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AN ANALYSIS OF ANGUS WILSON'S NO LAUGHING MATTER

THESIS

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By

Gloria Cockerell Arnold, B.S.
Denton, Texas

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This thesis examines Angus Wilson's novels with particular attention to *No Laughing Matter*, 1967. The introductory overview of Wilson's first five novels and the examination of *No Laughing Matter* show that all Wilson's novels are concerned with his protagonists' capacity for self-deception and the ways deception limits freedom of choice. In *No Laughing Matter* six protagonists try to balance self-deception and freedom both in their lives and in the art forms which interest them. The thesis traces the lives of these six as they fail both as artists and as people. Chapter III of the thesis studies the relationship of fantasy to character in the novel.

In *No Laughing Matter* particularly, the characters reflect the loss of liberty when individuals do not exercise their freedom to choose.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis the novels of Angus Wilson are examined; particular attention is given to his latest novel, _No Laughing Matter_, 1967. As his novels show, Wilson is a secular humanist with a special interest in social history. Wilson believes man has no recourse to God for his problems, but he does believe in freedom of choice for man. Therefore, the problem for man, as Wilson sees it, is to maintain a truthfulness with himself in order to keep his freedom of choice.

An introductory overview of Wilson's first five novels is given in Chapter I of this paper, drawing on interviews with Wilson and critiques of his works. This is done in an attempt to show that Wilson is concerned in all his novels with his protagonists' capacity for self-deception and the various ways deception limits freedom of choice.

In _No Laughing Matter_ Wilson's characters try to live out, and find a degree of liberation from, self-deception through role-playing, illusion, and art. Wilson has introduced the art theme earlier in _Hemlock and After_, 1952. The body of this thesis concerns itself with _No Laughing Matter_ because it seems to be Wilson's most complex and most

aesthetically satisfactory examination of the conflict between self-deception and freedom. It is this conflict, as Wilson's novels show, that accounts for the increasing disunity, throughout the twentieth century, of man in his social relationships.

As a novelist Wilson is a social historian who comments on the changes in English society from the time of his birth in 1913, to the present. Wilson is, in short, an artist with a particular interest in social history. As a recorder of the passing scene, Wilson presents historical change as it is registered on the lives of individuals, including some far removed from events which shape the destiny of a nation as a whole. These individuals are often unaware of the causes of cultural changes. Wilson is interested in the reactions of these people--not in the change in itself.

> The novelist's concern, he says, is to "expose the human condition," not to preach: "I attack not specific things, but only people who are set in one way of thinking. The people in my books who come out well may be more foolish, but they have retained an immediacy toward life, not a set of rules applied to life in advance" (6, p. 20).

It will be the purpose of this paper to show that Wilson deals with the conflict involved with freedom of choice through the lives of all his characters, and through the art of some of his individual protagonists. An introductory overview of Wilson's first five novels will be presented in an effort to show that the conflict is basic to Wilson's fictional world view.

In No Laughing Matter Wilson presents the dualism created in life by the options of free will and self-deception. For this he presents six primary characters who are unable to exercise their freedom of choice, but who utilize instead elaborate illusions which they live, each by adopting a role appropriate to his own illusion. In the discussion of No Laughing Matter, art themes in their most complex forms will be shown to reveal Wilson's attitudes as a social historian and humanist.

Wilson tries in his novels to present settings of imaginary worlds broad enough in social scale to make the personal problems of his hero seem no abstraction, but the center of "life" which expands beyond the novel, beyond the reader's view into "reality." He says,

> It is this, I believe, that prevents a moral theme from seeming a "set piece" or a formal pattern. It is because I wanted to create this sense of "life" that I have often used sub-plots and other such old-fashioned devices, not out of any partisan commitment to the "traditional" English novel or out of any belief that a novel should contain a wide variety of "real life" (7, p. 32).

Wilson hopes there is present in his fiction a deeper kind of conflict than that found in the traditional novel of manners, to which tradition he has certainly contributed. Indeed, Wilson's characters are deeper, more developed than those in the typical novel of manners. The moral code for his heroes is based on moral awareness, an awareness often

"so analytical and introspective that it ends in paralysis of the will and inaction" (4, p. 83).

Wilson's first novel, Hemlock and After, 1952, is a presentation of social history in the sense that the central character, Bernard Sands, is an established author who tries to change the social-financial conditions under which aspiring authors must create. Sands fights the government until he wins the right to turn Vardon Hall, a country estate, into a self-operated dormitory for authors-to-be, but even though the victory could change the status of the struggling writer, Wilson shows that almost no one cares about this potentially great event.

Throughout the novel, attitudes of other characters toward Sands and his Vardon Hall victory are shown. Ella Sands, Bernard's wife, has had a mental collapse and cannot cope with problems of everyday life, so she does not take a conscious interest in Bernard's victory or, indeed in any of the causes in which he has interested himself. Ella simply cannot face the chaotic real world, so she has built a fantasy world in which she tries to maintain constant order. She keeps a garden in which she tries to create the strict order of her fantasy world. "The garden is an extension of Ella's fantasies, where she can impose the order she does not find in the outside world, and satisfy her ideals by assisting life to flourish" (2, p. 231). Bernard suggests two objections to this ordered world; perhaps

sometimes it is better not to preserve life, but rather to "give it a further push on its way to the rubbish heap" (2, p. 231). More seriously he asks, "what about the weeds" (2, p. 231)? One must consider if he has a right to "weed out" those persons or ideas which he considers to be disagreeable in the mainstream of life and if so, to what extent. "What is one to do about the 'weeds' in moral choices? In life, a moral choice demands commitment to one line of conduct and the exclusion of others" (2, p. 231).

Bernard tries to make each of his decisions be the "right" one, but he eventually learns that no absolute ideal can be put into practice. Conflicting duties are ever present and moral decisions are based upon the balancing of these conflicting duties. Ella cannot live in an irrational surrounding. She views everything--persons, events, and decisions--simplistically. "This, as Bernard says, is 'the proper exercise of authority,' the proper carrying out of moral responsibility, but for him its clear-cut simplicity ignores the confused nature of life" (2, p. 231). This confused nature of life causes indecision in Bernard which he carries to extreme. He wonders often if decisions he makes about the various causes he supports are "right" after all. He knows someone must be affected adversely by any decision he makes and so he has difficulty in deciding what to do. His art, writing, suffers as his life does, while he wrestles with decisions in life and with the imbalance

between life and the art he produces. Bernard cannot be as sure of right and wrong as is Ella, and he must attempt to employ his own humanist beliefs without rejecting the necessity of making moral choices.

Though Bernard thinks of himself and his own aims as being different in nature from those of other characters--more wholesome and beneficial to others--he comes to see that he is like the others and to feel that he has been too idealistic. He feels at the end of his life that everything he does or leaves undone will have some effect on others and that nothing can have only good effects. As a result, Wilson does not judge Sands as harshly and as unsympathetically as he does the other characters because Sands tries "to limit the effects of his own egotism, and to avoid the excesses of the other characters" (2, p. 235).

Bernard knows he must make certain moral judgments which will affect others, but for him, those who interfere, even to help others, can never be sure to what extent they are giving in to a sadistic enjoyment of power. "But how is the balance to be struck? Bernard is not sure and his uncertainty gradually paralyses his will" (2, p. 233).

Wilson has said of Bernard Sands that he is a kind of stereotype of the rationalist-humanist, "a skimpy hero" (3, p. 30). Bernard is indeed a skimpy hero. The problem of self-realization is a theme in all of Wilson's novels, but to Sands, self-realization offers only death. Rather than

resolve the dilemma of the humanist--what the effect of his decisions will be on others and to what extent the problem is important--he escapes to his death, knowing he will never again have to wrestle with decisions. Whereas Ella chooses self-deception rather than face reality, Bernard chooses not to choose, that is, to die. However, Bernard has rejected self-deception. Wilson shows in the novel that he feels that no human life is separate from any other human life and that very often decisions made by one person can cause a reaction in a life totally unrelated, in any other way, to that of the decision-maker's.

The problem of how to exercise one's free will is left unanswered by Sands, who dies rather than try any longer to make viable decisions.

Many of the same questions that troubled Bernard Sands are pondered by Gerald Middleton, the central character of _Anglo-Saxon Attitudes_, 1956. His primary concern is just how much one should undertake to decide on his own when other persons will be crucially affected by the decisions. The crisis of the novel is prepared more fully in this, Wilson's second novel, and his hero is developed more fully than was Sands simply because Wilson had left his job at the British Museum at the time of his writing _Anglo-Saxon Attitudes_, and he had more time to plan the novel. Wilson says, "I was enabled carefully to plan a technique of flashbacks and word echoes which would show how self-realization and

the purging of guilt (or the acceptance of it) are inevitably a long process of re-living traumatic experiences in memory" (7, p. 32).

Gerald Middleton is a secular man who lives in the world of scholars; through the techniques of flashbacks and word echoes Wilson asserts that scholars are people first and therefore can be affected by the same kind of problems that affect other people.

Wilson believes that people are basically alike, but that during their lives they adopt the attitudes expected of anyone who enters a particular vocation or life style. Individuals, then, become known to others by the roles or attitudes they adopt, not by what they may really believe. In stressing this point, Wilson is trying to show that the problems of one man are complexly modified when placed in the perspective of the lives morally entwined with his. As the life of Gerald Middleton is presented, it is interwoven with those of other characters in such a way as to afford the reader a view of each major character, both as an individual and as an integral part of the lives of others.

Middleton is an aging historian, a man whose public and private lives are irreconcilable. While he is being considered for the presidency of a prominent society of historians, Middleton needs to make a major decision--whether to tell the historical society that its very foundation is fraudulent. His attempt to decide what to do is so

complicated by his past that he must explore his earlier decisions, or indecisions.

Before the beginning of the historical society, its founder, Middleton's teacher and fellow historian, Professor Stokesay, discovered a pagan fertility god in the coffin of an ancient missionary. Because of the importance of the discovery, Professor Stokesay was internationally acclaimed by scholars. Middleton has deduced that the pagan idol was in fact placed at the archeological dig by Stokesay's son, Gilbert, Middleton's friend, with whose wife Middleton was having a love affair. The society is built upon reports and studies about the strange discovery by its founder, and Middleton knows his information can cause the end of the society.

In his private life Middleton's separation from his wife, who refuses to grant him a divorce, is a constant source of vexation to him. However, like many other Wilson characters, he regards his decisions as moral ones and considers all possibilities for so long that he makes no decision at all. He has considered for years confronting his wife with his supposition that she purposely burned the hand of their daughter when the girl was a child, but he has said nothing because he has thought so long of the effect of his accusation on his wife, his children, and anyone who knows them. Likewise Middleton has neglected to investigate his belief that the historical society's founder

learned of the hoax perpetrated by Gilbert, but remained silent about it in order to retain his magnificent reputation in scholarly circles. At last, however, Middleton has come to the realization that whether he chooses to remain silent in both instances or to speak out in both, he will cause harm to someone. He further realizes that if he is to be able to live, he must make a decision and act upon it. At last, after gathering evidence, he decides to speak out and, finally he feels alive because he has progressed from indecision to action.

Throughout his years of moral dilemma Middleton has kept up an appearance of being a somewhat lazy historian who idles away his time and presents himself annually at his estranged wife's home on Christmas day. He has concentrated his mental energy for so long on the questions which plague him that, though he would rather stay at his own home and consider his problems, he has begun to perform the acts of day-to-day living--only because they are expected of him. Wilson has, with the title Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, found an "extremely apt symbol for the curious Anglo-Saxon habit of going through contorted moral gestures, while at the same time pursuing (rather slowly) one's own inclinations" (5, pp. 48-49).

Whereas Bernard Sands dies before he can act on a major decision, Gerald Middleton is allowed by Wilson truly to experience liberation through self-realization. Bernard

dies, Gerald accepts life by ridding himself of self-deception. He confronts his wife and, even though his children still despise him for failing for so long to act at all, he feels renewed hope and energy from finally making some decisions and acting upon them; he even begins again to work on a historical manuscript he has been intending for years to complete. He instigates an investigation by the historical society into the question of the authenticity of the idol.

In Anglo-Saxon Attitudes Wilson seems to go one step further than in Hemlock and After in his quest to find how secular man can function in the real world with his own problems and those of others. Bernard chooses not to choose, but to die. Because Middleton chooses to choose, he is relatively free.

