CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Angus Wilson (1913-90) : The Man and His Works

Angus Wilson was born on 11th August, 1913 on the South Coast of England to an elderly couple. In a family comprising six children, he was the youngest and this carried both an advantage and a disadvantage. His immediate brother being thirteen years older, there was the inevitable clash among the children and a suspicion of patronage in the relationships.

Wilson's father was of an upper middle class family of Scots origin. His gambling habits did not contribute in any way to the family's fluctuating fortune. His mother never could forget her well-to-do South African roots and she did not let others forget it as well even as the family moved from one boarding house to another. Wilson's boyhood spent in South Africa and largely marked by the drift from hotel to hotel and the day-to-day atmosphere of those hotels, sets the mood and tone of his early stories. The loneliness of such children leads to the obvious building up of fantasies. Wilson was impressed by Dickens' stories of such lonely children, and his first story 'Raspberry Jam' based on his real friendship with two elderly women expostulates the fragile innocent world of little children.

Wilson's schooling was in Westminster and, among other things, it helped him master the art of mimicry which, in course of time, became his most natural asset as a writer. After his college days at Oxford from where he graduated with honours in medieval and modern history in 1936, he went to work as a cataloguer in the British Museum Library in the same year. The early years there were a disappointment in its routine. The last years amply made up for this initial dissatisfaction as, being deputy to the Superintendent of the Reading Room, his interest in people and in books was
more than satisfied. Just before the war, he engaged himself in leftwing activities followed by a period of intense anxiety in his effort to gain approval in his Methodist work. Turning to writing as an opiate, he joined a circle of amateur writers which he soon abandoned.

Wilson resigned from his job at the British Museum in 1955 and began to live in the country on an experimental basis. Gardens and gardening henceforth became the symbol of a conflict in him - between the 'garden in the wild' of his mother's South African roots and 'the wild garden' of his urban father. Gardens became the principal motif behind the themes of his several novels.

Angus Wilson was the recipient of the Black Memorial Prize in 1959, the Prix de Meilleur Roman Estranger in 1960, and the Yorkshire Post Book Award for non-fiction in 1971. He was also made an Honorary Fellow of Cowell College, University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1968. He was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1958 and a Companion of Literature of the same society in 1972. He was also honoured with the Order of the British Empire in 1968.

Wilson died at the age of seventy-seven but not before he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1989. The recognition, though late, was most appropriate.

Against a general charge of lack of commitment on the part of the British literary circles of the late twentieth century with 'youthful practitioners' at the helm, Angus Wilson emerged with his fine talent primarily as a satirist, flaying the highly fashionable and the unpleasant. He is one of the post-war novelists who has made significant contribution to the great tradition of English fiction. His novels and short stories present a complex web of ideas and attitudes pertaining to the individual of our times.


Angus Wilson has tried to explode the hypocrisies of modern society. Modern man's dilemma arising out of a conflict between his inner and outer life, the problem of the liberal humanist in dealing with moral evil, the problem of loneliness of the elderly in the face of the young's lack of understanding of them, and the corrupting influence of power, are, among others, some of the themes of his fiction.

In trying to expose the highly fashionable in society, Wilson has often satirised their failings in strict terms. 'The family' has often been the focal point of his fiction and the 'mother' in it has come in for his bitterest attack.

As a novelist, Wilson is highly successful. The hallmark of his fiction is that though his literary concerns are the same in them, each of his eight novels is refreshingly
different in terms of variety and range. He is essentially, a novelist of manners and morals. Trying to probe into the ethics of life and set a standard of living, he often launches incisive and devastating attacks on various sections of contemporary British middle class society. The post-war scenario with its 'lost' generation comes in for his bitterest criticism. At the same time Wilson is much concerned with the social reality of the times and it is his belief that to incorporate modern life into the novel, it must be clothed with some elements of social realism.

The characters in Wilson's novels are many and varied. If there are respected and aristocratic people, there are also the common riff-raff of society. But it is in his delineation of the women characters that Wilson is at his best. The women characters are a force to reckon with in his fiction. 'Homosexuality' is a topic close to Wilson's heart. It has been freely explored in his fiction. In his underworld, the 'camp' or homosexual characters take on parasitic undertones as they live off their hosts.

The literary weapons in an author's hands are also, many and varied. Wilson has had recourse to motifs, irony, alienating devices, symbols and images. Dialogue also has been used as an important medium of interaction between the characters. Sometimes, Wilson uses the first person narration as in The Old Men at the Zoo which somehow hinders the smooth flow of the narrative but, at other times, he uses the stock-in-trade technique of the omniscient narrator.

