CHAPTER III
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Tragedy of Rootlessness and alienation thereof: The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot (1958), Late Call (1964).

The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot (1958) is a story of alienation and self-realization, somewhat late in life, of the protagonist, Meg Eliot. It is a study of intense suffering and subsequent loneliness caused by the death of one's near and dear ones. Once again, the false sense of well-being caused by material comforts and untried friendships is dispelled stage by stage. It is also about courage to go on with life in a society increasingly unsympathetic to the older generation. In The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot, as in his earlier books, Wilson has dealt exhaustively with the subject of the essential loneliness of man and his struggle for self-realization in a society materially very rich but spiritually inane. The principal characters, along with a host of other minor characters who, nonetheless help to carry on the action, are all lonely beings with shattered hopes and impulses. Their redemption lies in their efforts to attain awareness of themselves. Without any solid anchor or moorings, they can do nothing but float in a vacuum, or lose themselves in life's endless eddies. Weighed down by their burden of loneliness and racked by their subsequent struggle to attain self-identity, they, in most cases, understandably fail to locate their El Dorado. Everything turns out to be a utopia of dreams.

The novel has been divided into three books. The First Book presents Meg Eliot as a beautiful and educated woman of forty-three -- the wife of a successful lawyer, Bill, with an identity that revolves round him. She reads novels and occupies herself with works of charity. She is chairman of the organization of 'Aid to the Elderly'. Her life is one of blissful ignorance of the world that lies beyond the cloistered serenity of her house which she sees as 'the centre of the life she had made for herself' (36). Her life till now has been one big party until her journey to the Far East where she loses her husband to a bullet in Srem Panh airport. In death, Bill becomes a hero
for having saved the Education Minister of Badai by taking the bullet himself, but to Meg, his death comes as a bolt from the blue. It signifies the collapse of her hitherto 'safe' world. From now on, she is on her own in a world which is slowly taking on increasingly nightmarish dimensions.

In the British Consul's house, Meg tries to recover from her 'nightmare'. The consul and his wife do their best to shelter her from life's rude shocks by holding her back at Badai, but she resolves to get on with life, to go back to the 'unknown England which fills her with terror' (131) and decide on her future course. In Book Two, we find Meg back in England and going over the different courses that life now offers her. Her three oldest friends whom she had previously called the three 'lame ducks' come to her aid temporarily. Lady Viola Pirie recommends her a life of married bliss, Poll Robson suggests a life of bohemianism and sponging, and Jill Stokes by her personal example, prescribes a life warped with hallowed memories of the dead. None of these appeals to Meg who is a restless person and has a streak of vagrancy in her. At Jill's place, she has a nervous breakdown and goes back to her brother David Parker's quiet retreat in Sussex, 'Andredaswood'. Going back to David perhaps, signifies, going back to her childhood roots. Book Three titled 'Nursery Ins and Outs' sees Meg settling down at Andredaswood. David is a pacifist - a quietist whose life is centred around his homosexual partner, Gordon Paget who is dying of protacted cancer. Together, they have carved out a quiet retreat for themselves and busied themselves in nursery gardening – an entirely commercial venture. In course of time, Gordon dies as expected and Meg enters David's 'lonely' life. In his company, she recovers herself and her interest in life returns. Together, both of them rediscover their childhood link and find solace in each other's company by filling in each other's loneliness. But Meg decides to get out of Andredaswood, to escape the cosy bog into which both of them are dangerously falling. At the close of the novel, we find a much wiser Meg Eliot whose outlook on life is now positive.
Indeed, to quote Margaret Drabble, the novel 'records the progress of a human being towards self-knowledge and towards knowledge of the world she lives in, a world of which, as she admits, she had been dangerously ignorant'.¹ This critic has further opined that the novel is 'neither comedy nor satire, though again, it contains elements of both'.²

Unlike Hemlock and After (1952), and Anglo-Saxon Attitudes (1956), this work is a journey into the future rather than a re-assessment of the past. But the humanists in the three novels – Bernard Sands, Gerald Middleton, Meg Eliot and David Parker are all older people, fighting to keep alive their values in a society increasingly unsympathetic and aloof.

Wilson's first three novels form a triology in the sense that they adumbrate the theme of self-deception and the struggles to fuller awareness. In every instance, the principal character is someone who, not as an adolescent or young adult, but as a mature person, comes face to face with some truth about himself or herself that a lifetime has been spent avoiding. In these early novels, Wilson has taken care not to repeat himself; each form is different and the circumstances of each hero or heroine's dilemma is far from identical. Bernard Sands quite suddenly recognizes the innate cruelty that is part of his nature. Gerald Middleton conquers his years-old depression, Meg Eliot finds that there is, after all, life beyond one's sheltered and attractive existence and its collapse does not mean the end. Unlike her quietist brother, she goes out and meets life head on and enjoys it. Bernard Sands dies before he can redeem himself fully whereas his wife Ella overcomes her paranoid depression to further his work.

Wilson delights in liberally attacking the follies and foibles of his characters. Underneath this attack, however, is the deeply felt and relayed sense that life with all its muddles, is worth living and that human endeavours are praiseworthy.
The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot, then, celebrates the courageous story of a lively, popular but not very deep woman who in the later part of her life, becomes a widow, and rather poorer. The overcoming of her limitations and the discovery of her strength; and her relationship with her homosexual brother is delineated well.

According to A.S. Byatt, "Meg Eliot remains Wilson's most successful attempt at the Jamesian ideal of sustained, inner imagining of a character. She, too, is literary, and has her personal collection of texts 'characterized as the escape she and David had found in the past. Emma, The Mill on the Floss, The Small House At Allington, The Portrait of a Lady lay together with the hand luggage. They were the basic necessities of the Voyage'.

Between these heroines of the past - Emma Woodhouse, Maggie Tulliver, Daisy Miller etc. and Meg Eliot, there is an affinity somewhere. Like those passionate, impulsive heroines who suffer because of mixing their fantasies with stark reality, Meg Eliot's life, until the time of her sad dispensation, is an apology for life - she has not lived life till then. But even in the similarity, there is a grain of discomfort inherent. The novels already mentioned symbolise 'an escape to the past' (41) whereas Meg's addiction to them yet offers her no escape from misery. Indeed, the novels symbolise for her, an easy evasion of abject misery with no ray of hope.

In this evasion of reality, Meg Eliot's character anticipates that of Slyvia Calvert in Late Call (1964). Unlike Meg, Slyvia is basically shrewd, has a limited intelligence, and very little education. Her sensibility is formed by popular biographies, light historical novels, and sentimental television serials. Meg's search for meaning and a value in existence and realization of self-truth finds an echo in Slyvia Calvert's hitherto static existence with little joy or affirmation. Her feeble attempts to break off the shackles of her dull existence and her subsequent self-realization drive home the
point of the importance of the journey and not the arrival. It is ironic that Wilson places Bill's death and the disaster in Meg's life in the Far East - a place she has always despised: 'The East isn't really the part I'm looking forward to ... All the disease and the dirt and the teeming millions'. (54)

From now on, for Meg, the Far East will always be symbolized by a sense of great loss. Her misfortune is a revelation to her - it brings home to her the value of life and faith, the loss of which is acutely felt not only by her but by several others. A sense of desolation and loneliness assails her now as Bill's sudden death has left her bereft, with no solid moorings.