Wilson feels that readers will judge the second novel as either more or less genuinely optimistic than the first according to their views of death. To Wilson the underlying moral problem he sees at the center of life is whether to seek the seeming security of deception and illusion, or to risk the real insecurity of choice and freedom. This problem imposes a sort of greyness upon both his central characters--Bernard and Gerald. The central problem is the same in both novels: "Christmas dinners and social functions still represent the hell of the human failure to communicate . . . the solitary walks and the meaningless reveries represent the opposed

hell of the maze of self-pity and neurosis" (7, p. 33). However, Wilson says of his heroes,

> Poised between the manic world symbolized by cocktail parties and the depressive world symbolized by the long country walk, my two heroes seemed to me sufficiently to typify modern man's tightrope existence. Yet their very non-committal to either hell made them immoderately moderate. The sexual sensuality which I attributed to both of them got sucked down into their flatness so that it seemed not a redeeming delight or a cause for pride as I had intended, but an additional burden, perhaps, of life (7, p. 34).

Wilson tries in The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot, 1958, to divide his two hells. For the first time he presents a woman as protagonist, Meg Eliot, and casts her as someone already in the hell of the failure of human communication. She has no independent self; she is an emotional appendage of her husband. She can be involved in social commitment, because she does not see people as individuals. Wilson strips her of her false identity with her husband's death, and the loss of his money, which completely alters her social standing. Before his death she has lived in a hell of false communication. She immediately plunges into the opposing hell of aloneness.

Wilson has worked out the problems of his own life in his characters. He believed himself for years to be a warm, understanding person, but did not realize that he himself did not think of others as persons until he realized that people did not react toward him as they did to persons who really were concerned about others. He finally reached a

crisis in his life when he tried to become more responsive to the needs of others. He says some years after the writing of The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot, ". . . I now see she repeated, as Bernard and Gerald had done, my own crisis" (7, p. 35).

At the outset of the novel Meg is interested in nothing, actually, except her husband George and her life with him. George is the working member of the family; he takes care of any arrangements involving Meg and himself and deals with any contingencies which arise, thereby creating a rather sheltered existence for Meg. While the couple are on vacation, they stop at an airport during their flight and George is killed by assassins shooting at their political leader. Now Meg is left to create a life for herself alone. However, she is isolated from other people as a result of her dependency on George and her corollary lack of authentic connection with other people. Meg, suddenly jolted from a life of marital dependency, must now resist the pull toward loneliness and despair. She must look to others for help in understanding the world in which she will be living.

After notification at the time of George's death that she is financially impoverished, Meg tries rooming with first one friend and then another, only to become involved in their family troubles. She falls ill and is on the verge of nervous collapse when the second friend calls Meg's brother, David, in to assist Meg because she has no other

family. David is a passive person who was a conscientious objector during the war. He has tried to control his once-violent temper and has succeeded so well that he has more or less withdrawn from active life by subduing any desire he may have to react aggressively toward any person or event. He has really done little more than elevate his melancholic neurosis into a system of quietism. Once a student working toward an advanced degree, David has retired with a friend to the country where the two men own and operate a large nursery. David has been a homosexual, but has become so passive that he has even ceased his sexual activities.

Meg goes to live with David, and the quiet and solitude of his life are a balm to her; she begins to have an interest in living once more and an energy to attempt new things. She at last realizes that David's life style cannot be hers because it is an escape from life itself and that should she remain with David, she would be isolated and protected much as she was when George was alive, but through a role reversal. She refuses to indulge in David's love of dependence on others, for, of course, he is forced to rely on others for his existence at the nursery. She does not indulge her desire to run David's life, and discontinues the effort. Meg realizes that she will become in David's life what George was in hers and so decides to leave David's home. She frees herself, then, from a manipulative situation. As a result, when she decides to leave David's country home and

seek her own life, David sinks into his self-absorbed melancholic hell and she resumes life fortified by some powers of self-knowledge.

Wilson tries to show Meg as able to resume life in the world, through her honesty and toughness, on a level of self-knowledge which will at least be sufficient to prevent her from a second collapse. ". . . she had plumbed the depths and had come up again" (7, p. 35). By showing Meg as he does, Wilson presents a character who is willing to attempt to establish connections with other people and who realizes through many failures that she helps herself become a more whole personality each time she chooses to interact with rather than manipulate other people. Bernard Sands, and for many years Gerald Middleton also, dally over decisions until often they are left inactive. Middleton only finally becomes aware that he must act, but Meg makes her decisions and acts upon them from the outset. At times she makes decisions that result in pain or inconvenience to herself and others, but she knows she must act in order to stay alive. Both Sands and Middleton realize that every decision they make will affect someone adversely, if only a bit. This realization causes their inaction. Meg realizes that to remain inactive is to kill one's will and that living consists of acting on decisions and dealing with the effects of decisions made by oneself or by others.

> Mrs. Eliot is probably more important as a work of transition than as an achievement in itself. There are undeniable longuers in the presentation of Meg's personality and the supporting figures, harmless oddities for the most part, lack the grotesque vitality we have come to expect of Mr. Wilson's minor characters. What the book does suggest is a significant change of vision. The intellectual rigour of Mr. Wilson's standpoint remains unaltered. Neither Mrs. Eliot nor her brother can accept the consolations of religion in their suffering. The private conscience directed by self-knowledge is their only guide, and Meg in particular is prepared to follow it at any cost. The vital change is to be found in the author's attitude towards human conduct itself. The underlying pattern which his satire has followed in the past has been the exposure of characters whose pretentions far exceeded their true virtues or resources. Here for the first time he is writing of people whose trials bring out hidden reserves of understanding or self-reliance, and this more affirmative approach lends a whole new dimension to his observation (5, p. 52).

In his first three novels it seems Wilson has attempted to demonstrate some moral connections between even the most improbably related people; he continues to remind his readers in _The Old Men at the Zoo_, 1961, that people are very much affected by the actions of others. _The Old Men at the Zoo_ challenges the belief held by many people that their nation is separate from other nations and, therefore, can ignore the others with impunity. The locale is England, and Wilson shows that England is not separate morally or politically from the world and that violence can happen there--often violence engineered by other countries.

While the narrative does present national and international problems of England, Wilson is primarily concerned

with individuals. When he came to write *The Old Men at the Zoo* Wilson had begun to feel that the chasm between the liberal intention in personal relationships and its actual failure could not be bridged by any illusions, however polite or humanitarian they might seem. The falsely innocent evasions of Inge Middleton, for example, or the tolerant acceptance masking a deep self-deception, as with Bernard Sands, must be dealt with by "constant intellectual self-inquiry . . ." (7, p. 43). Wilson came to recognize the paradox that self-knowledge can itself be the agent of the stultified will. Bernard Sands in Wilson's first novel, is a detailed study of this problem. It is a study of a certain social group: artists and intellectuals. Simon Carter, the anti-hero of *The Old Men at the Zoo*, Wilson's fourth novel, continues the study, expanded this time to national and international implications.

Carter, the narrator of *The Old Men at the Zoo*, is a young zoologist who does not want to be involved in problems; he wants to have everything ordered and organized. A failure at work in the field, he has deceived himself into thinking that he is content to correct the copy of and write reports on the work of his associates who must perform experiments or otherwise work with the zoo animals. He wishes for an undisturbed existence, but in each area of his life is chaos. World war is being threatened, his marriage is failing; and, at his job, which he uses as an escape from

problems, two powerful factions within the hierarchy of the zoo's management are in verbal and political battle, each wanting to renovate the zoo its own way. One view is that the zoo should be made an open-air zoo with creatures allowed to roam free within the confines, while the opposing view is that the zoo should be of Victorian style, very ornate with small cages for the animals.

The two men who are the leaders of the two sides use the zoo to further their own political and vocational careers. The persons who actually keep the zoo operational care more for the animals, fortunately, than they do for the abstract ideals which blind the directors. They are concerned about the zoo, however, to the point of being concerned about nothing else. As the danger of war grows and there is increasing threat to the zoo, the men who care so much for the zoo often seem not to care for their families. They become more defensive as they become more defenseless until at last they are very animal-like in their attempts to save, if not the zoo, at least the animals, from destruction. Carter's own false contentment has blinded him to the trouble around him.

The leaders of the two factions are as blind to the zoo problems as Carter is to his personal problems. During the international events which make war inevitable, the two faction leaders at the zoo ignore all problems but those incurred in trying to convince others that their

zoological-political ideals are right. On the other hand, the men who are interested in keeping the zoo running, attempt to create in it an existence totally separate from the social world. Even this brief account of the basic situation in The Old Men at the Zoo shows that it is a national symbol.

The problems of living and working with other people presented in The Old Men at the Zoo are not peculiar to England, even though England is the setting for the action. Wilson reminds his readers of this when he gives reports about events of the war in other countries and when he shows the feelings of Carter's wife about the U.S.A., which is her home. Although Carter attempts throughout to remain aloof and above the squabbling, he is reluctantly aware of the personal problems of those with whom he works and of the zoo's management problems. He is also aware that he is not coping with his own marital difficulties. His is the problem of other Wilson protagonists: how to remain alive without acting or reacting, in short, without choosing.

When the bombing of the war is at its most threatening to the zoo, Carter and one of the zoo workers escape from London in a van which they have filled with monkeys from the zoo. Carter's co-worker values the lives of these monkeys over those of his own family. In the dead of night the two men are halted in their escape by people of the countryside who block the road and ask them about London's fate in the

bombing. The country people are starving and when they discover the monkeys in the van, they tear the animals to pieces to use them as food. The monkeys destroyed and his co-worker killed in an attempt to save them, Carter makes his way through the night away from the frenzied countryfolk.

When morning comes, the unconscious Carter is discovered by a widow and her son who live nearby. After they realize that Carter will not harm them, they ask his help in procuring food, for they too are starving. Carter fashions a trap and traps a badger, which the woman and the boy cook for the three of them. Carter becomes violently ill from eating the badger meat and for four days is nursed by the widow.

When he is somewhat recovered, Carter goes back to London only to find his marital difficulties worse than ever. His wife closes him out of her life; the two will merely live together because of their children. Nonetheless, Carter's experience in the countryside has been a liberating one for him. He has learned that his vocational contentment is false; he does not work in the field because he _cannot_ rather than because he does not so choose. In the end he realizes that no one can remain apart and he asserts himself to become a manager of the zoo rather than a reader of reports.

An aversion to making decisions, such as Carter has, is a basic trait of Wilson's main characters. Silvia Calvert, through whose eyes the action of _Late Call_, 1964, is seen,

is such a character. Silvia, like Meg Eliot, for many years has acted as she was expected to by others, with no thought of making aggressive decisions for herself. She is different from Meg, however, in almost every other respect. Silvia is a simple person, one who thinks of the wishes of others to the point that she ignores her own wishes and needs. Whereas Meg tried one idea after another, Silvia spends her life until she is in her sixties trying to maintain the passive role in life she has been told by others to accept.

Approaching old age, Silvia must begin a new life when she and her husband, Arthur, move into the home of their son, Harold, and his three children. They immediately encounter problems likely to arise when two families, each with its rules for living, are thrown together in close quarters.

Silvia, who is used to subjecting her will to Arthur's, tries to do what the various family members ask of her. Her predicament is much like that of Wilson's other protagonists who make no decisions for fear of adversely affecting someone else. This fear is, however, an ineffectual mask for Silvia's belief that she is unworthy to make independent choices. After the death of Arthur and after many failing attempts to fit in with the routine of living in her son's home, Silvia finally realizes that she must live alone. Her decision to do so is an assertion of her

value as a self. Silvia was born and bred as a servant. She chooses now not to be one. She must learn too, to change with the times.

To understand the changing times is a problem for Wilson's characters as it was for Wilson himself. Because Wilson was born at the beginning of the First World War, he has lived to see the England of his youth grow into the very different England of his middle age; much of the satire present in his books is derived from what he sees as an unwelcome transformation. He feels that each human being should be genuinely concerned about the condition of every other human being and not be afraid to act in behalf of anything in which he believes. Wilson believes too that to be alive is to make demands on others, to require thought and action of others. He thinks one must do this while thinking and acting in response to the needs of people one knows personally and the masses he only hears or reads about.

