

THE PERQUISITES OF LOVE

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THE WORD "love" appears in the titles of two of Ethel Wilson's books: *The Equations of Love* and *Love and Salt Water*. Combined, these suggest the complexity and multiple ramifications of this human sentiment, its somewhat fragile equilibrium, as well as its propensity to be associated with tears. Love is also a major element of her other novels: *Hetty Dorval*, *The Innocent Traveller* and *Swamp Angel*, and of many of her short stories. It is presented as a many-faceted experience, perceived in the main from the woman's point of view. So fundamental is the theme of love that through it we are brought into contact with the basic assumptions of Mrs. Wilson's work and are better able to appreciate her attitudes towards life and human relationships.

Ethel Wilson's first novel, *Hetty Dorval*, which shows two very different responses to love, deals with the question of responsibility. The experiences and emotions of Hetty Dorval and Mrs. Burnaby are developed against the background of a young girl's growth into self-awareness and maturity, which prepare her for participation in a love-relationship of her own.

The novel contains the only detailed study in Ethel Wilson's work of "a woman of no reputation". As is to be expected, Hetty is very beautiful. It is stressed throughout that her beauty is of the angelic variety and not, for example, the "odalisque" type which is attributed to Laura in the short story "Truth and Mrs. Forrester". The sensuous side of Hetty's nature is concealed by the angelic aspect, which is first apparent. This is symbolized by the different reactions provoked in Frankie by Hetty's profile and Hetty seen full-face. Of her profile in repose Frankie says: "I can only describe it by saying that it was very pure. Pure is perhaps the best word, or spiritual, shall I say . . ." The full face, however, seems to be at variance with the profile: "Ordinarily, Mrs. Dorval's full face was calm and somewhat indolent. The purity was not there, but there was

what I later came to regard as a rather pleasing yet disturbing sensual look . . . ”

These contrasting views and interpretations of one and the same person are linked with a basic preoccupation of Ethel Wilson: the gap between illusion and reality, which makes the search for truth and its ultimate revelation extremely difficult.

Hetty's sensuality is clearly indicated but never explored in its own right in the novel. There are no flaming love scenes. When Frankie "eavesdrops", what she sees is described with relative restraint: Hetty and the supposed Mr. Dorval could be any happily married couple spending a quiet evening of reunion at home. This may be explained by considerations of a practical and technical nature: the story is told through the eyes of an innocent and sensitive young girl, whose contact with Hetty would have terminated abruptly under the stress of exposure to strong physical passion.

It may also result from the fact that Ethel Wilson is primarily interested in Hetty's impact on other people. Hetty is a destructive force in their lives, breaking up marriages and marriages-in-the-making. She has no scruples and is concerned only with her own immediate comfort and security. The dominant traits of her character lie not in the pursuit of sensual gratification but in her passivity and egoism.

This passive quality is brought out more than once. When Hetty sings, it is always not loudly but very sweetly. On board ship Frankie notices that "she engaged the attention of too many men without seeming to try to do so . . . Her very activities were passive, not active . . ." Her utter passivity prevents Hetty from assuming huge proportions of wickedness; she does not consciously scheme to wreck and ruin lives for her own advancement or for personal gain. Hers is a force of evil that operates in a somewhat negative fashion only when her own comfort is threatened.

Hetty's concentration on self-indulgence requires her to eliminate other people as individuals who might have feelings and desires commensurate with her own. They are not really people but more like objects that periodically intrude upon her vision. Frankie sums up the implications of this attitude:

She endeavoured to island herself in her own particular world of comfort and irresponsibility . . . But "No man is an Island, intire of it self"; said Mother's poet three hundred years ago, and Hetty could not island herself, because we impinge on each other, we touch, we glance, we press, we touch again, we cannot escape. "No man is an Island."

Hetty's lack of commitment to the responsibility that love should engender,

suggests that she is a freak of some kind, an anomaly of nature. With unconscious irony Frankie, who at the moment is adoring Hetty, says:

It flashed through my mind that here I was, all alone, looking at the beautiful Mrs. Dorval, while at the other end of Lytton hundreds of people were paying money to gaze upon Torquil the Lobster Boy. They should have paid money to see Mrs. Dorval.