Bill, by dint of his success as a lawyer, was able to give Meg the life she wanted. But, unknown to him, it is this very kind of life which is Meg's bane after his death. But Meg's greatest asset is her courage to get on with life. Earlier also, one thing which symbolized her life with Bill was their resolve to 'keep going'. She realizes that a life lived with Bill's memories will not solve her pressing problems. Life is a reality, and the reality must be faced.

The stark reality of Meg's life now is her pecuniary insufficiency. She is badly in need of a job. As Patrick White observed in The Aunt's Story, 'Life is full of alternatives but no choice'. Finally, Meg disposes off her house and gets busy with a secretarial course for the future. She now clothes the emptiness of her life with trivialities. She gets busy with the rigours of the secretarial course, rents a room in a hotel and looks up old friends. With Viola Pirie, Poll Robson, and Jill Stokes, her three 'lame ducks', she finds temporary comradeship and solace but these relationships peter out on a damp note as Meg realizes their futility. She understands that the secret of enjoying life is to participate actively in it. Slowly, Meg accepts the world as it is. She realizes that a positive affirmation of life through whole-hearted acceptance of it is the only
way out for overcoming her feelings of impotence and misery. With this affirmation, all her doubts and questions of yesteryears become obliterated, giving her life a novelty which she had thought was lost. An imperceptible feeling of endurance erases her anguish of loss and separation.

At Jill's, Meg has a nervous breakdown and she goes to David's place at Sussex to recuperate. Henceforth, her day-to-day relationship with David is crucial to the growth of her character. At Andredaswood, David's quiet company and the re-living of their happy past together, brings Meg a world of comfort. She is now a relaxed woman, full of renewed confidence thanks to her growing awareness of her identity as an individual by her own right. Meg's world is now a contented and happy one in that she has control of the household, and of the parties she organizes. She is once again the successful, popular, and enlivening hostess of earlier days. Unfortunately, in her company, David gets into an ennui of inactivity. His idea of a good evening is now one spent in Meg's company while working on his research paper. The sentimental cosy futility of their togetherness is a retrograde step in Meg's process of self-realization. So, Meg takes the ultimate decision to break off from David. When David, fearful of loneliness, protests, she replies:

'Oh God, David, do you think I want to go back to that loneliness. But I can face it now, and that's because of the help you've given me. Surely that I can take on loneliness again shows you how important I think it is for us to break this up'. (426)

Her final separation from David is another step to her development through self-negation a sort of triumph. She gets the conviction that life is but a bed of thorns, and the best way to tackle it is to endure suffering:
but for me the only way I can feel of use is to keep my curiosity, to be with people - yes, even awful people like Michael Grant-Pritchard. It's no denial of your truth, but for me the only sense is to assert one's faith in people by living among them'. (426).

This last scene in David's house is the climax of the novel. After her husband's death, Meg has really come a long way. She accepts her suffering as necessary to reach a transcendental state of mind, her final joy and wholeness. This reminds us of Stephen Levine's thoughts on suffering as expressed in these words:

'Letting go of our suffering is the hardest work we will ever do. It is also the most fruitful. To heal means to meet ourselves in a new way – in the newness of each moment where all is possible and nothing is limited to the old, our holding released, our grasping seen with little surprise or judgement. The vastness of our being meeting each moment wholeheartedly whether it holds pleasure or pain. Then the healing goes deeper than we ever imagined, deeper than we ever dreamed'.

Meg's outlook on life is further sharpened by the rigours of her experiences which infuse in her the courage to fight life's trials and tribulations. She finally understands that there is no middle way to living life. Living itself implies taking risks and growing all the time. Living on the edge, or accepting things as they are, is the key to self-awareness. Importantly, she has realized the value of the future based on compassion and sympathy and not destruction and separation.

Meg Eliot suffers from a crisis of personality which, according to Anthony
Storr, is, because of a lapse between the inner world of subjectivity and the outer world of external reality which 'both compels re-examination of fundamentals and... demands new creative solution'. This incompatibility of illusion and reality or life and death is reflected in Patrick White's *Aunt's Story*:

'You can not reconcile joy and sorrow, or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason, Theodora Goodman, you must accept. And you have already found that one constantly deludes the other into taking fresh shapes, so that there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality...'.

Meg reflects that the 'high spirits' and 'high hopes' of Emma Woodhouse, Maggie Tulliver, Lily Dale, and Isobel Archer were hers exactly but she 'had avoided their defeats' (81) simply because she had been born in a later century. These allusions amply characterize Meg. Her self-satisfaction on having escaped the plight of her fictional forbears is an example of her initial lack of self-knowledge and a foreshadowing of the tight rope existence ahead of her. The abundance of allusions in the novel under study is an indication of Wilson's ability to paint a portrait of a contemporary lady, against a socially responsible setting which rivals in 'moral richness and depth the canvasses of his nineteenth-century predecessors'. At the end of the dark tunnel, there is a ray of light and hope for Meg Eliot but not for many others in the novel. The climax of this novel anticipates that of *Late Call* when Slyvia Calvert decides to move out of her son's house to establish a separate identity for herself.

Alongside the Meg Eliot - David Parker relationship is developed the David-Gordon Paget relationship which is crucial to an understanding of David's character.
The homosexual element seems to be a subject close to Wilson's heart. In *Hemlock And After*, homosexual attachments in contemporary society is worsened by the existing state of the law. The self-seeking, insecure, and malevolent sadly dominate these relationships. *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot*, however, boasts of a different kind of homosexual relationship free of these corrupting factors. David has lived a good many years with Gordon without any sexual relation. Together, they have succeeded in creating 'Andrediswood' – an idyllic, quietist community which like Vardon Hall, the home for artists sponsored by Bernard Sands in *Hemlock and After*, is a retreat from modern industrial society. 'Andrediswood', with an old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon tinge to it, and Vardon Hall are reminiscent of James' 'The Great Good Place'. On another plane, David and Gordon's nursery is also an escape from life's reality – an abnegation of life. Far from the madding crowd and enclosed in the serenity of the retreat, David deceives himself into thinking that he is happy in his 'withdrawal'. His stance of non-human involvement is a much studied Wilsonian syndrome. As Gordon suffers, so does David. He thinks that with Gordon's death, he will also reach the climax of his life. He feels that the inner strength necessary to maintain his stance of non-involvement with the world will be disturbed by unnecessary emotional dependance. Though this self-effacement comes 'perilously near to negation' David feels that it is the only posture that can keep his ideals intact and allow him 'to cross the shapeless tract of human existence with grace and with gentleness'. (201)

In his endless self-questionings whether 'his own carefully built up detachment (is) only a self-induced blindness to the Evil that governed the universe' (240), David resembles most of Wilson's other male characters. He successfully evades reality by deriving pleasure from 'the sad futilities of Emma Bovary's debts'.