Through his writing Wilson has shown what he regards as a basic fact of social history: that most people in the twentieth century are becoming progressively less interested, except selfishly, in events or other people. He shows too that to care enough to act for or against anything or anyone is to face possible nervous breakdown and physical exhaustion. But he insists on his belief that only those who try, care, and act are really alive, can really claim any sort of happiness untainted by escapism.

Escapism is examined in Wilson's novels, the action of which through Late Call, is viewed through the eyes of characters no longer young. These characters see a world in transition. The protagonists typically (with the possible exception of Bernard Sands in Hemlock and After) strive toward a life of making their own decisions and acting upon them as Wilson believes one must. They do not necessarily reach happy endings, but they do find new beginnings.

Though the characters, settings, and events are different in each of Wilson's novels, there is the suggestion in each that every action performed or ignored by a character creates an intersecting series of events. Throughout the narratives the protagonists must decide what they really want to be as persons and whether what they choose is consistent with the roles they have been playing. Often the characters do not realize they are playing roles ill-suited to them until something happens to make them aware of the artificiality of their lives, as in the cases of Meg Eliot and Silvia Calvert. In some instances the protagonist does not assume a life-long role, but changes roles when society or expedience dictates, as in the case of Simon Carter of The Old Men at the Zoo. Meg's brother David plays the role of passivist rather than suffer the frightening experience of interacting with others, and even convinces himself that he is contented. All these characters assume roles, sometimes false ones, throughout their lives. If the roles

assumed are false, then the decisions made during the time of role-playing are futile:

> Wilson suggests that a large part of human personality is built upon this false assumption of roles. Many of his characters are mere ragbags of pretense and affectation; they have no unique individuality but have become merely a series of poses (1, p. 119).

A frightening sense that personality is fashioned entirely by pretense is created by many Wilson characters, as in the case of Inge Middleton, or Harold Calvert's daughter, and to an even greater extent in the case of the primary characters of his latest novel, _No Laughing Matter_.

The pretense of his main characters in _No Laughing Matter_ is carried to the extreme as they create their own separate illusions about themselves in order to make their lives more bearable. Angus Wilson himself comes from a background of pretense with a family that was part of the genteel poor class that came into existence at the beginning of the twentieth century. Wilson's mother pretended to a class above that to which the family belonged and his father continually told stories of what might have been if he had only been treated fairly by life (7).

In _No Laughing Matter_ Wilson draws upon his own family life as well as upon character types he created for his earlier novels. He cannot hold Christianity or other religions to be true and so he creates characters who are without religion as a refuge during times of trouble. Rather, as people who feel that man himself is his only

strength, they look to themselves, if they do look, to find solutions to their problems. Wilson's own humanistic views are apparent in his treatment of the characters involved in No Laughing Matter and in the analysis of the illusions with which they defend themselves from the reality of their lives.

Wilson's first five novels have in common the fact that a single protagonist attempts to release himself from self-deception and utilize his free will--to create symmetry in his life and, where applicable, in his art. In some cases, as with Bernard Sands (Hemlock and After) the central character realizes the constant decision-making of life as a futile exercise and simply stops making decisions. Sands dies rather than continue trying to sort out his actions and judge the motives for his decisions. Some protagonists realize that simply to live is to assert one's self and to make decisions. Meg Eliot (The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot) realizes this and comes to know that she must decide in every instance and accept the responsibility for her decisions.

A type of complexity exists in No Laughing Matter that is absent from Wilson's other novels, making it a great deal more than a mere continuation of his earlier works. Wilson presents, not one, but six primary characters in No Laughing Matter. There is a great difference, primarily a difference of degree, between these protagonists and Wilson's earlier

ones. The characters in No Laughing Matter, being unable to manage the difficulty of decisions concerning their lives, create illusions which are more complex, more elaborate and in the main more destructive than the illusions we see in the earlier novels. The protagonists play roles suitable to the illusions by which they live so that eventually most of them cannot tell the difference between life and illusion, except in rare moments.

Since each believes so completely in his illusion (with the possible exception of Rupert) and plays his role so continually, the art each produces is untrue to him as a person. The art itself may have a limited sort of authenticity, but it is created under the influence of illusion which is false to the personality of the artist. Thus is created a problem which does not exist for the earlier heroes. For the sake of both life and art the six need to resolve the conflict between self-deception and freedom of choice.

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CHAPTER II

CHARACTERIZATION: ILLUSION AND ROLE-PLAYING

For Angus Wilson free will for man is a fact. Humanism as he conceives of it is an outgrowth of this fact, and Wilson's particular view of social history is heavily influenced by his humanism. To Wilson, humanism consists of his belief that man is his own supreme being and therefore free to make his own judgments and decisions. With these decisions, goes the responsibility.

A man's art is one of his responsibilities, and as a man lives, so will his art be, Wilson believes. To create art which has truth, an artist must be true to himself. This means that the artist must recognize himself for what he is, accept the responsibility for himself, and reflect as well as possible his considered decisions in his art. All the while, the artist is mindful that the reality of his art may differ from his own view of it as simply a human being. The perception of a viewer or reader of his art will differ from the artist's own so that he can never really present his view of reality in a way which will be received just as he presents it. The burden of this realization is sometimes too much to bear for the artist who wishes to represent reality in its truest form.

In _No Laughing Matter_ Wilson presents six primary characters who have secular views of life as he himself does, and who try to communicate their views of life to others, through the particular art forms they have chosen. Unfortunately for these six siblings, each lacks the ability to cope with the reality of his own life. For each the responsibility for life as it really is, is too much of a weight. Early on each becomes too tired or confused emotionally to properly deal with the everyday decisions one must manage if he is to interact with other people. As a result, each retreats into an illusion which is more comfortable for him to live than is his own real life. As each character becomes adept at playing the role he has chosen for his world of illusion, he progressively takes on more limitations of that role, thereby giving up part of his free will. These characters believe more and more in their roles until they actually have no freedom of choice left.

As artists, the characters are sometimes capable of creating truth, but their own lives are, for the most part, filled with lies. In a group effort the six create segments of The Game while they are still living at home, in order to give vent to their abused feelings. The Game is a success as a proto-drama because it presents the truth of their lives, but when the six attempt to do this in their individual art, they fail. The loss of their liberty as free

people is reflected in the art they produce, making it somewhat unsuccessful. As they live longer, their art loses what little power it has had and becomes totally ineffectual, making no impact on society because it is too egoistically oriented; it becomes too closely related to their illusions.

In the treatment of No Laughing Matter, below, Wilson's humanism and interest in social history will not be emphasized, but rather will be shown through the discussion of art forms in the novel itself. This will be done because the art themes show the progressive deterioration of society as revealed in the characters' retreat from freedom of choice--a freedom which is the basis of humanism. When they retreat, they retreat into illusion and role-playing.

Through the characters of No Laughing Matter Angus Wilson presents a microcosm of England and the social changes the country undergoes during the years from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. Wilson seems to want the reader to understand the ideas of class present in England and the problems encountered by members of that class system. To that end he has chosen six primary characters and their parents along with representatives from an older generation, one from the maternal and one from the paternal side of the family, with whom the reader becomes familiar. If, through his knowledge of the family presented, the reader learns of the problems social upheaval

causes for individuals, he will be better able to understand these problems of adjustment on a national level.

One comes to know the characters of the Matthews family very well, indeed, better than they know themselves. They hide their innermost feelings even from themselves and defend themselves from reality by playing roles appropriate to their positions in life, but roles which keep them from developing completely as people. A look at the background of the six primary characters will assist in understanding why these characters become what they become.

The characters in No Laughing Matter suffer from illusions which cripple their separate personal lives in various ways. Billy Pop, the father of six children, is an infantile person who labors under the illusion that he has the maturity of an adult. Throughout Billy Pop's life, his mother, Granny M, has felt and has stated often that he is a gentleman and therefore not to be expected to do actual work. Furthermore, she never really believes that he is capable of productivity, as his father was. As a result of Granny M's treating him a a child even after he became an adult, Billy Pop views life as merely a series of irresponsible adventures. Yet he always feels that his fantasy of being wealthy is near to being reality. Billy Pop chooses to see himself as a successful author and so acts the part both at home and when he goes out. He sees himself as a hero who can defend his family against all danger. He really does not want an

opportunity to come for him to assert himself in the world of literature because as early as when he is in his early thirties, he has become afraid to try.

Billy Pop is ignorant of the shape of his own life, but he does not care to find out really what he is capable of and so remains terribly immature. His immaturity causes distortions in Billy Pop's attitudes which in turn create problems for him in his dealings with other people. He is completely adolescent in his attitudes toward sex and does not even sleep in the room with his wife, the Countess. Nonetheless, he watches through the keyhole as she undresses for bed. He holds positions in his personal life that fit into his illusion of being adult, that is, husband and father, but he cannot accept the responsibilities these positions carry with them. He is so very immature that he thinks giving a present in itself can drive off unhappiness. As a father, therefore, he promises members of his family treats rather than trying to solve their underlying problems. He does this when eight-year-old Marcus cries after the Countess has slapped him and tried to pull him bodily from his nurse's lap in a tearoom. "Mr. Matthews came over and lifted Marcus in his arms. 'You'd like to come with me, wouldn't you, old sonnykins? Turbot and lobster sauce and a nice meringue, how about that? And perhaps Mr. Paul will have some _petits fours_ for a stout little fellow'" (1, p. 26). In a few minutes, however, he leaves the family group,

completely ignoring the children's reminders that he has promised to take Marcus with him.

Living in a world of illusion, Billy Pop very simply accepts himself as a failure. Ironically, he tells his eldest child, Gladys, that the figures have never added up for him and that he is not good at supplying illusions. Although he says these things to evoke sympathy from Gladys, with these two statements he both summarizes his life and explains that since he cannot supply illusions for his readers, he does not write well.

Billy Pop plays the role of a successful author, yet he takes the path of least resistance in his art as well as in his life. He thinks about his writing and applies what he considers to be artistic phrases to all that he sees. Typically, however, he never buys the writer's notebook in which he considers keeping his thoughts. Wilson presents in Billy Pop a man who allows self-complacency and illusion to replace the work he could have done. He vacillates in his art between allegiances to various styles and philosophies and, harkening back to his childhood, entertains such fantasies as a young boy would have. He fails to realize that he cannot substitute his fiction for his personal life.

A writing style of his own never comes to Billy Pop and he is never quite sure what form of writing he really likes. He is so unsure, in fact, that he merely reflects the attitudes of the times toward art and art forms. His

actions in his personal life are mirrored by his actions concerning his art--writing. Convinced that he is of the upper class, Billy Pop continues throughout his life to act as though the world owes him respect as well as the financial means to live as he pleases. He has never given serious consideration to anything; he has never even tried to make moral decisions. For Billy Pop, then, the action of setting goals for himself is equally as difficult as actually meeting those goals would be. Since he cannot meet goals, he has reduced his married life to a game. He feels no humiliation at the infidelity of the Countess because he reacts to her as a child would and is therefore not threatened by her sexual behavior as an adult would be. He would be very threatened by her actually leaving him to love or marry someone else.

Unfortunately, the Countess, wife and mother in the Matthews family, is as spoiled and selfish as Billy Pop; she wants no responsibilities to hamper her in her search for enjoyment. She is called "the Countess" by her husband, and her children also address her by that title. Selfishly protecting herself against the facts that show her to be a middle-class mother of six with a failure for a husband, the Countess clings to her illusion that she is a lady of good breeding and class. She plays the role of the free and fun-loving gentlewoman who is seen in the best places in London. Ignoring the economic and social decline of her

class carries with it assumptions of class superiority and expectations from society that reveal both an implacable fear of and hatred of the poor and a snobbish envy of the rich. This attitude is typical of the genteel poor of England during the early twentieth century. The Countess is concerned about and fearful of the social changes taking place, but she pushes thoughts of these changes from her mind and pretends to herself that the changes do not exist. She enjoys only light, gay fun and her view of life is accurately mirrored in her shallow attitude toward the theatre. She becomes disappointed when her son, Rupert, decides to act the part of Malvolio onstage rather than to be in a light comedy; the Countess thinks that the comedy will be more popular.

