. Blatantly advocating parental responsibility, she blames the breakdown of the family for societal problems. Too strident to invite sympathy, her tone is irritating.

As to whether intrusions are generally annoying, critics cannot decide. Frequently modifying narrative attitude, the remarks prevent the reader from becoming too emotionally involved. In reference to The Equations of Love, Wilson reminisces, "I wrote as I chose and introduced my own voice too much into the proceedings. The intrusion is not fatal, but it is a flaw in the writing" (Stouck 88). Whether she was equally critical of intrusions in Mrs. Golightly, we will never know. W. H. New and Desmond Pacey agree that

> [Wilson] is rather too prone to adopt the old-fashioned device of authorial comment, to intrude into the flow of her narrative little chunks of personal philosophy. Usually there is a flavour of irony in these remarks which helps to make them palatable, but they do sometimes offend. (Pacey, Wilson 61).

This technique, more typical of the Victorian period than the twentieth-century, is derided by modern authors and critics alike, as a sign of poor fiction.

E. M. Forster and Ethel Wilson are notable exceptions whose narrative rebellion is applauded by Beverley Mitchell, Helen Sonthoff, and W. J. Keith. The latter do not, however, agree about why they applaud it. Mitchell finds Wilson "a witty and wise raconteur" whose "'little chunks of personal philosophy' are one of the most rewarding features of [her] fiction" ("Right Word" 74, 75). Expanding upon this idea, Sonthoff says:

> Such reflections or comments counterpoint the plot rhythm, broaden the range, keep imaginative space open for the observer, for me. They are not directive or omniscient. They are freely, unabashedly individual. (99)

By contradicting, or challenging the characters' opinions, narrative remarks create a freedom of debate. There is room within each story for the perspectives of characters, narrator, and every reader. Each individual is entitled to her opinion, and each opinion is equally valid. Ignoring the modernists, this interpretation appeals to postmodernists. On the other hand, directly contradicting Sonthoff, Keith asserts:

> Wilson's, then, is invariably a providential vision, and her authorial intrusions, so culpable to the advocates of modernism, are justified because they reflect and interpret a world-view that presupposes a larger meaning. ("Overview" 113)

By calling the intrusions authorial, Keith highlights the fact that the narrators in Mrs. Golightly are often difficult to distinguish from Wilson herself. More importantly, however, he considers the author, or narrator, almost divine because she possesses "providential vision." Like God, she is not only omniscient but directive, controlling characters and guiding readers. This religious analysis, being a far cry from New's and Pacey's annoyance with the trivial, indicates just how controversial Wilson's remarks are, as well as how complicated her style can be.

As a form of verbal irony, narrative intrusions serve a moral purpose. "Ironic situations . . . can be invented or presented by satirists whose object is to expose hypocrisy, wilful ignorance, pride, confident folly, rationalizing, or vanity" (Muecke 66). Irony thus becomes a sophisticated weapon. But to satirize vices with mere common sense, irony must assume that certain values, such as compassion, honesty, and responsibility are universal. In "Beware the Jabberwock, my son..." right and wrong are objective values and, presented as completely unambiguous, cannot be interpreted subjectively.

> What was only a wet Wednesday afternoon to other people was a fresh free day for Tom Krispin when the bottom had at last fallen clean out of his mind, and his memory (which would at some time stir and re-assert itself) had succumbed to the assaults of misery; conscience had fainted. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 161)

Dismissing Tom's feelings of self-justification outright, the narrator indicates that some perspectives are invalid. This assertion is problematic because it contradicts Wilson' suggestion, through the confusion of appearance and reality, that everything is relative. In fact, to focus on how reality should be, her moral stance takes reality for granted as an indisputable, objective fact. To function effectively, satire must convince the reader that its underlying values have a permanent significance. In becoming a satirist, Ethel Wilson plays a dangerous game in which she becomes as much of a hypocrite as many of her victims.