Gardening, at David's hands, takes on a superfluous quality as his involvement with it is not spontaneous. The books on the garden flowers of Africa which Gordon and David were writing were useless and mere shelf-decorators, as Meg points out
to him. They show a perverse exploitation of nature. In David's hands, it symbolises 'despair, surrender to sloth, deliberate destruction of the human will all under a high minded false self-deception" and its perfunctory use becomes a characteristic abuse. As Valerie A. Shaw observed, "one of the central themes of the book is the relationship between sensitive observation and judgement, between what David calls 'the immediate and supreme demands of moral activity' and the need for speculative detachment and isolation" echoing a thought from the Bhagavad Gita, which says that self-abnegation can be achieved by non-interference and that even in withdrawal there can be action:

'He who sees the inaction that is in action, and the action that is in inaction, is wise indeed. Even when he is engaged in action he remains poised in the tranquility of the Atman'.

Meg summarily rejects the efforts to convert the melodramatic events at Srem Panh as patterned tragedy with Bill as a romantic hero. She realizes belatedly that relationships are important, no matter what the outcome:

"She tried to rest content with this 'live and let live' view, but it was no good. Puritan or not, she was made differently: made to judge; and at this critical juncture she must make judgements or cease to exist".

(273)

Meg reflects that the answer to her problem lies in life itself; she has only to find it:

All the same, Proust could afford to find human relationships insufficient or at any rate he could make Marcel do so -because he
knew that he was to find an answer in his writing. I've got to find some meaning in life itself. (278)

The closest Meg can get to finding such meaning is in the reconstruction of her relationship with David in 'Andredaswood'. Art offers David a way out of the humanist dilemma, but unlike Meg, he has accepted loneliness even while reconciling himself to the prospect of a comparable bereavement. To him, withdrawal or whole-hearted acceptance of loneliness—although a serious measure, is a necessary condition of civilized man. The sweetness of the voices in the howling wilderness and the 'selfishness, self-assertion, ideals, dream and so on' which lie behind those voices do not surprise him. He measures their magnitude; 'Beethoven, Shakespeare, Flaubert, Mozart ... were the only ones that could defy the discipline of living'. (202) So even as David enjoys a private 'great tradition', his great love for Gordon is ruthlessly devoid of any trace of sentimentalism. When Gordon's courage momentarily fails, David wishes that he were able to say, I observe, I don't judge. But this sentimentalism, that passed as a wide and deep love of humanity, as the gentle wisdom taught by the years, was surely the negation of real respect for men. It would never do, least of all where respect and love were involved. Where you respected and loved, you esteemed, you judged. (204)

Unfortunately, he cannot bear his shield of self-control much longer, the irrational thrusts itself through it. David, unable to remain a mute spectator to Gordon's physical suffering, writes to Meg 'an incoherent letter of anger that zigzagged across the writing paper like random flashes of lightning' (204) He accuses his 'own carefully
built up detachment' and childish conceit in the power of his own will and reason to remain meaningful when faced with nightmarish images:

God forgive me for prating about humanism,
pretending that pain and evil could be reduced to
a pigmy human stature. (240)

Meg now senses intuitively the limitations of sincerity as it becomes a barrier to active love:

'Do I mean it? Do they need it was a better question. At least let me seek for the words, she decided and with them I may discover my emotions'. (241)

Hereafter, the treatment of the interaction of the lives of Meg and David, representatives as they are 'of questive adherents to principles of active and passive humanism' becomes the novel's 'chief subtlety'.

Early in the relationship, David is clear about the dividing line between withdrawal and acceptance, the former being the necessary 'simmering down of human personality, of human achievement too ... in order that we can start up again' (290) of which he speaks to Gordon's mother in Book II. When Meg wants to know if she had done the right thing in trying to improve things between Jill and Evelyn (Jill's daughter), his answer, typically, stresses 'withdrawal'. He is 'inclined to think it is better to stand aside'. (327) 'Withdrawal doesn't mean acceptance' (327) to him.

David and Meg relapse into an easy, comforting relationship, with occasional regressions into their past. The phrase 'Back to the Nursery' ironically and aptly implies this very childhood regression. That Meg has realized the shortcomings in her married life with Bill, prosperous though they were, is evident here – very different from her earlier view: 'Although I must say I have such a wonderful life anyway that I'm not as excited as I ought to be at the prospect of change'. (21) At that time, her
experience and vision being limited, she does not realise that 'change is the nursery of music, joy and eternity'. So when the change does come in her fortune, her position in society and her life, she is caught unawares. Creditably, Meg realizes that for a healthy existence, she must accept this change and get on with life just as Charles Tart opines in *Waking up*:

> All genuine paths require courage: Courage to buck the social tide, courage to see yourself as you really are, courage to take risks. Progress on any genuine path is a gift to us all, as well as a gain for yourself.

On the other hand, David cannot bring himself to face this loneliness and change. He is so withdrawn that he cannot even tolerate interference of any sort in his and others' lives. When the others in the nursery want him to impress upon Meg the feasibility of taking on a job with the Rogersons, he differs, saying that it is up to Meg. To him, even pearls in unopened oysters are best left untouched: 'It's not the time for dreaming about pearls in unopened oysters. If there are pearls then the people leave them alone for a century or two the better'. (359)

Meg's temporary involvement with the nursery garden speaks for her determination to stay on life's course and her essential involvement with human concerns. As she tells David: 'My determinations are not scattered and my curiosity hasn't died on me. They are simply in abeyance'. (360) To Meg now, at 'Andredaswood', reading novels is not the answer to fight the eddies of life. She knows, 'She has to be interested in the real people' (403) while to David, this implies a 'narrow conception of the art of the novel' (405). He and Gordon had always 'detested worship of work as one of the most assertive and corroding of human passions' (397). Meg's arrival at her solution is marked characteristically, only by work and self knowledge. Even the
consolations of religion are not enough to mitigate her's and David's suffering. They fail to understand that even

amidst the chaos there is harmony, throughout these
discordant sounds there is a note of concord, and he
who is prepared to listen to it will catch the tune.

Initially, Gordon's death almost paralyses David mentally. When Meg comes to Andredaswood, he is worried at first about her detachment without a simple function; worried about her simply lapsing into a feeble, contented dependance: 'But it's a negative sort of calm or rather I feel that it's a desperate sort of calm. It's too near to apathy'. (338) But, ironically, later it's Meg who gets worried about David's dependance on her for his peace of mind, and David worries about her moving away from him.

As Book III progress, we feel that the distinction between withdrawal and acceptance as maintained by David so far is weakening as his relationship with Meg regresses into 'easeful communion' in which 'books and the past - their own recreation of a dead world, the creations of other worlds by men now dead' (343) co-mingle. This is art, not life - as is evident in their revival of the games of their adolescence; the parodying of stock type novels, the games of observations in which judgements are not allowed, and climactically, the attempt to build up 'a little island culture of work and pleasure deliberately kept simple, and of loneliness accepted'. (411) by resuming together the literary research which David had abandoned for the vitality of nursery gardening:

And their explorations of the past, David thought now
without danger of sudden squalls or treacherous reefs
beneath the smooth running waters. (342)
Their decision not to judge in their Game of Observation: "He had not forgotten the rules of 'observations' - to invent histories and thoughts for the people they saw, but to make no judgement" (359) shows how content they are to drift along the placid waters of life as spectators from the outside and not as active participators.