At times the Countess plays at another role, that of the perfect mother. Actually, love of life is love of frivolity for the Countess and she becomes very irate when reminded of her duties. She wants to be known as a good mother to her children without having to do anything for them. Without considering how her children feel, she believes that she is loved warmly by them and is sure that she loves life more than do any of the other family members.

While she lives in the shabbiness of the Matthews' flat, No 52, the Countess' illusion of being a well-born lady is so intense that it colors everything she thinks or does. As Billy Pop fails vocationally, he also becomes less interesting as a sexual partner in her estimation. Yet in

her role as a gentlewoman, the Countess dreams all her married life of what Billy Pop could be and of the status to which he could raise her; she is really not in love with him as a person. She is as immature about sex as Billy Pop is. She must continually spend time with other men so that they act as buffers between her and the reality of her life.

Because the Countess tries so hard to make her illusion into reality and because she plays the role she has chosen so well, the children come to believe that their mother always has enjoyable evenings when she is away from them with one of her lovers. However, she experiences problems outside her home too. She becomes so intent on making real the fantasy she has created of herself as a young, attractive woman, that when her lovers, whom she uses to help reinforce her role, leave her, she is thrown into a rage at having to return from her dream world, a rejected mother of six.

Because the Countess believes the illusion that she is a lady, yet knows all the while that her personal life is very different from that of a lady, she feels that she has been wronged by those who thrust her into the life she leads. She blames her father for dying before he could insure that she married well. "But he hadn't lived, damn him, and so she hadn't married one of his subalterns, a regiment at her feet, but Billy Pop and a smelly house and a sour bed" (1, p. 122). And she blames Billy Pop for failing to come up to

her expectations. "You used to speak such wonderful English," she says to him, "it was pleasant to listen to. But now it's like all the rest, you've let everything slide" (1, p. 124). She is very dissatisfied and as a result is unable to realize the good things she has because the life she lives is not the one of which she dreams. She wants her illusory world to be the real world so badly that she simply cannot give up her illusion and face what she really is.

This unhappy woman feels that she cannot control any facet of her life and so is frustrated continually. Only when she is in the company of her lovers can she exercise a measure of control over her life. Then she convinces herself that the role she is playing is the reality of her life. When she is at home with her family, however, she vents her unhappiness through saying cruel things to the members of the family or, often, through physical violence.

Both Billy Pop and the Countess are members of a generation which lives through a highly transitional period. They experience life in an England which changes rapidly from one with a well-established class structure and set of values to a life in which rules and values are constantly changing. Their own class is going from being genteel to being genteel poor. Because they cannot understand what is happening to the world in which they live, they react by holding desperately to the values they have been taught. They create illusions in an attempt to keep these values alive.

Underneath all their feelings is the belief that there is nothing they can do, either to halt the change or to turn things back to the way they were. While Billy Pop simply gives up, the Countess reacts violently to her feelings of inadequacy. At times she throws objects as well as verbal abuse at Billy Pop in an attempt to dispel physically the chaos and antagonism she cannot control. She often pulls Marcus, the youngest child, from his bed and spanks him while he is still asleep. To the Countess Marcus is not a little boy, but actually is her hatred for Billy Pop.

Ironically, Marcus, unwanted by his mother, is the child who most looks and acts like her. Even though he hates his mother, Marcus comes over the years to adopt her bored, spiteful manner in reacting to others. Mirroring the Countess' acts of violence, he tries until his early adolescent years to relieve the tension of situations which frighten him by screaming his loudest.

Because his actual existence is being spent in drab unpleasantness--he even must sleep in a box rather than a bed, Marcus has begun early to escape into his illusion that he is a special, lovely boy surrounded by beauty. Before the Countess and Billy Pop start keeping the money Granny M has paid for his tuition, thereby forcing him to discontinue his education, Marcus has begun to appreciate how different the surroundings of others have been from his own and how very little beauty is in his personal life.

Since his early life is ugly and devoid of color, he craves the newest and smartest in clothes and decor to help him remove himself from his real setting. To this end he spends many hours embellishing even the shadows on the walls of No. 52 with his imagination.

For all his quest for love, Marcus' feelings have been so abused that he early ceases to care for others. His interest in visual pattern details helps him to order the chaos he feels and lives with; he uses his drawing ability to create images he can enjoy. He views people, as well as objects, as patterns, but attaches little value to the people. When the children take in three orphaned kittens, he sees them as a pattern of stripes and wants them to remain so. He uses patterns to escape from ugliness so that he dislikes seeing the kittens picked up. To him they are ugly when separated from the mass their bodies together make.

His resemblance to his hated mother is more than physical, as we have seen. Marcus uses his painting, and later his critiques of paintings, to create a semblance of beauty in his life, just as the Countess uses her role as a free gentlewoman to create a semblance of order in hers. Marcus chooses the role of a homosexual aesthete so that he may be in the art world and enjoy the wealth of its people. He must act out his illusion because when he steps out of the role of aesthete, his illusion of beauty shatters and his real self becomes too painful for him.

Later, when he is a young man, Marcus actually lives his adopted role as an aesthete. He becomes an art critic and companion to an older rich man who lives in the art world. It is interesting to note that Wilson has Marcus become an art critic rather than an artist, just as he has Marcus live within the circle of artists but never really be one of them. Marcus' criticism is divorced from actual art just as the illusion he enacts is removed from his actual life. His exact portrayal of a rich aesthete with everything he wants cannot make him a vital, feeling person any more than his being an art critic can make him an adept artist.

Although he is able now to purchase whatever paintings he desires through his rich friend, Jack, Marcus is not happy because he is painfully aware of his lack of education and of the fact that he is homosexual. Odious experiences with the Countess have caused Marcus, even at a very young age, to like males better than he likes females. He can always find at least one disagreeable quality in each female he meets.

Even though he feels rather safe with Jack, insecurity haunts Marcus and he is still uncertain enough to strike out with his spitefulness and petulance when he feels that his security is threatened. At times Marcus expresses his infantile desires by taking up with vulgar, low-class men such as Ted, a youth he meets on a street one day, just as the Countess has taken American army officers as lovers.

Marcus knows Ted is not in the same class as his friends in the art world, but he realizes too that he likes Ted because of his vulgarity. After a brief physical affair with Ted, Marcus must withdraw into his illusion and take up his role-playing once more. With Ted he has been too near his real self and thus too nearly defenseless. He recognizes this when the two quarrel one afternoon. Ted says, "all right. If that's ow your ladyship feels . . . I'm off."

> Ted even went so far as to swing his legs down on to the floor and pick up his socks, but bewilderment . . . prevented his going further. By chance, however, his choice of words resolved his dilemma for Marcus, for he heard the echoes of his own voice in the room and recognized them with horror (1, p. 325).

What Marcus recognizes in his words is the sound of the Countess' voice.

As he practices his role, Marcus makes painting and the judging of painting his lifestyle so that he actually comes to live the role he plays. However, because of the bleakness of his early nursery days, he cannot keep himself from choosing only "fun" paintings for his bedroom, even though he could have excellent ones. His fun paintings, ironically, constantly remind him of his origins at No 52.

Marcus holds to the daydream he began at the Exhibition in the first pages of No Laughing Matter--the dream that he is special and apart from others. His elder sister Margaret, whose coldness keeps her apart from others, creates an illusion that she is a warm, loving person. Her coldness

results in part from the fact that early in her life Margaret begins to analyze the actions of others and to use her analyses as a defense against her parents. When the Countess says spiteful things to Margaret, Margaret concentrates on observing certain unflattering details of the Countess' appearance or tone of voice, or considers in what ways the Countess is like a snake. She concentrates on physical details to shield herself from the cruelty in the Countess' words.

> Making her way downstairs to her father's study, Margaret fixed accurately the little stream of frothy spittle that had run from the side of the Countess' mouth. Later she would make a phrase about it, connecting it perhaps with snakes and venom, and write the phrase down in her notebook (1, p. 51).

The Countess and Billy Pop use Margaret as a servant, as they do the other children; they mistreat her in ways that Margaret resents to the point of hatred. She is sent to dancing school, for which her Great Aunt Mouse pays. The Countess keeps the money and Margaret must therefore instruct younger students in order to receive her own lessons. Margaret knows that the absence of family warmth is caused by her parents' selfishness in particular and immaturity in general, but she cannot face the fact that she has withdrawn from human contact herself.

She observes people, but Margaret removes herself from real feelings by constantly analyzing them. This causes her to be like Marcus in not caring for people very much.

Putting the unpleasantness of her life into stories, Margaret does indeed become an artist, but she retreats progressively into the world she can create through her art. Margaret knows she has turned inward and that she lives what she creates. She thinks about her method of coping when she and her siblings meet to clear No 52 after the death of their parents. "If instead, she'd gone out, Martha-like, as Sukey did, and got on with the job, perhaps her talent would not have been so thin, so acid, so poisoned at the source" (1, p. 438).

Like her parents and siblings, Margaret conceals from herself her ignorance of the shape of her own life, but with Margaret, as with her brother Quentin, this concealment must be handled subtly by Wilson because of the habit of rigorous self-inquiry Margaret has, and because of her trained observation of the shape of the lives of other people. Both she and Quentin ". . . are practicing the final hypocrisies of the educated and worldly" (2, p. 30).

Knowing that the Countess is an unfeeling person, Margaret thinks that to be as different from the Countess as possible is good. By the time she finally realizes that she is not a warm person herself, she has already established a role, that of the mature, closely observant artist. Her role will keep her from having to face her coldness. As she sits in her old bedroom at No 52 she thinks about her literary position and her outlook on life. "From log cabin

to P.E.N. Club--for she was a Great Literary Figure now. Of course it was all there in the early Carmichaels, this tension, this smallness, this snake coiled in upon itself ready to hiss--and it was just that hissing in those early stories that, for all the critics' praises, she couldn't bear" (1, p. 437). Even while living with her parents, Margaret begins writing stories to defend herself from the hurt and turmoil of No 52. She believes, however, that she will write better when she is away from that environment. Unfortunately for Margaret, she can never transcend the emotional limitations of No 52; as a result she leaves it only physically.

Margaret is confused about simply how to live. She cannot seem to understand herself, and her perceptions of others are constantly being proven wrong. Her confusion carries over into her writing as she tries to create characters that seem real and situations that are viable. She cannot decide how to present "real" people, as with her character, Aunt Alice, and her nieces.

> . . . if she were to grant herself this Gothicism, it could turn out a dangerously melodramatic affair, and there were no means of tempering it with her well-known irony--for if the nieces had cut the old woman off from the world of chars and piano-tuners, she had effectively cut _herself_ off in this novel from the readers who called her a new Miss Austen--yet there must be _some_ tempering. Perhaps the pathos of Aunt A.'s position, but, if softened by pathos, where was the mighty oak brought down? Should she go back and soften the old tyrant? No. Oh, Lord, here

> she was back again at the failure of connection--
> Aunt A. wicked and strong, Aunt A. pathetic and . . .
> (1, pp. 402-403).

Margaret fears closeness to anyone and therefore cannot write convincingly of a close relationship. As an artist she attempts to extract an understanding of life from what she knows, but since she is unclear about life itself, her art suffers.

Fearing intimacy, Margaret withdraws from a life of feeling. Her brother Quentin thinks that Margaret has avoided him at No 52 because she did not want to see the wound he received in the war, but she simply fears intimacy. At No 52 having to share a room with her twin sister makes her feel that she can never have any privacy.

As a writer, Margaret grows and becomes quite respected because of the exactness of psychological detail in her work, but as a person she withdraws until she is coiled in upon herself in a tightened spring of bitterness. Her analytical nature causes her to become a good author, but a coldness that critics will later notice characterizes her writing, a coldness that Clifford, her first lover, discovers. Wilson shows with understanding Margaret's inability to share love with others and her inability to recapture, after it has gone, the little closeness she was able to experience.

A few years after a brief, unhappy affair in which her lover tells Margaret she is feelingless, critics tell her

that her work also is feelingless. She is hurt by this observation in a critique in the Literary Supplement, which continues through hundreds of flattering words of considered criticism, only to end by saying:

> The simple think that Miss Matthews "hates people." The more sophisticated believe that she loves them, and quarrel only whether she has been wise to attempt to express that love positively. The truth is that she neither hates nor loves human beings; she is indifferent to them. And considerable fiction, even perhaps considerable art of any kind, cannot be born of human indifference" (1, p. 236).