Hetty Dorval is really a study of self-love. She is the only woman to whom the author attaches an obvious label of immortality. Other women created by Ethel Wilson engage in activities that can hardly be considered moral, e.g. Lilly in *The Equations of Love*, yet Lilly is never judged “a woman of no reputation”, for the mainsprings of her behaviour are different. The immorality seems to reside, not in promiscuity but in imperviousness to the existence of other human beings, in attempting to be an island unto oneself.

To complement and possibly offset the image of Hetty Dorval, the novel deals with a type of relationship that is to recur in the work of Mrs. Wilson and that is treated here at greater length than in other novels. This is the perfect love that exists in a truly happy marriage, perfect to be accepted here without ironic overtones. Such a relationship is exemplified by Mr. and Mrs. Burnaby, Frankie’s parents.

True love is a source of strength in the recipient who is also the giver and it is imperishable. Death does not alter its reality or its validity. Sister Marie-Cecile wrote to Frankie:

. . . just before your father ceased to live he said to her “Dear, our happy, happy life together” . . . Your mother did not break down, she is very strong and she is good, and I want you to be aware, Frances, that your parents have between them the perfection of human love.

Note the present tense: even after Father’s physical passing “your parents have between them the perfection of human love.”

Frankie perpetuates this meaning into a vision of her own: “As I read I saw my mother leaning over my father in the immortal attitude of love.” The great lovers that Ethel Wilson celebrates “in the immortal attitude of love” are not the romantic tragedy-stalked figures of Tristan and Ysolde or Romeo and Juliet. Her poetic vision is concentrated on Mr. and Mrs. Burnaby, an ordinary couple who have suffered and worked hard, whose love burns with an everlasting flame in the midst of every-day activities. Her heroes and heroines are drawn from the mainstream of Canadian life.

Where this perfect love comes from, how it is created and maintained, is never

revealed or discussed. If the relationship is there, it usually exists full-blown and is presented as such to the reader. In so many instances where it does occur, the husband is dead and the wife is left with memories. There is Maggie Lloyd who had it with Tom and does not have it with Eddie in *Swamp Angel*. Which explains why Tom, though dead and not to be seen, is her reality rather than Eddie who is so irritatingly alive. Mrs. Severance and Philip had it and its aura persists even after Philip's death.

It is suggested but never stated that involved in the creation of this perfect love is a compatibility of tastes or temperament or both. Is it accidental also that these three women — Mrs. Burnaby, Maggie and Mrs. Severance — are strong, well-developed personalities in their own right? Did they bring a certain maturity to marriage with them or is this maturity a result of a happy marriage? Perhaps Mrs. Wilson outlines these relationships rather than exploring them because she believes with Mrs. Severance that “No one can write about perfect love because it cannot be committed to words even by those who know about it.”

Not all couples can attain perfect love but there are varying degrees of it which can suffice to make a happy marriage. Mrs. Severance writes to Maggie about Hilda and Albert: “They will not have perfect love but I foresee a nice kind of happiness and am thankful.” One is inclined to feel that Mr. and Mrs. Cuppy had this moderately perfect yet happy love relationship in *Love and Salt Water*.

LOVE IS ACCOMPANIED by and stimulates self-discovery. Love for Richard makes Frankie grow up and comfort Hetty as a woman struggling for the happiness she desires. There are indications that the Richard-Frankie relationship will be modelled on the pattern of that of Mr. and Mrs. Burnaby. Not only does love persist after death but it perpetuates itself in repetitions with variations from generation to generation.

The Innocent Traveller adds some interesting commentary to the subject of love. It has already been suggested that Ethel Wilson is a realist in her approach. Father Edgeworth's choice of a second wife is strongly motivated by practical reasons: “his need for a house partner who would maintain the standards by which he wished his children to grow up, and could run smoothly and easily his pleasant home and keep it happy.” Eventually a love relationship does grow out of this need, modulated and framed by the exhausting demands of a large family.

In Ethel Wilson's work, love spans all age levels, from the young Frankie to

the very elderly Great-Grandfather Edgeworth who, at the age of ninety, proposes in quick succession to Maria Grimwade, who is eighty-seven, and to her "little" sister, Sarah Raphael, who is seventy-nine. But while love is a matter of intense seriousness to Frankie, it has lost its urgency for Great-Grandfather and, as an emotion or sensation, its edges are blurred into other emotions and sensations equally or even more insistent: "Great-Grandfather Edgeworth ceased speaking. He had said what he wanted to say, and to tell the truth he did not much mind what Miss Raphael decided, but he would abide by her decision and he was feeling a bit hungry."