Perhaps for this reason, her satire is always of the gentlest sort. None of her characters is ever revealed as purely evil, or without redeeming qualities, and Wilson is rarely sarcastic or cruel. Rather, her irony uses logic, innocence, and ignorance to be satirical. Having pointed out Tom's faults in "Beware the Jabberwock, my son...," the narrator, in all fairness, admits that "Tom Krispin and Dolly are people of good will, and have been frightened and are fallible" (182). Giving them the benefit of the doubt, Wilson implies that she too is fallible and deserving of compassion. She also shows compassion by not taking malicious pleasure in people's weaknesses. Whereas much satire is punishing, hers is healing. She altruistically corrects moral lapses to improve the fictional reality of her characters, if not the larger world of her readers.

Satire relies not so much upon attitude as style. To persuade the reader to criticize a value or action, Wilson's satire moves him to "various emotions ranging from laughter through ridicule, contempt and anger to hatred" (Pollard 74). The degree to which he feels these emotions depends upon the severity of the immorality and Wilson's skill as a writer. Some instances, such as the teenagers killing Wong Kee and Mrs. Bylow, are so obviously bad that the reader condemns them as a matter of course, but others are less clear. The morality of "The Window," for instance, which advocates spirituality, could alienate as easily as it could attract the reader. Instead of preaching, and perhaps offensively foisting her own beliefs onto the reader, Wilson uses the more subtle persuasion of well-constructed rhetoric. She says:

> [Mr. Willy] had formed the general opinion that people who hold such beliefs were either slaves to an inherited convention, hypocrites, or nitwits. . . . It is not easy to say why Mr. Willy thought these people were hypocrites or nit-wits because some of them, not all, had a strong religious faith, and why he was not a hypocrite or nit-wit because he had not a strong religious faith; but there it was. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 204)

This satirical intrusion forestalls disagreement with the narrator's perspective by addressing every doubt a non-spiritual reader might

harbour. Spirituality as a meaningless, inherited convention, as a hypocritical practice, as a pacifier of the masses, as a daydream of the stupid, and as an event inextricable from organized religion is evoked to be dissmissed. And, finally, the reader suspicious of conversion is reassured by the narrator's non-commital tone and open-minded "there it was." Through her skill with words, Wilson confronts and defeats all opposition while almost appearing to identify with it. When her opinions cannot be considered universal, her satire not only makes do, but subtly and impressively, manipulates through style.

Be it in the service of satire or not, irony necessitates a certain level of detachment in the ironist. When D. C. Muecke describes Swift as "able to control the impulse to blurt out what he feels: there has been a pause, a distancing, an intellectualizing" (36), he could just as easily be describing Ethel Wilson. If she could not even pretend to be calm, she could not use the dry wit and controlled style which make her satire effective. If she had lapsed into spiritual passion and missionary zeal in "The Window," for instance, the satire would have dissolved into mere didacticism. Instead, she presents her case and merely observes, "but there it was." Some satirists are victims of their own cynical irony to the extent that that their feelings are as false as their detachment. Wilson, on the other hand, is always sincere. For her, detachment resides not in an inability to feel life's serious tragedy but a refusal to be overwhelmed by it. Saying, "the stars give warning that [Tom's and Dolly's] mutual future happines is likely, but not

assured" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 182), she does not permit their problems, despite their severity, to skew her logical judgement. On the contrary, she is calm enough to see that, even in an imperfect world, joy and goodness can survive. Allowing Wilson to rise above vice and folly, her rational tone and well-controlled style thus become assertions of optimism.

Afforded freedom by detachment and provided omniscience by dramatic irony, both narrator and reader cannot help feeling superior. At the end of many of the stories, we are "in the know" with either the narrator or the protagonist. At the end of "Hurry, hurry," for example, we possess information about a murder which Miriam does not, and at the conclusion of "Mrs. Golightly and the First Convention," we too have moved "out of the class for beginners" and are "much more skilful now" (24). According to D. C. Muecke, the ironic observer's "own attitude is that of a man whose world appears real and meaningful," and "he will see the victim's world as illusory or absurd" (37). Since the observer's viewpoint approaches the infallibility of God's omniscience, Wilson writes largely from a third-person omniscient perspective which clarifies a variety of imperfect mortal perspectives. Matters are further clarified by narrative intrusions which are not always in the third person. Stripping the reader of shared omniscience so that he regains a limited, mortal perspective, they have an unsettling effect. According to Hugo MacPherson, "the result . . . is uncertainty in point of view and abruptness of narrative method which diminishes the spell of Mrs. Wilson's art" (Campbell, B. 158). Consistently forced

to change his viewpoint, the reader cannot get too comfortable in the story or identify too much with the characters. Each shift in perspective necessitates a parallel shift in alliance which, compounded over time, reduces the text's emotional impact.