As a consequence she re-thinks her method of studying the actions of people as story material, but she fails to realize her basic problem: she is interested in the emotions of others only as story material. She needs to be able to analyze the emotions of others and to write about these emotions. Her writing is her only refuge from the reality of her own life since she has no religious beliefs to use as solace.

Just as Margaret, while living at No 52, uses her writing as an escape, so her older brother Rupert, uses his theatre work and her younger brother, Marcus, his painting. But Margaret is too bitter, and is too afraid to put much of herself into her writing so that she keeps herself from finding much release from pain through her art as Rupert does.

Throughout his life Rupert has been a favorite of the Countess' because of his ability to act and to sing with

her. Her affinity for Rupert, however, has been based on her view of him as a projection of that which she wishes to be. Yet she has often treated him in a demeaning manner because he has the chance, which she has lost, to live the life she wants for herself. Thus the Countess causes Rupert constantly to seek group approval of the sort he gets from audiences.

While living at No 52, Rupert tries to appear to take his mother's view at all times in order not to cause any more conflict than is already present there. In order to do this, he must suspend his own feelings and play a role that is acceptable to the Countess; in so doing, he creates great conflict within himself. Practice in suspending his own emotions in order to present a certain facade becomes second nature to Rupert. Even though this helps him tremendously whenever he plays a new role onstage, it is an endeavour on his part to dehumanize art by a callous indifference to sentiment which Rupert confuses with sentimentality. He is able to see how expert he is becoming at the art of living a part and, later, mistakenly thinks he is becoming just as expert at dealing with his personal, adult life. Actually, he has merely substituted one for the other.

It is Rupert, along with Marcus, who invents The Game, quite unintentionally, one night after the Countess has pulled Marcus from his bed and whipped him as he sleeps.

Rupert hears Marcus sobbing after the Countess leaves the room and tries to soothe him by originating The Game at this point.

> "'He'll have to sleep in the dressing-room,' she told me, coming home in the taxi. '"Cool off, Countess!" We'll see who's to cool off. I shall make him sleep in the dressing-room,' she said. It's for always." Then finding suddenly the softest, richest tones of his father, "I don't ask very much of life, children. A book, my pipe, my desk, a comfortable bed, and, is it too much to ask? a little quiet from my loving family." Delighted with his surprising power of imitation, he started to repeat the phrase, when from the corner of the room came his mother's voice, sharp and petulant, and raised to a high peak like the voice of a love-bird. "I hope you'll never know, Marcus," she said, "what it's like to be in love with life and to be cheated of it."
>
> "That's what she says," Marcus explained. "What does she mean?"
>
> "Oh, some rot or other. You do it jolly like."
>
> "So do you."
>
> "Let's try again."
>
> They repeated the same phrases, then they tried out some others. At last they sounded so like that it was creepy, and to break the eerie atmosphere they burst into giggles. Down below, a full row was in progress so that they had no need to hush their delight at their new-found game. Giggling and imitating, it was some time before they fell asleep (1, p. 30).

Thus is born The Game, a refuge from and criticism of the parents. The distancing it provides from the parents unfortunately distances them from themselves. So while The Game is always funny, it really is no laughing matter.

Although Rupert later comes to win much theatrical acclaim, his personal life continues to be less than satisfying and he often has trouble trying to be the kind of

husband he should be. While his professional expertise has grown, his ability to cope with his personal problems has dwindled to almost nothing. Rupert cannot bear to share his wife, Debbie, with their children and he expects his friends always to see him as an actor rather than merely as a man. While Rupert is totally involved in a part he is playing, Debbie's aunt points out to him that he has begun to stoop some. He does not want her to see him as Rupert grown older, but rather as the character he plays. ". . . he said quite sharply to Aunt Annabel: 'I haven't really begun to stoop, you know, but when one acts a part with any degree of intensity a lot of the characteristics follow you around. Certainly for the length of the run'" (1, p. 247).

When Rupert can no longer reconcile his illusory self with his personal self, he begins heavy drinking. At last he realizes that he must rely upon himself as well as upon his artistic ability. Perhaps most difficult of all, he comes to realize that he must face and accept his dependence on his wife, Debbie. Depending on anyone else is something all the Matthews children fear. As adults, each is afraid of being hurt even more than he has been in No 52 and so cannot let down his defenses to accept another person. Rupert has learned a great deal when he is able to accept Debbie, because he has learned that he is just a man, with the weaknesses of a man, and that it is completely acceptable to be just a man and not a larger-than-life character.

Rupert even comes to rely on Debbie to help him make it through the movie-making he does. Debbie explains to their daughter why she must be with Rupert, "But, darling, if he goes on his own he's terrified that he'll start drinking again and the studio have already said . . ." (1, p. 470). Rupert, then, is liberated by a degree of self-realization. He finally rejects the totally ignorant state of his illusion.

Perhaps Rupert does learn truly to accept himself and others. If so, he is the only one of the six. Certainly his oldest sister, Gladys, can never reach the point of allowing another person into her confidence. She is too insecure to admit that she lives the illusion of being a strong, independent person. Gladys early chooses the role of a strong provider for an older man, her father, and is the only one of the six children who assists the family when a financial crisis occurs while the children are living at No 52. She makes it a practice to lend money to Billy Pop when he has none. She knows the money will never be returned, but she enjoys the feeling of power she receives.

Later Gladys continues her role when she has a protracted love affair with Alfred, an older man who she knows is married. She remains independent by using men to fill a part of her external life while never allowing them into her inner life. Just as she gave money to Billy Pop, Gladys lends money to Alfred and listens to his advice in business

matters. She carries her role to extremes when she helps him financially and is caught in his dishonest dealings. Rather than tell what she knows, Gladys takes the blame for the theft of a valuable painting and goes to prison. Gladys struggles with the deception she has created for her own use, but she finally decides to take the blame for Alfred's theft. Since she is playing a role at the time she makes her decision, her decision is really a false one.

After her prison term, Gladys marries Benny, also an older man, whom she does not love, for she still cannot relinquish her role as the independent, dependable person.

Quentin, two years younger than Gladys, has erected quite a different defense against the hurt of his life. He appears to care not at all what others think about him and, indeed, criticizes others at every opportunity.

One reason for his insecurity is that at the age of eight Quentin was sent to live with Granny M and was more or less segregated from the family unit. His early life, coupled with his tour of duty in World War I, has caused him to feel that he has been injured by life more than anyone else. His feelings are reminiscent of the Countess' feelings that she has been hurt more than anyone else because of her station in life. Quentin has become, on the surface, sensitive to suffering in others. He is in fact defenseless against the hurt in his own life, but he creates a life of illusion with himself as a guardian of the oppressed just as

Gladys "guarded" older men. He believes in his illusion, and so when he is not accepted as the role he plays, his feelings are hurt. He has been beaten up by two men because he could not defend himself. This physical inability to protect himself mirrors his lack of self-protection of his feelings. He allows himself to indulge in self-pity. "Not a single sour had been to see him in hospital. It was the price you pay for telling the truth; not a soul, not even Lena, 'the good-hearted trollop.' He was still very weak and he began to cry" (1, p. 419).

Quentin began his tour of duty in World War I as a very young man who cared, perhaps too much for his own good, about the suffering and agony a war brings. He was truly alive because he cared, but he suffered physical exhaustion and near nervous breakdown because of his intense desire to make a difference for the suffering thousands involved in the war. After the war he returns home, a young man who creates a defense against ever again feeling the hurt of others strongly enough to become truly involved.

Quentin remembers how he felt, weakened by dysentery and unable to do anything that really made any difference in the war as a whole, so he begins to use his journalistic expertise to make that difference through his writing. As he begins to write, Quentin, like Wilson's earlier hero, Bernard Sands, feels that his own aims are different from those of other persons, more beneficial to others. Gradually,

however, he becomes more concerned with the machinations of helping others than he is with those who need the help. He needs order in his own life and he imposes a kind of order on his world by manipulating words and forcing his opinions on others. He becomes quite adept at ferreting out the tricks and deceptions of others and soon is playing the role of champion of causes just as Gladys is playing the role of guardian and provider for older men.

Quentin has been almost like two people, one devoted to compulsive sex with various women, and one concerned with helping the cause of the masses. He does, however, come to the realization that he has been living an illusion. He is in a pub with a friend, "When suddenly--it must be too little food, tiredness or what--he was alone, miles from anyone, the darkness hadn't left him, he was cut off into night, he would never be two again" (1, p. 386). This realization does not, ironically, liberate him because he rejects the realization. He enjoys his role too much and is too afraid to live outside his role to try to accept his realization and live within it. He knows he lacks real love for other people even as he lives by principles and rules to replace the closeness he cannot experience. He recognizes this strongly when he knows he is to die in a plane crash. "But he wished he had been able to love; in the darkness, warm, free from

the deadening prickles of sterile reason, perhaps he would" (1, p. 493).

In considering the problems of secular humanism, Quentin asks how much one should undertake to decide on his own when other persons will be crucially affected by his decisions. Here Wilson brings back the problem facing his protagonists in the earlier novels. The question is never resolved. Quentin works hard to change the conditions under which many of the world's poor live; however, Quentin is untrue to himself because his decisions are made under the influence of his illusion. His illusion may be beneficial to others, but it is false to himself.

Trying to keep illusion and role-playing separate is difficult for all the Matthewses and, indeed, at times the two merge in each of the characters. Only Sukey, twin sister to Margaret, totally accomplishes the merging, for her sense of reality is weaker than that of any of the others. In the end she comes to live entirely, and mindlessly, within her illusion: that her family life is ordered niceness and togetherness. Sukey does not trouble herself with the dilemma of how much right she has to make decisions which affect others. She simply cannot face the chaotic real world and so manipulates the lives of her children to impose order and organize life. Wilson shows us that Sukey's need for order extends to world events. She simply does not accept World War II as world-wide turmoil and reacts by

creating a radio program in which she tells pleasant anecdotes about her family life.

Even as a child Sukey wants to keep family life untroubled, and when it is not, she retreats into her fantasy of being the mistress of a tidy home filled with pleasantness. When she must help Regan, the cook, in the filthy kitchen of No 52, she especially needs her fantasy:

> In the great roomy farmhouse kitchen from whose speckless tiled floors one could eat one's breakfast any day, Ada laughed. "Oh, I gave him a piece of my mind Madam; 'The garden isn't yours,' I told him. 'Asparagus like great pillars. The idea of it! When you know that the mistress likes the early spikes as thin as her little finger.' It won't happen again, you can assure the master of that." Sukey said to this tall country-woman, so neatly dressed in her uniform, almost handsome with her direct, self-respecting gaze, "Oh, you've bullied him, Ada. The poor man! And you know he's in love with you." "Oh, he's all right, Anderson is, Madam. But every man needs to be put in his place now and again. It doesn't do to spoil them. You know that." "Indeed I do, Ada." Then laughing--two women together--she looked up and saw Regan's greasy old apron, a hairpin hanging over her ear (1, p. 71).

Sukey chooses the role of the mother who can always solve the problems of others. However, her disregarding their feelings results in her mishandling of others' affairs. As a child Sukey longs for her own married life so that she can structure her life by editing out the unpleasant. When she and Margaret discuss sex, seventeen-year-old Sukey ignores the fact of the physical sex act and the emotions leading to it and thinks only of the resulting babies that she wants. Later, her marriage to Hugh is primarily to

insure that she will have a family that she can protect and a life that she can organize, in short, story material--illusion material.

The twins, Sukey and Margaret, are unlike in many respects, but they resemble each other in that neither really cares about others. In her concern not to be like the Countess as a mother, Sukey overreacts and becomes as careless about the feelings of persons outside her family as the Countess has been about persons within her family. She giggles to herself as she thinks of her imitation of one of Hugh's friends,

> but she never did it aloud because Hugh didn't like one to make fun of friends. And Mr. Plowright counted as a close friend. Anyway, the children liked him, and he hadn't got a wife whom she would be expected to visit or ask to the house. No, on the whole, Hugh was very good really in not cluttering the house up with a lot of strangers (1, p. 191).