Ethel Wilson skilfully indicates with a few deft strokes a whole relationship, sometimes extending over a period of years. As a result, certain minor episodes stand out with remarkable vividness. An example of this is the love affair between Edward Shaw and Mary. How clearly two sentences reveal their situation at the time they are reunited in India: "He overflowed with tenderness, compassion and his desire. Mary broke into weeping which she could not restrain, sprang forward and cast herself, more in homesickness than love, upon Edward's beard." Another example is the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Porter, the academic beauty married to the man who finds it hard to live with "one of your damned Greek statues".

Topaz' unrequited passion for William Sandbach, a tragic widower of about thirty-five, is an important contribution to the theme of love. When she is rejected by him, her reactions are understandably violent: "She had spent seven years of her life in the preoccupation of love, and there was no return but this emptiness. The placid, bearded figure passed and repassed smiling before her eyes and she whispered: 'I hate him'." Her stepmother, standing hesitantly outside Topaz' door, hears the fearful words: "Curse him! I call Heaven to witness that I curse William Sandbach!"

This is the period of greatest suffering in Topaz' life. But time is a great healer and she recovers to the point where, years later, "She who had wept so much could not now evoke even a spurious sigh. 'How could he have made me so unhappy?' she asked herself in surprise." Time reverses even the impact that provoked the curse.

In the fictional world created by Ethel Wilson people love and are not loved but life goes on and the wounds inflicted by love are absorbed, as are the joys, in the cumulative process of day-to-day existence. Her characters do not resolve their problems by desperate measures or extreme undertakings. Their way is the not-so-spectacular solution that life itself provides in most instances: a gradual

adjustment to or partial compromise with the situation. In the novels only one person tries suicide, Vera Gunnarsen, and she is unsuccessful because she is unable to summon up enough courage to go through with it.

Topaz does not marry after her initial disappointment. She is a woman without of a private life of her own, unaware of the "human relationships which compose the complicated fabric of living. The limitless treasure and absorbing motions of a continuous hidden life had neither enriched nor depleted her."

Topaz remains an innocent traveller, but the ability to skim the emotional surface of life is not necessarily characteristic of the woman who never marries, as the depiction of the "reserved Rachel" indicates. Rachel had apparently had offers of marriage before coming to Canada but she turned them down. The implication is that some strong bond between herself and her mother motivated her choice. None the less she submerges herself in family living.

She was the daughter, the maiden. Never having known the lights and music of marriage, never having known the joy and care of being a mother, she was yet the wife and mother of her household. She was to this home as the good bread upon the table, as the steadfast light upon the stair.

This poetic tribute to Rachel suggests that there are other ways of fulfilment for a woman than marriage, other forms of love satisfying under certain conditions.

Rachel is a far cry from Victoria May Tritt in *The Equations of Love*, whose solitary state is an expression of unutterable loneliness, sheltered only by the protective framework of routine. Victoria May is a nonentity, conveniently anonymous, afraid of life and of herself. The contrast between these two spinsters reveals that it is not the fact of being married or not married that counts, but what a woman brings to life and what she does with it. Rachel may have sacrificed a part of herself for her mother but she remains intact as a personality, contributing to and planning for others, a source of quiet strength. Victoria May was always on the fringe of human relations, bound up in her fear of both men and women.

Yet it is Victoria May Tritt who nudges the elbow of harsh reality and succeeds in transforming the image of Mort, the drunken betrayer, into that of a hero. In the two stories that compose *The Equations of Love* the theme is everywhere interwoven with the interplay of illusion and reality. As is the case with Hetty Dorval seen full-face and in profile, the revelation of truth continually falters and wavers in response to fluctuating visions of events and people.

Myrt's love for Mort lends itself to a series of kaleidoscopic patterns because of the kind of person she is and because it is essentially self-love. "Of all people,

Myrt loved herself in whatever guise she saw herself." She loved Mort in her own way which would always be a limited way. After the news of his death "when the policemen had gone, and Myrtle was alone, she laid her head on her arms upon the table, and wept — not for Morty her husband, but for herself who would now be exposed to the pity of Irma Flask . . ." Similarly, later on "she became proud of Morty, but prouder of herself for being the widow of a hero."