In addition, several of the stories are written in the first person. "I just love dogs," "The corner of X and Y streets" and "To keep the memory of so worthy a friend" are told from the perspective of an "I" or "we" who is both the protagonist and narrator. Written as diary entries, "The Birds," "Till death us do part," and Mr. Leaper's half of "A drink with Adolphus" take the first person to an extreme. Helen Clarke thinks these works are awkward because they reduce the writer's objectivity and do not draw the reader more closely into the story (73). In addition, "A certain distancing is necessary for that gentle air of irony which is a distinguishing feature of [Wilson's] work" (73). But while the first person precludes irony within the framework of the narrative, it is fostered by the different perspectives encompassed by Mrs. Golightly as a whole. Samuel Hynes, in The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry, says that irony is "a view of life which recognizes that experience is open to multiple interpretations, of which no one is simply right, and that the co-existence of incongruities is a part of the structure of existence" (41-2). Given that Wilson writes in the ironic mode, this statement could well apply to her short stories. The abruptness that MacPherson identifies in the narrative actually mimics the counterpoint of irony. Juxtaposing diverse perspectives, it expresses life's rich complexity far more successfully than one overly-simple viewpoint.

Wilson uses structure as unconventionally as perspective, despite the initial impression created by her conventional beginnings and endings. Each story begins differently, with dialogue, setting description, character introductions, or action, but they almost all begin in media res. "The Birds," for instance, says, "Having written down that dreadful day, I will not spend much time on subsequent emotions. I spoke last night of pride. Let me reccomend it" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 67). These opening lines obviously do not function as mere introductory remarks. Vigorous and unpretentious, they instantly draw the reader into the heart of the story without waiting for a gradual accommodation. Moreover, they do not function as mere introductory remarks. Elucidating theme, plot, and character alike, they are relevant to the story as a whole.

The end of each story generally returns us to the beginning, creating a frame for the intervening text. "From Flores'" conclusion with the Indian "[walking] slowly up and down the docks" because "no one seemed to know anything about his only son" reminds us of the beginning when Captain Crabbe sees "the red shirt flapping like mad from the rocky point just north of the Indian's place." By showing how much the story has developed, how far it has come, the end creates a satisfying sense of completion. Desmond Pacey notes, in reference to "Hurry, hurry" and "Mr. Sleepwalker," that trick endings are rare and not particularly successful in Mrs. Golightly (Wilson 39). When Mrs. Manly is equated with a hare, for instance, all previous allusions to Mr. Sleepwalker's frightening feral smell, which the reader was taking seriously, seem ridiculous (39). Wilson's

trick endings have been called formulaic, and critics think that her efforts to satisfy the reader's supposedly conventional taste for dramatic resolution and a strong punch line detract from the body of the text. While this criticism rings true for "Mr. Sleepwalker," it does not for "Hurry, hurry," and two stories are not a broad enough basis by which to judge Wilson's trick endings in general. Lesser versions of the trick ending can be located in ironic conclusions. "A drink with Adolphus," "I just love dogs," and "Beware the Jabberwock, my son..." end with dramatic irony highlighting a character's ignorance. For example, as Tom walks away in "Jabberwock," Mr. Olsen's neighbor comments, "'He must be nuts, that fella . . . see him walking along laughing like crazy with nothing to laugh at'" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 104). Humorous and quirky, this conclusion is also thought-provoking, encouraging the reader to think back over the story to comprehend why Tom is laughing. Unlike her direct beginnings, Wilson's surprise and ironic endings alike always have a twist.