The atmosphere of the novels has a direct relation to an author's life. Recurrent subjects, symbols and places give them a distinctive flavour. But as far as a novelist's art is concerned, the atmosphere is the most unconscious and automatic part of it. Therefore, it is also the least understood and is rather difficult to analyse. In Wilson's novels, the recurring motifs are limited in number and, as he himself declares, mostly spontaneous. The 'garden' motif linked to his boyhood in South Africa also can be
traced to his special attraction for the country. But, strangely, it is not Dickens with his rather perfunctory Cockney sentimentalism about the countryside who has influenced him but Jane Austen with her 'more rooted, cherished and deeply felt attachment' who has shaped his responses.

Alienating devices like the flashback technique, parodies, literary allusions, pastiches, irony etc. which abound in Wilson's novels make them dense and allusive and not easy for a first reader. But taken together, the interplay of these major techniques and formal devices delineates well the social, moral and expressive concerns of the novels. This, in turn, clothes Wilson's fiction with a complexity and richness which is his principal forte.


Wilson's similarity with Waugh, Orwell and Golding lies in the satiric depictions of contemporary society based on wrong values. Their novels also flay the world of the fashionable, and the young intellectuals, and are replete with undertones of cruelty, violence and bitterness. For Iris Murdoch, the novel is an 'art of image', not merely an instrument of analysis and reflection. Like her for whom fiction is not a 'simplification of ideas developed elsewhere', for Wilson also, the novels are moments of vision. The fiction of both presents a wholly intelligible view of life, the stuff of life is seized thoroughly and communicated totally. What strikes us about Wilson's work is the note of hope and optimism notwithstanding the moments of gloom and despair that come through at the end. But it can be safely said about Murdoch and Wilson that they aim at achieving true knowledge minus the hindrance of the 'fat
relentless ego' which is the reason for the so many lapses in modern society. It is worth mentioning that the American critic, Edmund Wilson regards Angus Wilson as a possible successor to Evelyn Waugh. The only difference as Edmund Wilson says, lies in Wilson's focus on the poorer and hence, the more aggressive social group.

Wilson has been largely influenced by Dickens, Kipling, Austen, Forster and Dostoevsky. We recall his words in The Wild Garden:

I had always been, and still am addicted to the great Victorian novelists, especially to Charles Dickens. The conflicts of the novels of Dickens or Balzac, for example, so frequently clearer on the symbolic under-level than on the surface story level, seem to me to have not only remarkable social and moral insight but also a cosmic significance that is often denied to them by critics. I used always to be very impatient of more fastidious critics who took exception to the melodrama or the sentimentality attaching to childish or childlike innocence: these were such small prices to pay for the intensity, the fierceness of the struggle portrayed. [emphasis added].

Like Dickens, Wilson delineates well the loneliness of the human heart in the absence of love and companionship. Wilson finds an affinity with Kipling's gifts which are delicacy of craft and a sense of exactitude. This means a similarity between Kipling and Wilson's technique in that events start in all sobriety and soon get out of control so that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the really possible and the fantastic. Kipling synonymous with India and South Africa also attracts Wilson who often lingers in his own South African childhood memories. Wilson's As If By Magic reflects much of the Indian landscape as does Kipling's Kim. A powerful sense of comedy, a strange fascination with crime, violence and low life marks the fiction of all three of
them. But the sense of mystery and strangeness that characterises the work of Dickens and Kipling is lacking in Wilson for whom the 'modern psychological analysis' means everything.

According to Wilson, a combination of depth with breadth should be the primary objective of every contemporary English novelist. In his own practice, he has succeeded fairly well in achieving this ideal. He was not satisfied with the traditional older form for he did not find them adequate to express emotions freely and openly. He was of the opinion that the personal touch should be maintained even while delineating it in a broad social and narrative sweep. So, according to Wilson, it is Dostoevsky rather than George Eliot in the nineteenth century who comes closest to an expression of these 'newly discovered depths'. No wonder, then, that Dostoevsky's influence can be seen in his seventh novel, *As If By Magic*.

Thus, taking into account the range and depth of his works, we are inclined to believe that Wilson deserves a place amongst the all-time literary greats in the English language. But it is indeed a pity that he is not so well known to students and readers. The notable absence of much reading material on him is also a disadvantage to those who want to enter into the world of Wilson's fiction.