"Tuesday and Wednesday" adds another interesting portrait to the gallery of women in Ethel Wilson's books, that of Mrs. Emblem whose label might easily be "Two sad cases and one divorce". "Mrs. Emblem is not lonely — exactly. But she has enjoyed long and varied male companionship; that is what she is formed for, and that is what she — less ardently now — craves. And yet something holds her back." She is highly feminine but it is an immature, sensuous femininity and in her pink and blue bedroom she is "like a beautiful old baby".

In "Lilly's Story" the problem of the approach to truth becomes a game of hide-and-seek. We are confronted with the invention of a person who never existed, Mr. Hughes, to justify the disappearance of one whose existence has become undesirable. Lilly is exposed to two passions based on strong physical attraction, that of the sinister Yow and her own desire for Paddy Wilkes. Lilly almost yields to Yow because he satisfies her craving for possessions. She is saved from Paddy Wilkes by the warning thought of Eleanor and by the strength of her ambitions for this child who, since birth, "had guarded her mother and made her the blameless and silent woman she had become." We not only catch a glimpse of what Lilly might have become without Eleanor; we see the limitations of Lilly's ability to love anyone except her child. Lilly herself is shaken by this perception years later when she becomes aware of the feeling that binds Eleanor and Paul: "She had lived for fifty years, and she had never seen this thing before. So this was love, each for each, and she had never know it. And this secret life of love went on in this house and she had never seen it before. She was outside it."

Swamp Angel shows that being alone is preferable to certain types of marriage. Left with no one to care for after the death of her father, her husband and her daughter, Maggie married Edward Thompson Vardoe out of compassion. Alberto makes a fitting comment on this motivation: "Compassion! Compassion is to sympathize and carry the suitcase and give a drink of brandy but not to marry." The relationship becomes intolerable and Maggie runs away.

The personality of Eddie Vardoe is expressed in terms of his spaniel eyes, at least as far as his relationships with women are concerned. The spaniel eyes

suggest submission but in actual fact Eddie's stupidity and narrowness dominate Maggie and make her feel degraded. It is not until she leaves him and he takes up with Ireen that he meets his match and for his "eyes like a dog" he gets "a dog's wages". A personality as limited as that of Eddie Vardoe is incapable of love. After Maggie's flight, Mrs. Severance observes wisely: "It's self-pity, not love, that hurts him."

Swamp Angel introduces one aspect of love that does not appear anywhere else in the works of Ethel Wilson, jealousy. Vera Gunnarsen is a complex mixture of love and hate, both directed at Maggie. Vera feels threatened by two rivals: the lake and with it the lodge, and Maggie. They are closely connected for the rôle of Maggie is integrated with the functioning of the lodge on the lake.

J EALOUSY is based on insecurity and this is plainly visible in Vera: "Vera in her frequent moods of self-pity said to herself I never had a break, did I, my mother never loved me . . . and now . . . look! no, I never had a break. She carried her childhood on her back, and could not — or would not — set it down." Vera develops an image of herself as poor Vera and reinforces it by living up to it.

Jealousy is an emotion that feeds on itself and the individual who harbours it. Vera fills Haldar with a sense of guilt and robs him of his confidence and this leads to a deterioration of the marriage relationship and love. That Haldar himself is not entirely blameless only contributes to the tension that has grown between them.

Vera's shortcomings may be assessed as purely individual weakness but Mrs. Wilson extends them into the broader framework of human relationships. As Mrs. Severance puts it: "Poor Vera. Poor people." This links up with an earlier thought of Maggie's: "Human relations . . . how they defeat us." Mrs. Severance speaks of "the miraculous interweaving of creation . . . the everlasting web" and adds "No man is an Iland, I am involved in Mankinde', and we have no immunity and we may as well realize it."

Love emerges as an important part of this basic fabric of life and those who love are not exempt from hardship and suffering. Love demands the full commitment of the self in order to exist. Hilda yielded only slowly to love "because she was self-protecting, mistrustful of herself and others" and therefore reluctant to become involved. Egoism, whether it is the obtuse Vardoe type or the tortured Vera variety, destroys the foundations of love. True love is its own tie that binds,

witness Philip who did not approve of the bonds of matrimony but was faithful to his wife all their "married" life together.