Between the fairly conventional beginnings and endings, Wilson's stories employ non-traditional structural techniques. She has strong opinions about structure and did not hesitate to tell students at the University of British Columbia School of Architecture:

> There is the short story which is a curiously interesting art form enormously dependent within its small compass on structure. If structure is faulty a short story may be all at sea, as a well-intentioned ship whose rudder is faulty is all at

> sea. The ship and the story will probably not arrive at their desired destinations. Paradoxically, too slavish and careful a structure may destroy a short story. The earnest student of the short story who tries too hard to conform to some required shape or tension or termination, or experienced practitioners who have come to use a certain formula or mould, are endangered by the mould or formula becoming apparent, and then the story has no life. It does not "happen," and I think a short story has to "happen." (Wilson, "Address" 130)

A good structure must lend shape to a text without deteriorating into a formula that saps the work of spontaneity and life. In short, a successful story structure must balance on a fine line between complete disorganization and slavish conformity.

As to whether Ethel Wilson can follow her own instructions for balance, there is some debate. Pacey thinks that each story in Mrs. Golightly "always builds swiftly and surely to a meaningful cimax" (Wilson 38). According to conventional plot expectation, Wilson sets up a conflict only to resolve it. Stating that this organized efficiency recurs in each story, Pacey suggests that her structural style verges dangerously upon the formulaic. By contrast, Barbara Campbell says that,

> Rather than conveying the sense of a neatly ordered structure, truer to fiction than to fact, her novels

> seek to achieve the opposite effect, to persuade one of the formlessness, the absence of design and the frequent discordances which characterize much of human experience. (Campbell, B. 8)

Unlike Pacey, Campbell thinks Wilson plans each story so that, instead of appearing artificially contrived and streamlined, it seems to have "happened," just as events happen in reality. Shapeless, episodic plots reflect the disjointedness of experience in an irrational, unpredictable universe. And because Wilson finds life lacking the suspense of a progressive sequence of events, she refuses to write according to such conventions (158). With this debate over structure, we must wonder once again how Wilson's fiction, apparently so innocent, provokes such extremes of reaction.

An indisputably important structural element in Mrs. Golightly is what Campbell calls the non-traditional "[disclosure] of future action" (158) but is more commonly labelled foreshadowing. While foreshadowing does reveal events of the future, this revelation is partial and does not reduce suspense. For instance, the narrator of "Fog" describes Mrs. Bylow "while she was better and before she got worse" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 109), simultaneously decreasing tension by informing us that she gets worse and increasing it by withholding details and a resolution to the story. Foreshadowing thus binds the "rambling," "episodic" (Campbell, B. 9) structure together with suspense. Moreover, foreshadowing is most frequently located in the "summary" beginnings of which Wilson is so fond.

This type of beginning is more than in media res; it jumps ahead of the story's true start point. The first paragraph of "Mr. Sleepwalker," for example, begins, "During the time that Mary Manly's husband was in Australia, Mrs. Manly had an experience that was peculiar" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 131). Albeit brief, this introduction is nonetheless a summary creating expectations. The reader has a vague goal, or point, in mind and can relate each textual event to it, thereby extending whatever structure Wilson has already set up. Using structure and foreshadowing in this symbiotic manner, Wilson proves that the former does not necessarily lack planning. Rather, its design, which demands active reading from her audience, is simply unconventional.

Whereas debate surrounds Wilson's structure, the critics unanimously agree that her descriptions are executed in a breathtakingly flawless style. Their perfection is in no small measure created by their integration into the text. To Mr. Willy, the view of his surroundings is of paramount importance. Because it is essential to theme, character, and plot development, Wilson not only describes the view repeatedly throughout "The Window" but explicitly says,

> Sometimes [Mr. Willy] stood with his hands behind looking through the great glass window, seeing the wrinkled or placid sea and the ships almost at his feet and beyond the sea the mountains, and seeing sometimes his emancipation. (197)

Without the contrast of naturally vivacious surroundings, Mr. Willy's withdrawal from life would be far less apparent. Pacey thinks that Wilson's settings "are never merely set-pieces of description . . . but always, by creating mood and suggesting theme, form an organic part of the story" (Pacey, Wilson 34). They are integral to many themes, especially the sense of place, and to the creation of atmosphere, as is shown by "Hurry, hurry." In it, the words used to depict the birds and dogs, while appropriate, also contribute to the troubling atmosphere. They are described as:

> A multitude . . . on wheels. . . . whispered and whimpered . . . stabbing . . . running on. . . . continuous small noise. . . . whispered and wept . . . fled in a cloud, animated by one enfolding spirit of motion. . . . running and jabbing. . . . little earnest monsters bore down upon them again in futile chase. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 112)

Together, these words give the impressions of both a frightening machine and a nightmarish kind of war. Birds and dogs alike are described in terms of violence and tragedy, creating tension which prepares the reader for the murderer's appearance. Moreover, by describing the animals in ominous terms, rather than in pastoral, idyllic ones, Wilson is consistent in tone throughout the story. Always revealingly relevent, the description of setting in Mrs. Golightly never becomes tangential.

In addition, it is never permitted to be vague or unrealistic. Among many other critics, Pacey comments on the precise nature of Wilson's fictional environments. They are, he writes, "always exact, and reveal a trained eye not only for the contour and colour of the landscape but also for the flora and fauna of the region" (Pacey, Wilson 34). Pacey then uses a quote from "On Nimpish Lake," the story which most focuses on setting, to prove his point. In it, Wilson writes:

> When you reach the cabin beside Nimpish Lake you will see the gray whiskey-jacks who love the neighbourhood of man - what cheeky birds they are and how endearing - 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 through the trees you will hear the loons laughing and crying on the water. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 37)

Capturing the reader's imagination with sight and sound, Wilson does not simply place birds around the lake: she describes at length, with scientific accuracy, and in unforgettable detail, how different species look, sound, and behave. Imbued with vivid images, landscape passages leave as significant an imprint as actual experience in the mind of the reader. There is never any doubt about a story's setting.

When it comes to urban description, however, the specificity of Wilson's regionalism is somewhat questionable. At a superficial glance, Vancouver seems as accurately depicted as any wilderness scene in Mrs. Golightly. "I just love dogs" occurs not just on any street corner but where the narrator "had just turned the corner of Dunsmuir Street, going down to Granville Street (that's our principal business street) . . . right out on the sidewalk beside the bank building, on the corner of Granville and Dunsmuir, but up a bit" (85). Appearing in more vivid detail than is perhaps necessary or desirable, Vancouver seems larger-than-life here. But to Blanche Gelfant in "Ethel Wilson's Absent City," "Wilson's references to actual (or putatively actual) places raise questions they seem meant to forfend" (11). Are the urban details she includes essential to creating a realistic setting, or are they merely interchangeable place-names used to "create a superficial impression of city life?" (11). X and Y streets, for instance, are no less generic and vague for their particularity. Gelfant may have a valid point because, apart from its street names and natural context, Vancouver remains largely mysterious. Describing it by its geography, Wilson strips it of the sociological, economical, and emotional signs of urban life. Vancouver is merely a feature of the British Columbia landscape which, for the sake of realism, must not be omitted.

Even for the sake of realism, however, Wilson does not sacrifice the lyric quality of her prose. The term "lyric" refers, according to contemporary literary theory, to subject and tone (Baldeshwiler 231). Thus any narrative, even prose works, can be called lyrical.

Eileen Baldeshwiler, in her article "The Lyric Short Story: The Sketch of a History," defines lyrical short stories as creating a

> rich and mellow atmosphere arising from the abundance of emotionally significant detail. The effect, then, is poetical, even lyrical, and, as in lyric, it is not plot development that arouses interest. On the contrary, the reader experiences "infection" by the poet's mood. (Baldeshwiler 233)

In her short fiction, Wilson achieves a balance of realistic detail and lyric suggestiveness. In "The Window," she shows the realism of Mr. Willy's emotional aridity by creating an unrealistic spectre:

> Sometimes a thought or a shape (was it?), gray, like wood ash that falls in pieces when it is touched, seemed to be behind his chair, and this shape teased him and communicated to him that he had left humanity behind, 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. (Wilson 199)

Without actually resorting to fantasy, Wilson nevertheless evokes the image of a guardian angel advising Mr. Willy behind his shoulder. Treading that surprisingly fine line between realism and suggestiveness, she skillfully creates the type of small, emotionally laden scene which Baldeshwiler finds so typical of lyricism.