Their gaiety on the pier and their joy in simple, immature acts show that they have 'reverted to old patterns'. (355) David's attempts 'to fight back to the limit of its critical usefulness his natural rage for irony that, playing around these simple, defenceless ideas, might destroy the truth that he believed to be within them' (411), exposes the dangers of the academic version of the 'game of observations'. Their life together gets into a closeness of futility as it becomes painfully apparent to Meg who decides to break off when she can: 'It is too cosily brother and sister. It wouldn't be quite decent'. (393)

Their last evening together is the climax of the novel. Their cosiness itself brings home to Meg the reality of the situation: 'What David thought perhaps the happiest evening of his life' (420) and 'only one of a long chain of such evenings to come' (420) is to Meg, too familiarly destructive. For, the same had happened with Bill. 'David's aim is to pacify, listen, sympathize, encourage and yet to remain withdrawn' (420) whereas for Meg her 'real living peace' (425) lies in participating, by living and by asserting one's faith in people. David's strength is his loneliness and self-denial. Both of them had begun to think that they were 'happy', living life as they were but it is the very 'vegetable ease and creeping lethargy that's paralysing' (425) them. Ironically, David's careless answers to Meg's apparently off-beat questions sound the knell to the relationship. As Valerie A. Shaw says, David's appreciation of Meg's 'vitality and surprisingness' (422) on their last evening together, is, paradoxically, a quietist acceptance of 'sentimental, cosy futility' and a denial of the separateness of
the individual's unique truth. So, Meg's ultimate decision to break-off could not have come at a better time.

Gordon Paget is the promiscuous homosexual partner of David. Their books on garden plants were a success but it is only after the death of his father who has left him ample money that they are able to indulge themselves in gardening as a hobby. For all his faults of egoism and dominance, Gordon is committed to living. He also symbolises power and his innate cruelty is apparent in his treatment of his pets. He has them killed because he is concerned about their future after his death. The behaviour of Gordon who does not believe in the transmigration of souls of animals either shows how egoistical he is: 'But they (animals) do not have souls' (210) echo Samuel Butler's thoughts on souls that the souls of women being too small are practically non-existent.

The shadow of Bill Gordon and Andrew is constantly in the background of the events in the novel just like Beth's in Late Call. Every moment of Meg's life is coated with Bill's memories and a feeling of guilt at what she could not do for him. So, to be able to go to Srem Panh again without feeling anything means that she has been able to exorcise her guilt and fears. Her memories of Bill hereafter will always be of happy moments.

Viola Pirie, Poll Robson, and Jill Stokes are Meg's 'lame ducks' and her oldest friends. As Bill's wife, Meg was in a position to patronize them. She could laugh at their looks, their behaviour, their standard of living. Now, after Bill's death, the position is altered and to Meg, this rankles. As she tells David: 'I realise now that all the trouble happened because they were in a position to patronize me'. (346)

They are all life's flotsams struggling for an identity of their own in the complex cycle of life, and fighting the ennui and boredom in their own particular way. After
Bill's death when Meg is in danger of losing her individualistic identity, her three friends offer their help and, most importantly, their company to alleviate her acute loneliness. But Meg's renewed relationship with all three of them fails to take off after some time because of a gap in their respective ways of thinking.

First, Viola Pirie who was with Meg in the 'Aid to the Elderly' steps into Meg's lonely life. From the early days, her behaviour towards Meg has been motherly. Though Meg 'sought a more positive relationship with the Piries' (241) (Viola and her son, Tom), it fizzles out towards the end. With Tom, her relationship is misunderstood and the whole generation gap is driven home to her strongly. Meg's realization of the deep chasm between the older and younger generation anticipates again the failure on Harold's part to really understand his mother, Slyvia Calvert in *Late Call* (1964). Meg feels that 'her generation had treated people as individuals, not bothering about age' (246) whereas 'the young people were returning to a seclusion as narrow as the secret lives of youth in victorian times. She had just been herself but they did not care about human beings; they only wanted badges, and they were not interested because she did not wear their badge'. (246) To Meg, this summary rejection hurt. It does not speak too well of the young people. Frankness of behaviour should be based on mutual respect between the two generations for a healthy co-existence.

The projection of a life of 'deliberate calculated marriage' (281) bliss by Viola to Meg – 'a woman isn't complete without a man' (280) – does not appeal to the latter as she now realizes that marriage is not the answer to life's problems. Meg's relationship with Poll also peters out. The 'live and let live' (273) view of Poll cannot satisfy her for Meg is made differently. She must judge if she has to exist. Poll's 'life was still a sort of animated death'. (273) The life of 'bohemianism' (281) suggested by her - 'there just isn't any place for women of our age and upbringing who haven't any money ... you'll just have to settle for being a slut' (272) is repulsive to Meg.
Ironically, she loves her friend and yet hates her life: 'Loving the woman and yet hating her life' (273) as she was 'not looking for punch-drunk bliss' (273). Unfortunately, Meg's relationship with Jill Stokes ends on a bitter note as her way of living on hallowed memories of her dead husband does not seem to be the right thing. Jill's relationship with her daughter and son-in-law is strained because of her too rigid and uncompromising attitude. To have a happy life, a certain amount of flexibility is essential. That Meg can reach out to the sensitive person in Leonard (Jill's son-in-law) whereas to Jill, he always will be 'the little beast' (298) and 'his highness' (298), shows Meg in a positive light. That Jill has all along been hiding her real feelings of hurt from her daughter Evelyn, is a negative aspect of her character: 'For five years now I've kept my feelings for that creature, even from Evelyn so that she should never guess how much she'd hurt me?' (316). She, all along, concerns herself with trivialities to relegate the important issues of life into the background. As Meg intervenes, Jill accuses her of patronizing: 'Meg, what makes you think you can run other people's lives as though they were children? Are you sure that everything you have done in your life has been so triumphantly for the best?' (317) and this adds to our impression of Meg as a 'natural Emma'. (396)

All the characters of The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot are victims of anxiety, fear and loneliness. A common motif of pain, rejection and betrayal runs through them all. It is ironic that where her friends fail Meg, Mrs. Fairclough, a relative stranger, gives her comfort in her sad state of mind.

There are a host of other minor characters (appreciably fewer than in the earlier novels) who, minor though they be, have a definite link with the main characters and help further the action. These characters are representatives of 'Wilson's characteristic abundance of social notation' and create the 'sense of a socially responsible middle
But they are never allowed to hog the limelight. They are present only because they tell us about Meg or David (through comparison or contrast).

The country-town dichotomy of values is evident in the novel. Meg's breakdown in the town and subsequent retreat to the country for recuperation seems to be the temporary answer to the conflict between the two. But then, both of these are rejected by her in choice of vagrancy.