Despising the life she was made to live when she was younger, Sukey constantly vacillated between her feelings of hatred for her parents and the life they forced on her, and her desire for a happy, tidy home. As a result she was filled with emotional conflict just as her brothers and sisters were. After her marriage, however, Sukey's illusion that her husband and three sons look always to her for mothering and guidance, gradually fills all her thoughts. Hugh worries about this some, but decides against talking it out with her. He realizes that she must believe that

the boys, especially, need her constantly or she cannot live. He thinks of it again one afternoon as they wait for their sons to return home from a treasure hunt. Hugh says,

> "Isn't it time that Rose brought tea out to us?"
> "I told her to wait until the boys got back."
> "Oh!"
> "They've gone on one of these treasure hunts. They'll be ravenous when they get in."
> "Surely they'll have tea with some of their friends."
> "Not while there's my home-made marrow and ginger to come home to."
> "Darling, this year or two you have got very . . ." But he changed his course in mid-stream. "How would you like to live in the West Country" (1, p. 317)?

Sukey not only organizes the lives of her sons and expects them always to have as much interest in her as she has in them, but she habitually creates her own meanings for the words and deeds of her sons so that they fit her own ideas.

Sukey builds her entire personal life, as a mother, around her youngest son, PS, and she cannot accept the fact that he has been killed in the Palestinian conflict. In 1967, she is old. She still has two sons and is a grand-mother, but she goes every week to a chapel in which she tells God stories about her past experiences with PS. Sukey is an example of Wilson's attack on preserved innocence. In the later years of her life he shows her as a sad example of Rupert's belief that as one grows older, he often cannot distinguish between what is and what might have been. Ironically, Sukey is the happiest of the six Matthews

children because she lives her illusion and really does not care about the present and so does not try to cope with it.

Though the Matthewses are very different in some respects, they are alike in their need to have an illusion, and a role, that will allow them to believe in the illusion. The family as a unit decays because there is nothing taught in their homelife to help them face their individual personal lives or their personal relationships. At times they realize that they are playing roles, but they do not try hard enough to reconcile the disparate elements of their lives. In both their art and their lives they reject the responsibility of freedom.

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CHAPTER III

FANTASIES AND STRUCTURES

Angus Wilson has divided the material of No Laughing Matter into five books and divided these books even further, in some instances into chapters--divisions which are not in themselves unusual. However,

> the fabric of the sophisticated epic that is the novel itself is wrought from an immense variety of creative forms. Daydreams, plays, popular songs, newspaper accounts and television broadcasts, even a short story, complicate the family narrative, stretch and alter the traditional form of the family novel. In this way, from its opening pages, Wilson suggests that his novel is "about" art as well as life (1, p. 392).

This complicated physical structure woven into the narrative itself, represents Wilson's attempt to find how the novelist or, indeed, any artist, is to proceed in presenting reality through his medium. Correlatively, each member of the Matthews family asks, by implication, what growing up is and what life means.

> Thus the question the author poses in his opening paragraphs, like the question his characters ask, can be answered only through the art of the narrative. Indeed, he and his characters alike are asking the same question: how do we know what is real (1, p. 392)?

And so, where does one look to find reality? Wilson's novel early on shows old values and old customs very much

threatened and in danger of a collapse that eventually comes about, during the time covered by the novel, and leaves the characters with only themselves to look to for answers. The British Empire, having been so long established and having so long projected an example of order, is falling in _No Laughing Matter_ and with the Empire the traditional socio-moral forms that have been so comfortably easy to grasp and to follow. Wilson shows the socio-historical framework of English existence crumbling in a pattern of crises. This pattern can be seen over and over again on an individual level as the Matthews children meet a family crisis and then try to find a meaning in its occurrence and a workable resolution in fantasies, by playing The Game, by staging Family Plays, and by actually being artists. The Game they utilize when they are children. It is a proto-drama of their own making in which they try to create, as they do all their lives, their own reality through language. Thus the novel provides the answer: "man makes his reality by self-conscious creation" (1, p. 392).

In _No Laughing Matter_ it is, however, only a semblance of meaning that the protagonists create. Early in the novel, as young children, the siblings do this by indulging in daydreams of an Eldorado, and later by making up The Game.

> Appropriately, the daydreams come first, come immediately with the opening of the novel as the novelist's . . . device for getting his Principal Players on stage. These are wonderful daydreams which take their impulse from the

> outward event of the Wild West Show of the Exhibition; they are furnished into comic verisimilitude by the everyday props of the everyday lives of the characters (Eldorado, thinks Sukey, will be like Cromer--and there will be very nice neighbors): and they are given their shape, their plot-line, by the inner pressure, the inner desires of the dreamer himself. In their common delight in the joyous, prosperous family unity which makes feasible the family journey through the dangers of the wild, wild West, makes unquestionable the passionately desired arrival at Eldorado, these dreams are the Edwardian National Dream, as illusory as it is comfortable (1, p. 394).

So it is that with their differing fantasy-adventures and differing visions of Eldorado the characters introduced in Book I prefigure the dramas about to be created from each individual life. At the opening of the novel, three generations of the Matthews are represented as the family unit as it makes its way through the Exhibition, and members of each generation cherish their dreams. The fantasies of Granny M and Great Aunt Mouse have the wild West setting common to all the family dreams; they employ reminiscence, however, in their particular dreams, Aunt Mouse of her travels and Granny M of her past organized, sheltered life. Aunt Mouse congratulates herself that her pioneering courage will sustain her throughout the journey to Eldorado and she is convinced that when they finally reach Eldorado, it will prove to her, the much-traveled woman, to be somewhere already familiar. This is the reader's first glimpse of the pattern of life lived by Aunt Mouse, which will recur as

Aunt Mouse advises Margaret to be self-reliant and as Mouse relies on herself by leaving England on her extended trips alone in foreign countries. Unlike Mouse, Granny M does not think of a reachable Eldorado, but contents herself with thinking of her own ability to deal with contingencies which may occur. In the mind of Granny M, nothing can happen that is not familiar and expected, and therefore everything that happens will be easily dealt with.

If the two elder ladies see their futures in terms of their pasts, Granny M's son, Billy Matthews, dreams of success he has yet to know. He sees himself as smiling and boyishly handsome, lazily ambling along toward Eldorado, relaxed yet constantly alert for approaching dangers to his family band. He dreams in literary terminology and sets a pattern which he follows again and again throughout the novel, one of thinking of himself as a writer without ever doing any writing. The Countess, typically, dreams a dream of being a happy wife and mother who does all she should to rear her children and to keep the family loving and close. Into her dream, however, comes a conflicting vision of herself in Eldorado playing cards and laughing with men. It is only with great effort that she can force her thoughts back to her familial role. The Countess presents her real desire within her fantasy, which is to be free in the conventional sense, with many gentleman friends. Throughout the novel the Countess attempts to act this part of her dream.

Because the children are born into a time when the social order is rapidly changing and because the older generations are refusing to accept the change, the children must look to themselves to find reality. This they try to do through representing reality in art forms, the most basic, or primitive, of which is the fantasy. And so it is important to study the separate daydreams of these six siblings with which the novel begins, for these daydreams reveal the basic patterns for the future lives of each of the six.

The eldest boy, Quentin, sees himself not as one person, but as three on the afternoon of the visit to the wild West Exhibition. In one imagining he is Quentin, the eldest son, watchdog and guardian of the family. As he thinks on this birthright role, however, he is painfully reminded that that dream is inconsistent with fact, for the family he wants to guard has rejected him and sent him to live with Granny M.

> . . . his simultaneous resentment of the rejection and guilt at his failure to share in the family's shabbiness and sudden violences (p. 8) has evoked another role, Quentin to whom unity is all, who rocks, lulled in the womb of the daydream saddle, regardless of guardianship obligations, until he is disturbed by the third Quentin, Quentin the "looker-on," the objective critic (1, p. 394).

He spends the rest of his life trying to find and in a sense trying to escape, the "real" Quentin. The Quentin who is guardian of the family is tested when Quentin returns

to the family home, No 52, after being wounded in World War I. He fails utterly in his attempt to lead the children in a revolt against the disorder of the home life and the irresponsibility of the Countess and Billy Pop, and it is only when the day of revolt is ended that the youngest son, Marcus, reminds us that we should have known that

> this Quentin could have no real existence, belongs only to the sentimental self-regarding aspect of the daydream . . . That night in the Nursery, Marcus, . . . points out quietly to Quentin how enormously Quentin has enjoyed playing the role of protector, even though the protection failed (1, p. 395).

Thus is set the stage for the pattern of Quentin's life. As the novel unfolds, so does a constant pattern for Quentin: because the unity-seeking Quentin can never achieve the unity he desires, he slips easily into the role of Quentin-the-protector and finally, feeling completely removed from those he would protect, into the role of onlooker and critic.

Quentin becomes a professional commentator, a journalist, and thereby uses his third self, the onlooker, to create his personal narrative both for newspaper and television, and eventually for his life. He becomes overly critical of everything, a fact which evokes the image of his sneering face in the laughing mirrors of Book I. "And the unity-desiring Quentin's failure to find the brotherhood of man in socialism lends the intensity of disillusion to the commentator's early discovery of the fake unity that conceals the horror of the Stalin purges" (1, p. 395). Because the

onlooker patterns are repeated time and again in Quentin's life, the end result is that he does not find a satisfactory role to play. No single one of the three selves first defined in Quentin's daydream emerges as the "real" Quentin even though he has searched many years to find that one. With Quentin, Wilson seems to be raising the question that if life itself cannot fashion a single, complete reality,

> How can art be expected to fashion a single figure that has shape and wholeness, that can be distinguished as a single figure and one, without telling lies by making the disordered and the contradictory into a tidy pattern (1, p. 395).

The point is the extreme difficulty, in human life in general, of escaping chronic self-deception.

Gladys, the eldest girl, two years Quentin's senior, sees herself in her fantasy as keeping account of all the family supplies and providing a ledger for records of all purchases and income. In this fantasy Gladys spends much time inside the family wagon making sure the food ledger is accurate. Once more a pattern is set for the episodes to follow in her life; for being a responsible person entails Gladys' keeping herself apart from the family. Her separation causes the others to have only a scant idea of what she is like. Throughout the novel Gladys attempts to relieve the tension of situations caused by family problems, by drawing attention to herself. This she does by the clowning which becomes a part of her life; she establishes

a pattern of crisis-clowning. Clowning is the way Gladys distances herself from problems of involvement with other people: this pattern recurs so often that one knows just what to expect when she and her lover, Alfred, unexpectedly meet a friend of his wife's and again when Gladys is on trial for theft. Even at the death of her husband, Benny, Gladys continues to try to keep her accounts straight and to joke away every unpleasant situation. When Gladys is seen in her final episode she, like Quentin, has not changed much throughout her life, and her personality is so represented by a pattern of conflict-clowning that the reader can easily picture what her life will be until its end.

Daydreams continue for the children as they try to make their goals become reality; these dreams are patterned in that they are attempts to order events and feelings. Gladys' younger sister Margaret has a need for order that is so great that everything that impresses her she writes down in the notebook she keeps for this purpose. On the day the family spends at the wild West Exhibition Margaret, typically, sees herself sitting beside the family wagon in her fantasy. She dreams of describing the happy family journey in her notebook. Her daydreams are the formal dilemmas of a writer. As she reflects on her written description of the day, she thinks it too sentimental and deliberately adds a stark account of their collies' returning to the wagon with blood from a prairie marmot dripping

from their mouths. In her fantasy she has the same problem she will later experience as an author. With the added ironic ending, she has removed from her notebook entry the incredible, sudden family happiness of the day which she so wants to convey.

It is the need for order in her life and for a way to create her own reality that causes Margaret to return time and again to her writing tablet to make an attempt at putting her family into a narrative structure in stories about the Carmichael family. She eventually learns that the order she can impose on her thoughts by putting them on paper is soothing to her after the violent wrenching of feelings she undergoes in her family life, especially from the Countess. Therefore she sets up a pattern of retreat to her writing each time she endures a crisis. Having learned the efficacy of fictional patterns, Margaret sometimes repeats to herself a sort of narrative verbal formula whenever she hears her drunken mother coming home late from a date.