In the short fiction, suggestiveness often becomes symbolic, despite Wilson's professed dislike of symbolism. Almost all of the stories include symbols as part of characterization and setting. In "The Initiation of Mrs. Golightly," C. M. McLay says that "The hat 'with the longest quill in town' [Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 10] becomes a symbol of [Mrs. Golightly's] need for assurance and place" (53). The feather, or her insecurity, troubles her throughout the story but is eventually clipped short, reflecting her new-found confidence. She no longer needs to impress with a trivial feather. This example, being one of many, is unexpected in the work of a self-proclaimed "anti-symbol" author (Stouck 164). Wilson's frequently-stated criticism of symbolism is, however, limited to those symbols which are deliberately contrived and foisted onto prose in an obvious manner. As stated in "Somewhere Near the Truth," she is

> convinced that if a writer of fiction should self-consciously and deliberately introduce and exploit an object or incident as symbol into his work, finagle it into his story as a set piece to which his story must conform and adhere ever so cleverly, the device is phony and an affectation, and his work loses its quality of true life. (Stouck 85)

The conscious use of symbols, such as she undertakes in "The Birds," or "The Window" must be done with delicate subtlety. One cannot insert a pre-fabricated symbol into a text without first ensuring

that it can be easily incorporated, like description, "to form an organic part of the story" (Pacey, Wilson 34). Neither can one write a story around a symbol. In that case, the text loses all life, spontaneity, and credibility in the attempt to conform. Only a skillful author with a light touch, such as Wilson, can risk the conscious use of symbols.

Given this difficulty, it is best for symbolism to spontaneously, if not unconsciously, stem from the text itself. Then it is indisputably and inextricably part of a story, free from self-conscious awkwardness and affectation. Wilson considers this type of symbol "honest and very potent" (Stouck 85) to the extent that Mrs. Forrester, in "Truth and Mrs. Forrester" says, "The potency of symbols is astonishing" (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 124). Wilson respects unconscious symbols not only because they are adequately incorporated, but because they complement her realistic style of writing. Her belief, previously discussed in reference to structure, is that writing should try to resemble real life rather than literature. Thus, what makes symbol honest to her is its freedom to "grow in and . . . take over--or not, as it does in life" (85). Never in Mrs. Golightly, however, do symbols overwhelm the text so much that it can no longer be realistically interpreted. Unconscious symbols necessarily reside in actions or subjects which the author invents for non-symbolic purposes. Robert Campbell says, "the actual meaning of the work is explicit, it is the surface; the symbolism and suggestive imagery are there only as a reinforcement of what is plainly stated" (Campbell, R. 114). Only because her style of

symbolism is subtle, well-integrated, and discriminating can Wilson claim to be "anti-symbol" and get away with it.

These same characteristics of subtlety, integration, and discrimination create in Wilson's style a deceptive simplicity. With apparent ease, she negotiates everything from the comma to the sentence, dialogue, irony, satire, and description. Moreover, she manages to blend these elements according to her own strong opinions and particular tastes. "Within the framework of the lighthearted lead-off story and the speculative and somber concluding one, lie a rich variety of tales" (Campbell, B. 136) which are at once similar and dissimilar in style. What makes the many aspects of Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories work cohesively together is Wilson's feel for language - its beauty, power, and potential. Beneath her self-deprecating facade, the mind of a master-stylist, who thinks at length and in great detail about every mark she makes on a page, unpretentiously works its magic. As Pacey observes, "She writes her stories as simply and casually as if she were actually talking to us beside the fireplace" (Pacey, "Innocent" 48-9). The effortlessness with which she creates marvellously accurate dialogue, simply limpid prose, and stunning irony is astounding. Such a fresh and engaging style conceals the effort with which it was created. Although Wilson strove to be a fine stylist, her work seems neither strained nor overbearingly contrived. In fact, it can only be described as a kind of "artlessness that is very artful indeed" (Wilson, "Address" 130).