Meg's childhood in Sussex anticipates that of Slyvia Calvert in the Prologue in *Late Call*. Meg's comment: 'I hated it when I lived near here as a girl, but then I was always having to do things. What I hadn't realized was that Sussex was such a wonderful place to be idle in' (347) is similar to Slyvia's childhood, when as a child she had much work to do without any moment of enjoyment for herself.

In *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot*, elements of the short story technique with thrust on the dialogue and over statement has been shed in favour of a relaxed, muted treatment of a universally relevant subject. The narration is restricted and the 'God's eye view' or omniscient narration which he employed in *Hemlock And After* has been dropped. Everything in the novel is seen through the eyes or over the shoulder of Meg or David. Even the frequent literary allusions to different works of different authors strengthen the theme and suggest parallel affinities (*Emma*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Tess*, *The Modern Comedy*).

The finest of Wilson's first three novels, *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot*, is clearly an attempt to resolve the problem of 'Diversity and Depth' - the need to combine 'depth of vision' with 'breadth of setting' which was a problem for the contemporary English novelist. Because of the sharpening of focus, the plot is uncomplicated. After the initial event of the violent death of Meg's husband in the novel's first part, the
story unfolds naturally and plausibly. The novel's structure - the contrasts and parallels in the personalities and situations of Meg and David – has a powerful simplicity.

The strength of *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* lies in its moral and psychological insight which informs the characters of Meg and David. David's self-withering is well portrayed but it is the story of his sister's life and troubles through and through that dominate the work appropriately named after her.

One of the best features of the novel is that the significance and profundity of Meg's crisis, her floundering in search of an anchor and the solution thereof is not overplayed. Attention is diverted from her gradually by taking the point of view away from her. The whole of the first part of the novel is narrated exclusively from her point of view whereas in the second part, David takes over completely. The reader is taken into the deep inner recesses of David's mind and, in the third part, Meg is shown strictly from the outside. Even in the climactic scene with David, he takes centrepiece as it is narrated from his point of view and her subsequent decision to leave 'Andredaswood' has also been made off-stage. It is often argued that Meg Eliot's crisis is not so profoundly deserving a full-scale treatment. And so, a comparison of the work with such intimidating standards like *Emma*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Portrait of a Lady* is odious. Nevertheless, in Meg's character, affinity is perceived with another character, Kate Brown in Doris Lessing's novel, *The Summer before the Dark* (1975). The lives of Meg and Kate run along parallel lines. Their life stories are similar - happiness cut short by unimagined tragedy followed by sudden knowledge of some sobering truths about their marriages. This is then followed by a period of intense suffering during which both of them discover their self-identity. In comparison to Kate's, Meg's mid-life crisis is of less intensity. On the other hand, however, Wilson's social observation and social notation in *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* is noticeably
bereft of any social vision. Still, given the self-imposed limitation of Wilson's treatment of Meg's character, his considerable skill in plumbing the social and psychological depths of Meg and David is admirable.

The novel ends on an uncompromising note. Wilson fails to give us an abiding solution to the conflict between David's loneliness and withdrawal and Meg's passionate involvement with people. The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot, a work of diversity and depth, celebrates the 'priority of the ragged edges of life over the self-contained work of imaginative art' in an admirable way.

Late Call (1964), as compared to the other novels of Wilson, especially The Old Men at the Zoo (1961), is a novel of relative serenity. The marked cruelty and violence that pervade the whole of The Old Men at the Zoo is remarkably absent here. The story of Late Call is a simple one - it traces the quiet growth of character of its heroine, Slyvia Calvert, and her relationship with the members of her son's family in the New Town of Carshall. Human relationships are also explored in depth and family values stressed. Wilson's satire is closely woven into the fabric of family life with its demands and conformities, attacking the pretensions of the affluent caught in the web of modernity. Entangled in this web, modern man becomes mechanical and status conscious; social snobbery, hypocrisy, meanness, immaturity come easily to him and even filial affections are paraded openly and get-togethers become mere show businesses.

Late Call is Slyvia's story and the tension between her past and present is what lends energy to it. Her late self-realization at the age of sixty-four, is the essential subject here proving the truth of what Wilson himself maintained that 'self-realization lies at the heart of (his) fiction.' Slyvia has just retired after a hard life of work as a manageress of a hotel, 'The Palmeira Court' and leaves for her son's house at Carshall.
a new town somewhere in the Midlands along with her sponging idler of a husband, Arthur. They are welcomed heartily at Carshall by their son, Harold and his family of three teenaged children – Ray, Mark, and Judy with a great display of filial affections. But why Sylvia can not fit in at Carshall with all its modern amenities and in the chilly jovial atmosphere of her son's house, forms the core of the novel.

The choice of Sylvia's name is not without significance; it means 'Slyvan', which is so appropriate to her rural surroundings. It is suggestive of the song beginning, 'what is Sylvia?' (90) and the answer peculiarly is not just 'our granny' (90) as Harold put it in the rhyming Christmas card. She is an individual by her own right though it has taken her a lifetime to realize this.

The novel, divided into eight chapters, begins with a Prologue which resembles one of Wilson's sharpest short stories. It begins with an apt description of 'The Hot Summer of 1911' seen through the eyes of a ten year-old-child on an East Anglian farm, weighed down with a host of responsibilities - looking after her younger siblings - a 'brood of indistinguishables' (8) and working on the farm and battered by the ignorance and brutality of her parents. This growing-up world of the child is never idealized as the child is never allowed to flourish freely. The Prologue, though rather long, dwells on the prevalent snobbery and insensitive treatment of children, and has echoes of Dickens' novels with similar themes. The hypocritical adult world of Mrs. Longmore and the Tuffields is set off lucidly against the innocent world of children. It begins and ends with the viewpoint of Mrs. Longmore, a fashionably dressed Chelsea lady of aesthetic and liberated outlook who comes to a Suffolk farm on a holiday with her two children, Myra and Derek. Self-contained in itself; it demonstrates to the reader and to Mrs. Longmore the limitations of her 'modern' outlook. It is an excellent satirical and poignant portrayal of the hostilities underlying the pre-Great War class system, of the "clash between, half-baked 'progressive' ideas and childhood
innocence" and the yawning chasm between the city dweller's vision of idyllic rural life and the real picture.

One fine day, the Tuffield girl is tempted by the seven year-old Myra Longmore away from her endless chores on the farm to the country where she enjoys a unique glimpse of childhood by 'doing something different' (12). The Longmore girl regards all this as an adventure whereas the Tuffield girl is content 'just to be'. (19) In a symbolic journey to Eden, she removes her layers of clothing and urges Myra to do the same. 'She was content, lying back in the warmth of the leaf-dappled sunshine, just to be ; she could not remember such a thing before, she could only recall doing things or thinking about things to be done'. (19) Their 'adventure' or 'misadventure' does not meet with approval of the grown-ups. Myra who has more of the adult in her cleverly escapes their reaction that follows but the Tuffield girl gets a thorough beating at the hands of her father.