> Slowly, practisedly, she relaxed by means of the familiar stringing together of words. "If a certain cacophonous crying is the hallmark of Greek tragedy, Sophie Carmichael qualified for Clytemnestra herself, a role which she would dearly have loved to play if only in order to shock the bridge-club-gossips. Her adultries, though suburban, could perhaps have passed for something more regal if only her husband, James, had been more worthy of Agamemnon's role (3, p. 47).

Having learned the strength of forcing a pattern onto a situation, Margaret employs her fictional pattern-making as a means of analysis of people she knows and, therefore, of characters she creates for her work. Margaret often creates an "ideal" pattern of her own as she tries to fit a real life person into one of her stories. Just as often she finds that the person has been deeply hurt by her action, the character made flat, and that she has been left with a feeling of emptiness. Only once does she realize, and this from watching Rupert act, that real persons as well as fictional characters are multifaceted creatures who will not fit truthfully into any one mold. She realizes as Quentin eventually does, that neither life nor art puts reality into tidy patterns truthfully. After using this insight to help in her creation of a character, Margaret is still unable to relate it to her relationships with real people. So it is that while Margaret creates patterns for her characters to live, Wilson, in turn, presents Margaret as living a series of fragments which she knows are not the patterns of an authentic life.

While Margaret sees a one-sided picture of human behavior her twin, Sukey, sees a picture equally, though differently, one-sided. On the imagined trip to Eldorado Sukey dreams she is caring for animals and children along the way. In her fantasy all the baby animals with which the family comes in contact trail after Sukey and seek her

protection as she feeds the chickens they have brought along for fresh eggs. Sukey rejects her actual situation at No 52 by imagining a storybook home; in this way she can withdraw from the filth and unhappiness that is No 52. Sukey imagines a home of loving, gentle people who are always orderly and clean.

Sukey, like her twin, Margaret, lives a pattern of a series of conflicts and retreats. When she is in danger of losing control of a situation, she retreats into her imaginary world of being a good wife and mother. Though she wants only pleasantness, Sukey's own actions become a pattern of hurting the feelings of others by saying thoughtless words. This she does because she sees people as one-dimensional beings and cannot understand that anyone might disagree with her ideal of the perfect home life. She tries very hard to make order from the chaos around her, but as seen in the episode in which her parents drown the kittens she has saved, she simply cannot control her life and those of others. She tries to control the lives of her sons later, but her favorite one is killed. Because she must impose a pattern of order on her own life in order to survive what to her is unreality, she never realizes that it kills people to order their lives too closely.

His siblings frequently use patterns, which for them are the basic stuff of self-deception, to help them order their lives, but Marcus, when quite young, insists that <u>all</u>

phenomena turn into order. On the family holiday Marcus' fantasy is of himself as a lovely, sacred boy. He sees himself riding a large elephant around which dance his siblings and his mother, all dressed in rich robes and veils. When Eldorado is sighted, he does not become excited as the others do, but remains aloof "high above, crowned by a vast red turban twice his own height" (3, p. 13).

Marcus enjoys the beautiful picture presented in his fantasy and does not want to shatter the image of himself crosslegged on the elephant, black and motionless. He lives through the pattern of color and line he has created and wants it to remain unbroken. In fact, he attempts when young to "magic away" broken patterns by screaming to numb his senses and later by organizing fragments into patterns in order to present only a neat picture of his whole life. He admires Picasso's "Guernica," but cannot tolerate the actual people of a Bermondsey street clash because in them he sees no form, no rich colors, just a shapeless human muddle. He, unlike Quentin, who seeks unity on the social level, wants to be apart from masses of people. Marcus very often makes patterns from shadows and pictures from patterns. He needs patterns and color to survive because he is indeed separated from the human communal feeling which allows most people to survive. In the end, he is in the desolate desert with deadening sand all around him.

Like his siblings, Rupert tries, through The Game and through fantasies, to cope with the world of No 52. He is bound to the Countess by their shared repartee and in his daydream during the family visit to the Exhibition, he re-enacts what occurs most often when he is with his mother. He sees himself as a great golden eagle that soars aloft and is joined by a smaller raven-black eagle from the family wagon. The two fly together when suddenly something glitters in the black eagle's eye and her beak snaps. Immediately, "Rupert made himself the red spaniel at his parents' feet down in the happy, house-warm, family-smelling wagon, and snuffled and licked at their hands . . . 'There's a lovely boy,' they cried" (3, p. 10).

Later in his life as an adult, in becoming a professional actor, Rupert creates a method by which to distance himself from the whole world. As he follows this pattern of withdrawal into acting, he comes to think of himself as only one facet of his own real personality--the actor. Only after much time and trial can he tentatively admit needing more depth as a person.

While each character in No Laughing Matter has his own fantasy which supports the illusion he lives, the family together presents a sort of family illusion, dramatized in The Family Plays. The dramatization helps the Matthewses put their lives into a form which shields them from reality. Through these plays a picture emerges of parents who

reconstruct the past in their memories and children who want desperately to have the family unity they lack.

It is easy enough to see that the fantasies described earlier are part of the psychological background of the roles through which the Matthews children dramatize their lives. For these roles they use the selectivity of art which is inherent _to_ art, to create a limited order, but more importantly, to disguise what they cannot face. This relationship between the fantasies and the roles is probably the best reason for the presence of the fantasies in the novel. It might be noted, however, that the progressive inefficacy of the roles is paralleled by the progressive disorder which provides the material of both The Game and the Family Plays. The play _Pop and Motor: A Catastrophe_, obviously, with its Beckett-like social eschatology, is a vision of utter devastation as compared to _The Family Sunday Play_, which conveys a sense of external order at least. The gradual disorder of the Family Plays, as shown in their titles is, of course, one of the structuring elements of the novel. However, it is the development of the individual roles which is the main structuring element.

It is the shape of disorder in the characters, rather than of an aesthetic construct in itself, which interests Wilson most in _No Laughing Matter_. For this reason we must make a further analysis of the infantile and adolescent fantasies which feed into the roles. In a sense the characters become their roles. Their roles become displaced, or

acted, fantasies. Thus it is worth one's time to look further at the fantasies because the roles, for all of the aesthetic and emotional energy that will have gone into some of them by the end of the novel, end by being little more than fantasies. This is true in the sense that the characters do, finally, very little about disorder except reflect it. (To emphasize the bleakness of Wilson's views of social history implied in this statement, it is thought appropriate to put the chapter entitled "Fantasies and Structures" immediately following the chapter entitled "Characterization: Illusion and Role-Playing.")

The individual fantasies of the characters are utilized in the Family Plays created by the family as a whole. In 1919, The Family Sunday Play is presented by the Matthews family. In this play the children attempt to get Granny M and Aunt Mouse to side with them against the Countess and Billy Pop. The children present a list of grievances to the two old ladies and are well on the way to succeeding in their cause when the pets of the old women begin to fight with the kittens belonging to the children. The elderly ladies demand that the kittens be sent away, but then the children and their parents band together to protect their kittens and, in essence, their home, from the rules of outsiders. At the end of the play the two old ladies leave in anger and the Matthews family has a Sunday dinner together as a victorious family unit.

The lives of the children have become, to them, unbearable and they plan to acquaint Granny M and Aunt Mouse with the misuse to which Billy Pop and the Countess have put funds sent to them by the elderly ladies for the education of the children. Just as he will later in his life, Quentin takes the part of the one who presents the group problem to those who can enact a solution. The family is really not a close one and rarely do the children exchange non-hostile words with their parents, but when the children's kittens and the pets of the older ladies begin to fight, sides are taken immediately. The Matthews family band together against the wishes of the two old women to send the kittens away, much as siblings who have been fighting suddenly become allies when outside enemies approach. _The Family Sunday Play_ ends with an outward show of unity in the immediate Matthews family.

The Family Plays are to an extent attempts on the part of the family as a group to present itself as a cohesive unit. The individuals involved each live their separate self-deceptions, but in each Family Play the family presents a group deception. Nonetheless, the Family Plays do present truth--the truth that the family members are trying to disguise. Each character plays himself rather than the role of someone else as the children do in The Game. Truths emerge despite their attempts to work within the false

framework of a "real" family that, for them, simply does not exist.

In this first Family Play, Quentin's chosen role is pre-echoed more than those of the other characters and even the selfish Countess realizes something of the problems he will have if he continues to live as he does. She answers Mouse's statement that Quentin learned self-reliance in the trenches by saying, "Self-reliance. As if the universe was self. Responsibility for others, that's the only kind of growing up that doesn't kill the heart" (3, p. 104). Quentin himself has reflected upon his segregation from the responsibilities of the family while he lived with Granny M and spent countless empty afternoons with no one but the old woman. He thinks of how those afternoons did indeed kill the hungry heart.

It is the Countess again at the play's end who actually gives Quentin good advice: "We respect you so much, Quentin, dear boy. But you mustn't be too sane, darlings. It really won't do in this family . . . And please, Quentin, darling, especially not a lot of smugness and pretending" (3, p. 120).

In 1925, in Parents at Play: A Lesson in Lamarckian Survival, the Countess and Billy Pop discuss with their sons their impending legal separation and even serve sandwiches to the boys as they help the parents decide financial matters. After some discussion the Countess and Billy Pop decide to stay together and even to go out to dinner together

that evening. The play ends as they leave through the kitchen and send Regan out to tell their sons about their decision.

After thirty-five or so years of marriage the Countess and Billy Pop are considering a legal separation. The children are grown and gone from No 52 so that only their parents and Regan still live in the building. In Parents at Play the two Matthews parents still rewrite the past in their minds and the Countess even states that they have been married twenty-five years to subtract a few years from her own age. In 1925, however, Quentin is twenty-eight years old.

The most interesting feature of Billy Pop's character is revealed in this play to be the highly developed cunning by which over the years he has survived the disaster the moralists have predicted for him. "To this survival, of course, the snobbish reverence of the English tradesman towards paraded gentility has greatly contributed" (3, p. 213). The Countess also possesses a cunning that has allowed her to survive, "But no boy ever had that woman's instinct for getting her own way by as devious, illogical, and seemingly irrelevant course of words and action as Mrs. Matthews" (3, p. 214).

Apparently understanding their lack of parental responsibility as a method of inducing responsibility in others, the Matthews parents do not realize that their own deviousness

has caused the children to be, not independent, but concerned with only themselves. In Parents at Play the Countess and Billy Pop discuss their children as their three sons try to decide on a suitable financial arrangement for their parents' separation.

> WILLIAM MATTHEWS: . . . you're all doing so well now, you can't afford shabby genteel parents. It only proves what I've always said, that the more you neglect children the better they'll fare later on.
> CLARA MATTHEWS: Don't be absurd, Billy. We've never neglected the children. We taught them early to be adult and responsible and as a result they're responsible adults (3, p. 217).

This Family Play serves for Billy Pop as well as for his wife as a deception about the past. Billy Pop knows he and the Countess neglected the children when they were young, but he deceives himself and attempts to deceive others by thinking and saying that the neglect was so that they would be independent and would fare better later on as a result. The Countess refuses even to believe that they neglected the children. She simply remembers the way things were but puts her own distorting interpretation on them just as Sukey does with events in her life. Finally, at the play's end, Regan points out to the boys what the play has shown the reader. "You can't break bad habits like nail-biting in a few weeks, let alone worse ones like marriage. Besides, the only way they've got of livin in the future is lookin back on the past. That's always ow the gentry as survived" (3, p. 220).

Billy Pop and the Countess actually are "at play" and the Lamarckian quality of the play is that the children do inherit their parents' ability to play at life, to play roles, rather than live a true life. This inheritance is not, however, one which is helpful in the survival of a real life.

In 1935, the parents star in another play, The Russian Vine: An English Play, with their three daughters. In this play the Countess sits in her garden discussing her happy family past with her three daughters and Billy Pop. The girls are hardly allowed time to talk since the Countess constantly does so. When the Countess and Billy Pop go inside for wine to serve, the three girls realize their parents will always live in a past they have created for themselves and so leave before the Countess and Billy Pop return.

In 1935 Quentin has been ousted from the Soviet Union for too much questioning of things he sees happening there. Still, he is a well-respected journalist. The other five Matthews children are well established in their lives also; the three girls, having come to visit their parents, see how the old home is being run now that Regan has been hurt in an accident. In this play the Countess is still changing the past to suit her own needs. She actually refuses to accept anything new or different.