Unfortunately, this view is not shared by all critics. To conclude The Ethel Wilson Symposium, W. H. New states that he finds most of the short stories

> thwarted by unsustained mood and intrusive chattiness and overextension and repetition and an accentuated social edge about language that sometimes interferes with the compassionate principle they ostensibly espouse. (144)

From his theoretical perspective, New does not find ironic juxtaposition and narrative commentary, at least to the extent that Wilson uses them, either pleasing or justifiable. While his comments undoubtedly represent other critics' opinions, this judgement is not unanimous. More and more critics are coming to appreciate Ethel Wilson as a stylist. Beverly Mitchell, for instance, also in The Ethel Wilson Symposium, says Wilson is "Acclaimed as the most exquisite stylist of this century" ("Right Word" 73). Her opinion is shared by such relevant critics as W. J. Keith, Desmond Pacey, and David Stouck, who have seen enough merit in Wilson's short stories to devote considerable attention, and numerous publications, to them. When Dorothy Walker says, "Wilson would be incapable of technically bad writing" (69), she goes too far, but she and Mitchell, Keith, Pacey, and Stouck do approach the truth about Wilson's prose. A difference of opinion is good, however, because it stimulates critical interest in Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories more than three decades after its publication. Without debate, perhaps many stylistic elements, such as Wilson's sentence structure, dialogue, irony, satire, description, and symbolism, would go unnoticed. And for an author of her calibre there could be no greater tragedy.

Conclusion

As Paul Comeau so aptly observes, the mountains which Ethel Wilson describes surrounding Vancouver can be seen as a metaphor for her fictional world (Comeau 24). Her collection of short stories shows the peaks and valleys, the harshness, and the beauty of life as we know it.

> In the summer time the mountains were soft, deceptive in their innocency, full of crags and crevasses and arêtes and danger. In the winter they lay magnificent, white and much higher, it seemed, than in the summer time. (Wilson, Mrs. Golightly 197)

While the life she fictionalizes includes many peaks and valleys, Wilson's fiction itself is neither rocky nor inconsistent in its quality. With the innovation afforded by a changing genre, Wilson thematically and stylistically explores the idiosyncratic nature of existence with captivating style.

Her literary skill would, however, mean far less to her if it did not vivify a worthy subject. She writes,

> . . . I believe that fictional books are . . . sometimes written for sheer delight in writing -- just as a person swims for love of it -- from a joy in and the selective use of our language, and because

> of an abiding interest in, partial understanding of, projection into, curiosity about (what would we do without prepositions?), identification with and compassion for our fellow human beings. . . . The human predicament is universal and also intensely personal and curious, and is the subject of all serious fiction. (Stouck 83)

Even more than literature, Ethel Wilson loves people. They are the cause which literature must serve, and it is their predicament, their joys and their tragedies, that she attempts to capture with as much accuracy, compassion, and insight as possible. To Wilson, the short story respresents a way of discovering the universal qualities and values which unite people everywhere, a way of reaching others with the love, understanding, and responsibility her works advocate.

Although emotions, beauty, and wonder are often her subject matter, and although she frequently writes of them with great humor, Wilson never completely relinquishes her serious tone. In her essay, "Somewhere Near the Truth," Wilson says that her fiction "is serious even when it is funny (for serious fiction may also be funny fiction)" (Stouck 82). The many styles which Mrs. Golightly exhibits reveal the comedic aspects of serious issues and vice versa. It is style, then, which provides the text with numerous levels of meaning and reveals it to be the work of a highly talented artist.

And, ultimately, it is through a synthesis of theme and language that Wilson achieves the ironic mode which is her favorite literary style. When Helen Sonthoff describes this irony, she says,

> As I read Ethel Wilson, this is not a reductive vision. It enlarges. It shares. The shapes of her fictions, the pacing, the tone keep us always aware of otherness, keep room for reflection, for comment, for individual judgment which, precisely because it has no collective, no social weight, no gathering up of the robes of authoritative abstraction, is freely idiosyncratic.
> (Sonthoff 104)

This statement summarizes with great clarity a few of the qualities that render Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories eminently interesting both to read and to study. The ironic mode functions with great efficacy in the genre of short fiction and in the hands of such a capable author. Unique and challenging, Wilson is very much her own writer and does not subscribe to any status quo. Experimental in the deepest and truest sense of that phrase, her collection of stories illustrates what literary heights and triumphs a craftsperson of Ethel Wilson's caliber can attain.

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