The identity of the girl is withheld throughout the Prologue and we are not aware of its significance till almost the end when the story unfolds gradually and references are explicity made to the poor Tuffield girl as being no other than the grown-up Slyvia Calvert. Past events keep piling up—the past — meaningless and unconnected is only a story till its force and relevance are finally understood in the present when seen through Slyvia's consciousness. Towards the end, Slyvia finally rediscovers herself—the story is an outcome of events and attitudes that formed her. The real story of her marriage and two dead children is influenced much by the 'controlled unity of the past event for the present circumstances'. (19) It also shows how the values absorbed by Slyvia as a child have remained with her, and marks the difference between her and Harold and the people of Carshall.

Her mother's cruel words sum up the lower class social realities : 'You wanted
to be different. Well, you're nothin'. Nothin'. And you always will be' (31) and they stay imprinted in her young mind and are echoed much later, in her answer to Sally Bulmer's question: 'I'm, a nobody, I always have been'. (133)

Thus, the preface which may not seem relevant at the first reading does help in the later part of the story towards giving Slyvia's characters a shape and form based on the values of the pre-war world.

The Tuffield parents are not major characters in the Prologue but their dark presence can be felt throughout. Their brutality and insensitivity towards their child together with the exigencies of the farm and the ineffectuality and snobbery of the rich family boarding with them for the summer are directly responsible for the eroding forever of the innocent, trusting world of their girl.

Among all the characters here, the Tuffield girl alone shows some strength of character. From among 'a brood of indistinguishables' (8) she stands out for her maturity and intelligence.

Wilson loves delving into the recent historical past contemporaneous with his own birth in 1913 and bringing it forward into his present writing. His two novels of the sixties - *Late Call* and *No Laughing Matter* also begin in the past. These two novels show time as having physical weight and thickness, independent of the people who inhabit it. One gets the feeling that the author in the second of his three decades as a novelist had to embrace and portray in fiction the whole century through which he lived.

*Late Call* is set in the imaginary new town of Carshall stationed somewhere near the Midlands. Its factual identity is based on the post-war new towns - Stevenage, Crawley, Hemel, Hempstead and Harlow - all within thirty miles of London -
established in 1946 by the Labour Government elected not much earlier. Initially established to house the war-torn and war-ravaged, to relocate the industrial enterprises with a workforce and as an experiment in social engineering, their beautiful architecture is symbolic of modern art. In their attempt to loosen the stratified British class system, they appealed to their supporters, but their detractors regarded them as disruptive of the countryside: rootless and soulless. The only novel of its kind with such a setting by an important British novelist, Late Call incorporates a little known aspect of British post-war life. Nevertheless, Wilson is worried about the local colour that he incorporates in the novel. His thoughts probably echo those of Stephen Wall who, describes it as 'worthily pedestrian'. In Chapter 7, he mentions local ten-pin bowling teams embarassingly named 'The Mellingerers and the Bowling Budgies' (213) and then, worriedly forecast in his notes: 'It seems to be much down on my usual social scale'. Late Call, from this angle, would have been so had it not been for the human angle.

The human angle is provided by the protagonist of the story, Slyvia Calvert. Her hitherto busy life of service recalls Meg Eliot's preoccupation with the 'Aid to the Elderly'. Even in the apparent similarity between Slyvia and Meg Eliot who is the liberal archetypal heroine having forbears in George Eliot, Trollope, and Austen, there is a grain of dissimilarity between them. Whereas Meg is a beautiful, educated, rich and intelligent woman in search of an individual identity after the death of her husband, Slyvia is the exact opposite - she is fat, unappealing, not educated and not so intelligent but her leitmotif is the same. The 'salt of irony' and 'sharp comic detachments' which Meg and Simon Carter in The Old Men at the Zoo constantly apply to themselves help keep alive the reader's interest in their stories. In fact, Late Call, in furthering Wilson's interest in the penetration and understanding of the feminine mind, represents a furthering of the thematic and formal interests released in the
The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot. Sylvia's narrative is used as a vehicle for the exploration of the proper role of art in life. As Valerie A. Shaw observes, 'The value of myth in helping one to cope with the muddle of living is a central topic'.

Chapter I suggests that Sylvia unknowingly has learnt her childhood lessons only too well. She abhors the personal note in relationships and is satisfied that in her job as a hotel manageress 'she'd never done more than her duty'. (37) Thus she does not bask in the praise bestowed on her by residents of the 'Palmeira Court' on her retirement for she feels that she does not really deserve all the adulations. She believes in keeping her affections reserved for her own flesh and blood but it is sadly limiting as two of her three children died while still young. The first chapter punningly titled, 'Leave taking' is implicit enough; it implies for Sylvia, from now on, a life of leisure and relaxation, aptly symbolised by the presentation of a clock by the employees of the hotel.

So, when Sylvia finally leaves for her son Harold's, she has only 'a past she cannot change and a future she cannot see into'. (50) Such a situation implies a dilemma - a sense of not belonging, of uprootedness, of alienation. Arthur, her sponging, raffish character of a husband gets angry about the mis-spelling of their name as 'Culver' in the 'East sea' paper but Sylvia, reminiscent of her mother, says: 'We are not important people'. (57) and immediately brings to mind Alys Browne in Patrick White's The Living and the Dead as she self-pityingly laments: 'I am nothing at all' and Felicity Bannister in the short story, 'The Night the Prowler' in The Cockatoos 'I am nothing. I believe in nothing'.

Like Arthur Miller asserting in Death of a Salesman that 'attention must be paid to such a person', Wilson also pays a touch of interest and 'a subdued air of excitement' to the growth of Sylvia from a nobody to somebody and her journey from Winter to Summer.
Thus, as Margaret Drabble says, Slyvia's spiritual journey towards a new sense of purpose starts from the moment she reaches 'The Sycamores'. In her journey she faces more serious situations - all owing to Harold's irrepressible attempts to judge the social morality of everybody's slightest action, and then to speak his mind out on it. Slyvia is now beset by a feeling of suffocation in the comforts of the modern house of her son.

The situation of Slyvia is the situation of many in modern times. Science has provided us with amenities for carrion comfort, but often we get caught in the race of modernisation which is all an ostentatious business with no sincerity of values. Sometimes we find ourselves lost and confused at a crossroad unable to find our moorings. At times like this, what is required is simply an attitude of affirmation regarding life and things – both necessary and valuable. The basis of all spiritual life is courageous faith in truth and open confession of the same. As Albert Schewitzer so aptly observes, 'The ideals, born of folly and passion, of those who make public opinion and direct public events, would have no more power over men if they once began to reflect about infinity and the finite, existence and dissolution, and thus learnt to distinguish between true and false standards, between those which possess real value and those which do not'.

Harold is a prime example of a man beset with false standards. Modern, with a respectable job as headmaster of a school with progressive educated ideals - he cannot bridge the generation gap with his elderly parents or with his children's young generation. To a man like Harold, only appearances and the success of his plans matter; everything else even filial feelings, take a backseat.

Slyvia's desire to cling on to her past shows her growing frustration with the present state of things in her son's house: 'I feel a bit lost too. But it'll be all right as
soon as the furniture arrive. We can make our room like home then'. It shows that a home is not built by external paraphernalia. Even modern comforts are not able to remove the grains of loneliness from her mind. The age-old adage 'Home is where the heart is' is driven again and again when set against the background of Harold's modern house.