In *Love and Salt Water* the problems and joys of love are once again seen within the larger perspective of human relationships. The complexity of understanding and evaluating is expressed in terms of an image. As Ellen lies in bed, trying to reach a decision regarding Huw, she watches the shifting play of light and shadow on the ceiling:

She did not at that moment think that there was somewhere some parallel of light and darkness, of illumination and blotting-out, and perhaps our whole existence, one with another, is a trick of light. That may be somewhere near the truth, which is often hard to determine because of the presence of the lights and shadows of look, word, thought which touch, glide, pass or remain.

Ellen's joyous response to the knowledge of her love for George Gordon, slowly arrived at, shows how love permeates and colours her whole existence with its magic: ". . . the radiance of the fact that she loved George and was not afraid any more to marry him, spread around and forward and backward, illuminating areas of her life which had nothing whatever to do with the matter; and this is one of the perquisites of love."

Morgan is one of the most interesting and sympathetic of Ethel Wilson's characters and surprisingly so, for at first sight our impression is likely to be negative. He is nineteen years older than his wife Nora, a ponderous, heavily-built M.P. who typically calls his wife "dolling". This conventional exterior hides, or rather does not reveal the true sensitivity that lies underneath. The peak of this revelation is in the visits with his idiot son, both in his behaviour at the time and his realization of his wife's absence: "Because he loved her, he spared her, and thought he had reason enough; he excused her also on account of her youth, not noticing that she was no longer young."

In the marriage relationship it is Morgan who loves and Nora who gives what she is capable of giving in return. She responds to his devotion with a reasonable fondness, devoid of passion, which is beyond her range of feeling. The essential coldness of Nora is picked up in the description of her with curls in her hair: "she looked like a modified goddess of Liberty — meet to be admired but not to be fondled."

Spoiled and protected by Morgan, Nora's deficiencies are in no danger of threatening their marriage. Her immaturity and the incompleteness of her personality emerge when she must assert herself and take some responsibility as, for example, with Johnny.

OUR ANALYSIS of Ethel Wilson's work points to a continuity in her thinking throughout. In her first novel, *Hetty Dorval*, her basic attitudes towards love and life are already revealed in terms of a particular story and characters. The novels that follow add new dimensions to these ideas, amplify and extend them with fresh illustrations of events and personages, but do not modify them fundamentally.

Love is part of the "everlasting web" of human relationships and, as such, partakes of its complexity and variety. "No man is an Iland, intire of it self"; his contacts with others depend on the depth and sensitivity of his own nature, but contact there must always be. The highest achievement of human interaction is perfect love, reserved for those who possess "that third dimension that includes perception and awareness of other people". There are other degrees of love, as well, that make for happiness and the joy of sharing, that illuminate and transform all areas of existence.

Love implies responsibility and commitment, the giving of oneself. Individuals who are solely preoccupied with their own wishes and desires, lack the capacity to love fully. If they marry, the relationship becomes a reflection of their own self-love. This can have disastrous effects, as in the case of Eddie Vardoe, or moderately amusing ones, as with Myrt and Mort. Pushed to the extreme, egoism can be dangerous and verges on immorality because it is contrary to the laws of nature.

Love is a manifestation of the interweaving of human relationships; it is also linked with the illusive nature of truth. "But what are doormen like? What is anybody like?" asks Ethel Wilson in her short story "The Corner of X and Y Streets". "One never knows." In a sense Wilson's literary production may be summed up as a constantly renewed quest to find out what anybody is like. As the image of flickering light and dark in *Love and Salt Water* intimates, our whole existence is perhaps a succession of "illumination and blotting-out", "a trick of light".

These three inter-relating themes: love, the complexity of human relationships and the subtlety of truth, are the pegs on which Ethel Wilson hangs her fictional world. Some of her characters are completely oblivious to the existence of these forces that impinge on them; others are supremely conscious of their impact and importance. All move in the aura of a world in flux, where actions and reactions are continually modified by "the presence of the lights and shadows of look, word, thought which touch, glide, pass or remain."