Gladys has sent a woman to take charge of cleaning and cooking at No 52 for the Countess, but the Countess, who still pretends she is of the upper class, realizes that the woman Gladys has sent is more well bred than she and sends the woman away. She keeps instead Regan as a servant even though Regan is old, has been struck by a taxi, and has suffered a stroke that left her partially paralyzed and unable to talk coherently. The Countess pretends to herself that Regan is the same as always because the servant is all she has left of the past. Regan joins her in her re-ordering of past events. As a further rejection of the present and preference for the past, the Countess will not admit that Marcus is traveled, but remembers instead the travels of her Aunt Mouse.

In The Russian Vine, the Countess talks on and on to her three daughters about the past as she has reconstructed it: "When I think of what a happy, free home this was for you all. London children brought up in all this peace and quiet. We must have been a family in a thousand! All this talk about self-expression nowadays. Your father and I had discovered that for you children years and years ago" (3, p. 289). And in the play Billy Pop, with an equally falsified memory, opens the photograph album and talks of the happy Matthews family unit of the past.

The three girls are almost convinced that the family past really is as their parents have presented it until,

left alone, they begin to discuss how their young lives really were. They realize that they will never be free from No 52 except physically and that their parents will never allow themselves to recognize the truth of their children's feelings. The constant droning of the Countess' voice tells them that they were happy, but, as the play ends, the girls realize, in the silence after their mother leaves the garden, that the unhappiness they grew up with was real in the past and will continue to be a part of their lives.

In French-Windows: An Interrupted Play, we see the Matthews parents in April of 1942. They spend all their waking hours telling others about their famous children until a woman effectively silences them by mentioning Gladys' imprisonment. Billy Pop and the Countess end the play by angrily leaving the other guests. The Countess and Billy Pop have taken Sukey's advice and moved to a hotel in the country to wait out the bombing of London. The two can live in the past when they are alone together, but when they are among others they know they really have nothing to support the deception they have been living. Therefore, they talk of their children who really are notable. With time, and the realization that they themselves have accomplished nothing, Billy Pop and the Countess have come to be in a sort of panic to continually present a picture of success and happiness in their family. They constantly prattle about their children as though the mere talk will make them

if not responsible for, at least a part of the success of their offspring.

A guest in the same hotel is tired of hearing about the Matthews children; he knows that Billy Pop and the Countess pretend to be of a class higher than their real one--they now use the name Rickard-Matthews. The guest mentions Gladys and her prison term to the Matthewses to stop their endless talk and is answered by the Countess with a demand for an apology and threats of a charge of slander. Billy Pop and the Countess leave the room grandly, but they realize that others know the falseness of their position. Although this is true, they cannot completely accept their situation themselves because they have come actually to believe their grand stories.

Later that same night Billy Pop and the Countess appear in _Pop and Motor: A Catastrophe_ in which, after years of always having someone around them--children, a servant, other hotel guests--they are alone together. In this play they try for a while to outshout one another, each remembering his own past. Finally they, for the first time, speak truthfully to each other about their feelings and life together, even though they speak cruelly.

> MOTOR: . . . it was always the same with you--making me undress in the bathroom and peeping through the keyhole, Keyhole Pop, the Weasel, saying my bottom's sore in front of the girls . . . You could never do it without sniggery, snickery. . . .

> POP: And you could never take it without hiding your face. Am I your femme fatale, Billy, you asked, am I, am I? like some schoolgirl turned tart. That's why you're so dried and withered now, all the jam licked off like a mummified girl (3, p. 430).

The truth of the past brings them toward the truth of the present.

> POP: . . . Why even my paralysis is the fruit of my lust. My body is alive with it. I pullulate. . . .
> MOTOR: But you won't for long. Doctor's diagnosis: locomotor ataxia; symptoms: disturbance of the genito-urinary functions, diminution of knee jerks, sluggish condition of the irises, paralysis of the cranial nerves, symptoms of Rombergism; prognosis: poor.
> POP (groaning and shaking his fist): I hope loco motor attacks yeh. (Pulling himself together) But I don't believe it. I'll go to a naturopath, a homeopath, an osteopath, any old path that winds on . . . But for you, . . . a tearing, rending pain in the chest, your legs tremble, your head swirls, all goes red, goes black. Over in a minute that seems a lifetime. But I (propelling his chair round so that it creaks)--creaking doors never wear out (3, p. 431).

At last they have put themselves into the emotional state necessary for them to speak the truth of the present as it really is for them.

> MOTOR (in a more tender voice): Never worry, my Popsie. I don't intend to let you die in or out of doors. Looking after you keeps me alive.
> POP (cheerfully): Ah! that's better. We needed a change of tune on the trumpet.
> MOTOR: I thought so. (She puts her hand in his. He lifts her on to his knee) (3, p. 431).

Finally, the truth is too stark for them so they actively decide to pretend, which is of course, what they have been doing for years.

> POP: Let's pretend, my strumpet (He takes her arm and puts it round his neck. He places his hand on her thigh) (3, p. 431).

Their pretence is about things and people they wanted to be in the past. As they talk and begin to live once more in the past that is so dear to them, a bomb is dropped onto their hotel from an overhead airplane and they are killed at the play's end. It is fitting that these two pretenders die together, for without one the other could not go on. There would be no one with whom to share the past.

The Family Plays in an overall pattern can be seen as a movement toward catastrophe. They are, in fact, a movement toward nothing. Although in the Family Plays there is always an attempt to disguise reality, in all of the plays, except the first one, some of the characters will admit the truth. Even Billy Pop and the Countess, in the last play allow for a moment the reality of their feelings for each other to be revealed. The point is that art, the Family Play, is more truthful than fantasy. A further and more important point is that for all of the structuring power of art, the end of the family play is a kind of moral, and in the case of Billy Pop and the Countess, literal destruction. The Eldorado fantasies see the family remaining together. The plays reveal them as being separated physically and solipsistically--the point of the national symbolism which the family embodies.

Wilson presents the Matthews family as a microcosm of English society and the plays mirror the life led by the family. The fantasies that feed into the illusions and on into the Family Plays have been created by the members of the Matthews family to help them make it through their lives. The fantasies which the characters create fail, however, partially because although the characters can spot the lies others live, they reject the lies in themselves. Each develops one "acceptable" facet of his personality while rejecting awareness of the depths he is ignoring. The artist characters, Quentin, Rupert, Margaret, and Sukey, can never fully mirror real life through their art, therefore, because they understand life itself so little. Their art, then, while it may be clever, is limited. It does not reflect the free, liberal imagination. The six siblings do not change much in point of emotional development throughout: consequently, the novel ends with none of its primary characters, except possibly Rupert, making a significant change either for the better or the worse.

Ultimately Wilson seeks to show the progressive personal and social degeneration of values that takes place when society discovers on a large scale that there is no set answer to the question of how to live. What happens then is that each person must accept the complex difficulties of finding his own manner of coping with reality. *No Laughing Matter* begins at a time when a certain order seemed imposed

upon English life, and the novel shows the breakdown of this order. In No 52 one can see the decaying, falling-to-ruin British Empire.

Put very simply, fantasies and games are created by all the major characters, but it is the youngest generation that Wilson is primarily interested in. Of the three major generations depicted, Wilson deals least with the oldest, and more with the next generation, that of Billy Pop and the Countess, and most with the generation of the children. The manner in which the children choose to cope with the changing world is of most importance to Wilson because theirs is the time of the greatest social upheaval.

Although he could have used a more explicit method of dealing with the social changes in England and the world, Wilson chooses to use art forms within an art form. He does this because the central tradition of No Laughing Matter "represents a search for artistic equivalents of the amplitude and variety of experience . . ." (2, p. 172).

One way, then, to describe the structure of No Laughing Matter is to say that it is based on the fantasies which open the novel. Each fantasy is in itself a story which is a part of the larger story of the Matthews family's quest for Eldorado. This larger story, as is implied by its name, is about the attempt not to solve, but to escape problems. Eldorado thus at the outset symbolizes the Matthews' Grand Illusion. The adults share in and, it is implied, create

this illusion. The children inherit it, and it in a sense determines their fate; yet it does so only because they allow it to do so. That Wilson believes in the possibility of freedom has been repeatedly stressed in this thesis. We have seen, however, that most of his characters are not free. We have seen on the other hand that some of them are, at the last, free to a significant extent. Even those who are never free, most of them, reveal at times that they know very well what freedom is and simply choose to reject the knowledge. That they choose to reject implies the power to choose to accept. This fact is underlined by Rupert's open acknowledgement of his deceptions and his partially successful struggle to free himself from them. The Eldorado fantasies are, however, extremely seductive. They provide an inflated sense of power to the Matthewses. The difficult question of how to live, of what is real, is subsumed by--and blurred by--the question regarding the role of art. Art gives the Matthews children a sense of power, but it is a power which entrenches instead of overcoming weakness.

The Eldorado fantasy symbol neatly serves a basic dual function, one for the Matthews family and one for Wilson the narrator. Wilson creates the novel's structures by showing the relationships of raw experience (Matthews family life) to story forms, the most primitive, as we have seen, being the fantasy. Wilson then shows the relation of fantasy to individual illusion, to The Game, to the Family Plays, and

finally to the art which most of the siblings make into a career.

Wilson lets us know, not only about the theories of art held by Margaret, Rupert, and Sukey, for example, but about the plots of their stories. Their lives and their art combine to form yet larger stories, the plots of which concern the attempts to use art as an Eldorado. For the protagonists, to move from Eldoradan fantasy to Eldoradan art is, perhaps, to move nowhere. It does, however, give a set of structures for a complex and interesting work of art, *No Laughing Matter*.

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CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Wilson presents the conflict between self-deception and freedom in a way which shows a certain skewed and negative evolution. The endings of his first and of his last novel are pessimistic, whereas the endings of his other novels are relatively optimistic. What the first and last novels have in common is that the protagonists are artists. Wilson seems to refuse to allow his artist heroes the sort of minimal triumph seen in the non-artist heroes.

This refusal may be a part of the general decline of faith, among British novelists, in the artistic sensibility, a decline which got well under way during World War II as a part of the reaction against the experimental, or "lyric" novel. As the main reasons for this reaction are well known to criticism, we may ask whether Wilson feels the distrust of the artist simply because he shares the intellectual climate of those who, seeing two major cultures within one body politic, choose the one which prefers positivist values. The artist can overcome the iron memorial fixity of historical facts and events primarily through expressing his feelings as a form of subjective albeit authentic reality. Personality, or feelings, equals reality, especially in the novel of

the artist hero. It may be, therefore, that the artistic sensibility in fiction is regarded by C. P. Snow and others, perhaps including Angus Wilson, as being particularly liable to create illusions rather than reality. Be that as it may, Wilson's first hero, an artist, is described by Wilson himself as being "skimpy" and is given the rather ludicrous, Quixotic task of collecting money to build a free hotel for writers. In _No Laughing Matter_ the artist heroes as a group do no better at creating a reality whose function is to sustain and nourish culture.

Wilson's protagonists are in the main only fragments of people. Taken as a group, they might comprise one integrated personality; but this is idle speculation, for the reality which seems to concern Wilson most is not a characterologically internal one, but is social. Beyond the rim of individual consciousness is a society which is crumbling and therefore offers little support to the individual, and the individual, in Wilson's work, lacks the Conradian capacity for fidelity necessary to function in the moral void of society.

What basic question, then, is Wilson dealing with in his novels? The answer must of necessity be almost simplistic, for Wilson is not a profound and complex thinker, although he is a good observer. The answer has something to do with a non-symbiotic relationship between society and the individual. Since the individual cannot

depend on society, he must try to make his illusions as workable as possible, in a small way only, as Sylvia Calvert does in *Late Call*, in her attempts to live with a husband and family who refuse to accept her real self. Her triumph over illusion at the end is simply to take the long walks, symbols of a pitiably narrow freedom that she has been denied all her life. Sylvia Calvert's intellectual and emotional range is narrow, but even the protagonists who develop a fairly sophisticated moral awareness (Bernard Sands, Meg Eliot, Quentin Matthews) not only have little power of action, but no notable power of feeling. If we are to take *No Laughing Matter* as Wilson's most comprehensive and detailed examination of this power, then we must conclude that his view of social history is not at all optimistic, to say the least.

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