In the kitchen bristling with modern appliances she does not at all understand, Sylvia finds herself at a loss. At one point she imagines the kitchen 'closing in on her' and the 'black emptiness of the hills' seen from her window becomes more and more oppressive. A severe climactic anxiety intensified because of her sense of 'the weeks, the years ahead' stretching out in front of her in empty uselessness recalls the anxiety of Meg Eliot as she looks out of the window of the plane she is travelling in and feels lost in the immensity of the desert. In both, it is a severe case of anxiety, loneliness, and fear of the unknown preying upon the minds of the two elderly women.

The house of Sylvia's son now increasingly begins to take on a prison-like proportion; she finds self-images in the reviled old mother in Osborne's play, in the 'Jewesses she had read of going to the gas chamber' and in the victim of a grisly murder she reads about. Her growing feelings of uselessness gradually turn into an 'unappeased loneliness', a 'pervasive depression or a nagging ache of anxiety' which lead her out of Carshall new town and into the surrounding countryside on long, solitary walks.

Sylvia looks forward to the arrival of their furniture eagerly '... so that if there was to be this division it might be made complete'. It is sad that when the furniture does come it does not quite fit in with the interior of the room: 'It will never be right. Everything looks so shabby and awful'.
The misfitting of the furniture is rather suggestive of the fact that the old does not suit into the new. It also suggests that life is not tailor-made. For the old and the new to meet, it requires something more than ‘furniture’. A mutual understanding based on love, respect and tolerance of each other’s faults is necessary to cement the growing chasm of the generation. Slyvia is taken aback to divine the intolerance of the elderly by the young generation as is evident in her reaction to Jimmie Porter’s words in Osborne’s play ‘Oh, what a bellyache you’ve got coming ... Alison’s mother is on the way’. (162)

Incidentally, this generation gap has been beautifully dwelt upon by Meg Eliot in the earlier novel, when she laments the absence of tolerance and lack of communication among the young — so different from her own time.

‘The Sycamores’, then, in all ways, fails to be her prison of peace (207) as she has nagging fears of being lost in a maze. Even her outdoor expeditions within the town serve to heighten her futile evasion.

Her new-found friendship with the Egans fills her with a new sense of joy and well-being. They are a perfect foil to the selfishness of her son, Harold:

Slyvia found them wonderful company, not least wonderful because it was she they called on to entertain them, to surprise them. And, in surprising them, she often surprised herself. (247)

Suddenly, she finds a new challenge to survive, a new confidence in herself:

The stroke, that might have seemed an inevitability to Slyvia in her days of depression, a savage beast camouflaged amid
the sad, grey flora of her melancholy world, had struck her
now in her new found happiness as a warning, as a challenge
'
to survive ...'? (247)

This survival instinct that emanates from within Slyvia herself recalls Richard Bach's Illusions:

'I am no more Messiah than you. The river delights to lift us free, if only we
dare let go. Our true work is this voyage, this adventure and again,

'... within each of us lies the power of our consent to health and to sickness, to riches
and to poverty, to freedom and to slavery. It is we who control these, and not another'.

(1:9)

At the beginning, modern Carshall clothed in plastic, glass and steel appears to
her a world of 'trees without leaves' (63) in which she is unable to find her bearings.
She admires a modernistic fountain in the Town Centre but feels 'It was clever but
you couldn't say that it played' (141) and this wryly sums up her view. Her compulsive
walks are also felt to be connected with the desire to find 'some shape in life however
small' (207) and with a 'vague idea of return' (208). 'Perhaps to weave all the threads
together again she needed to return to the country world of her childhood'. (208)

For some days the only reconnection with her past seems to be the discovery
that after so many years she can still boast of the knack of snapping the neck of an
injured rabbit. But one afternoon her depression and anxiety climax by a sudden lightning
storm. The screams of a terrified little girl standing under a solitary oak from which
she rescues her reach her ears only when it begins to rain. Slyvia holds the small
trembling girl to her until the old woman and the child 'seemed to merge into one
sodden mass' (232) as a 'jagged blinding flash zigzagged across the field and the
rotten oak went down in a moment's flames and a long plume of funeral smoke'. (232) The climactic moment in Late Call is the storm scene in which Slyvia saves the seven year-old Mandy Egan from death, and in so doing suffers a slight stroke. This scene is a symbolic figuring forth of Slyvia's reconstruction of her own childhood past, of a rediscovery of a pulse of feeling and a strong desire to live that had infused her during that day long-ago in the hot summer of 1911. Here is the moment when the Prologue is fully fused with the body of the novel, when the past finds its expression in the present. A pattern of loss and gain is symbolically accentuated by the transformation of the seven year-old Myra Longmore into the seven year-old Mandy Egan and is a compensation for the deprivations of childhood and adult life. The joy found in this reconnection with the past is an echo of the reconstruction of the past of David and Meg Eliot. Like Slyvia, the rediscovery of their link with the past helps them bridge the years of separation in between. In recontacting, 'a living sense of one's childhood or youthful past, a regenerative life - giving result' is achieved.

Grace as preached by the elderly Scottish preacher is also an important theme of the novel:

'So we ask for Grace to be given to us, for we'll not get it by shouting or fussing and fretting away our souls. No, not all the charity, the social work, as they call it now, can save your soul alive if there's no soul left to save ... You can go out to meet God's Grace. Go out to mind who you are. Go out, not into the busy clamour of getting and spending, nor even into the soothing clamour of good works. No, go out into the dreadful silence, into the dark nothingness'. (192)

and has echoes of Marlowe's Dr. Faustus as the Bad Angel and the Good Angel are
engaged in a struggle over possession of Faustus's beleaguered soul. Belief in God as the supreme saviour is also divined in Faustus's agonised cry: 'Ah, Christ my saviour, my saviour, Help to save distressed Faustus' soul'. Harold and the Carshallites are appalled by the preacher's (suggestively called Mr. Carpenter) 'barbaric doctrines' and 'all this rubbish about Grace' (194), but it is an eye-opener for Slyvia who thanks the old man. The sermon is meant to be transposed into a humanistic key. Harold celebrates good works but not grace. Good works are also important for a society as Sylvia recognizes the egalitarian values embodied by Carshall. But as is revealed soon enough, mere good works are not enough. Harold's 'half-baked' progressive notions and his undeveloped emotions cut him off from his son, Ray, whose homosexuality comes as a rude shock to him. Little does Harold realize that to be able to reach out to his children he requires only an open mind and thoughts and the key to this opening is in our minds only. On the other hand, Sylvia's 'secular grace rooted in her cultivation of the instinctual and emotional' enables her to accept her grandson's homosexuality. The notable absence of this quality in Harold and his circle comes up for serious criticism in *Late Call* probably also hitting out at life in a new town with new, modern values without the required healthy vision for, 'where there is no vision, the people perish'.

In *Late Call*, Sylvia's response to religion seems to be the answer to various kinds of contemporary insincerity and insensitivity which starkly contrast the attitude of Wilson's earlier characters who believe that religion is an evasion of human responsibility.

Valerie A. Shaw has observed that the sermon strikes at the doctrine of good work so vigorously preached by Harold, Sally Bulmer, and the now-dead Beth and is a serious, if somewhat burlesqued, affirmation of the essential loneliness of man and the mystery of human life.
Slyvia's secular light dawns on her during her forays into the countryside (the paths of which have a tendency to bend backwards) where she discovers her 'new leaves'. (169)

Slyvia is, by Wilson's own admission, one of his most successful creations. In her characterization he has once again portrayed his deep sympathy with the women characters.

The novel shows parallels of a variety of episodes and characters. Each character forms a part of the whole, the lives converging and again developing separately. The relationships are sustained and studied in depth. If a society is to progress, an ideal vision based on the primary human values of love, compassion, sympathy, faith, understanding, and selflessness is absolutely necessary for a healthy existence. Distorted visions are a society's bane. An individual finds true happiness by a harmonious integration within himself which is reflected in his relations with the world. An abiding affirmation of such values ensures that life is restored to its pristine glory and fullness. In Late Call, Wilson has affirmed it positively through the character of Slyvia Calvert. She shows significant growth. In due course her speech changes from 'I don't know, I really don't know' to a confident, 'Yes dear, I think I am'. [emphasis added]

Arthur Calvert is not a strong character like Slyvia, nor does he show any growth. Yet he engages our attention from the beginning when he enters the room of 'The Palmeira Court' complaining to Slyvia till the last moment when he lies dying in his room at 'The Sycamores'. He arouses our interest pity, sympathy, disgust and anger at the same time. A war pensioner, the war left him with ruined lungs and in raising him from the ranks, cut him off from his lower middle class origins, making him a socially displaced person. So long as he is comfortable with life, black can be
white; he lives for the moment and stays away from the truth. His relationship with his wife is a mockery of the sacred institution of marriage. Their marriage is not based on any solid rock but on fragile values - lies, rows and false intimacy: 'stale rows leading nowhere; intimacy that did not signify'. (51)

Like Sylvia, he is also not happy at his son's house at Carshall. The modern comforts of the house fail to impress him; instead, they serve to further alienate them both from Carshall life. Even though he feels close to his grandchildren, especially Judy for whom he harbours a special affection, sadly, he can never feel close to his own son, Harold. For all his crudity, Arthur is a harmless character who infuses Carshall life with his jest for living and love of horse racing and playing bridge with the old timers. And even as he dies leaving behind a confused Sylvia caught in a welter of emotions, his exhortation to her to once enjoy life for a bit remains ingrained in our minds: 'You want to enjoy life for a bit. Before you kick the bucket'. (118) A sponging, raffish character, Arthur is reminiscent of Mr. Nicholson, Brenda's father in 'Rex Imperator' in Such Darling Dodos dependent on Rex, his son-in-law, for his daily sustenance and without any qualm about borrowing money and sexually associating himself with women. An affinity of character is also noticed between Arthur and Poll Robson in The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot in their celebration of a bohemian style of life. Not surprisingly, Arthur is considered one of the finest supporting players in Wilson's novels and in his characterization, the author's strongest characteristics as a novelist is revealed which are class consciousness and the complexities of social relationships.

Harold is a progressive headmaster and educational theorist in the new town of Carshall. Recently widowed, he invites his parents to his house, 'The Sycamores' with a great display of filial feelings which at times appear incongruous. His fine modern house gives him much pride and he takes pains to fit in his parents there
With his usual unique insight and sensitivity Wilson tells us what exactly is it about him and his modern house that alienates his parents.

Wilson has put up Harold's character for ridicule - a character whom he has studied in depth, observed, and drawn splendidly. He has understood Harold very well. Partly in an attempt to live up to his wife's standards - Harold has thrown himself into the business of managing his family and working for the future of new town life, with a relentless idealism. His weaknesses become very clear on the first night that Slyvia and Arthur spend at 'The Sycamores;' Harold keeps them all in the garden getting cold, while he lectures his son on his thoughtlessness in talking on. The children manage him better than he manages them. 'TFFTS, or even TFFTSU', they say to him which means 'time for father to stop talking, or even ... to shut up -- and he comes in like a lamb'. (74)

Harold's one deep obsession is with Goodchild Meadow and this obsession sometimes comes in between his relationship with his family. The Goodchild Meadow issue causes much heartburn in the family and his self-centredness is the reason behind the slowly widening chasm between its members. His actions at times smack of selfishness, especially, when he bombards his mother with the technical know-how to operate the oven. People like Harold are prime examples of the 'gimickry of affluence' which have 'become a way of living rather than an aid to living'. He often harps on the subject of Beth, his dead wife without any consideration of his mother's feelings who did not get on too well with her while she was alive. Flaunting their family affections, he has no qualms about putting up Beth's caricatures of them all on the wall up the stairs so that people can see them and admire Beth's gift. Again, an air of ostentation permeates his idea of using their names in the family Christmas card. His answer to 'who is Slyvia?' as 'our granny' (90) shows that he has not yet come round
to regarding her as an individual with her own identity. He berates his parents for altering the thermostat without his permission: 'But I should still prefer that you should ask me before you ...' (94) Because of such dominating nature, it is no wonder his parents start alienating themselves from him. Even his reaction to Ray's homosexuality comes as a shock to us. At first, it seems to be enlightened and then, as Ray refuses to come back to Carshall, he angrily says: 'I wash my hands off him'. (311)

Harold's character is a study in contrast to the Egans. He wants to exploit Slyvia's new found friendship with the Egans over the Goodchild Meadow issue. His 'We miss Beth' (255) becomes irritatingly frequent. No wonder, Slyvia would rather go to Shirley Egan's improvised outing than to Harold's carefully planned dinner at the Chinese restaurant. He lets his failure on the Goodchild Meadow issue spoil his relationship with his parents. That is indeed a pity. He charges Arthur thus:

'I'll speak exactly as I choose. I provide you with a roof over your head and you come here and quarrel with all my friends and borrow money from me and God knows what. It does not seem to occur to you that somebody else will have to pay for it all. My name is mud in this town. I'm not even considered suitable to speak from a public platform'. (279)

Slyvia's invective sums up his character aptly: 'Oh, shut up, Harold. I, I, I. you don't deserve to have such good children'. (296) Harold is selfishness incarnate. Through him, Wilson has satirised the social pretensions and hypocrisies of modern town life bereft of any generous outlook. Harold does not realize that 'the energies which spring out of a world view and impel us to create a civilization, are rooted in the
ethical and the optimistic. They get worn out because we had not succeeded in establishing the ethical and optimistic elements on a sufficiently firm foundation.\textsuperscript{10}

Harold's three teenage children - Ray, Mark and Judy reflect the growing-up pains of a modern society and are the best symbols of the generation gap. In fact, Harold is even ignorant of his son Ray's perversion and when he does comes to know about it, he fails to be a source of strength to him. Mark and Ray are perfect foils to each other's character. While Mark is the dark, brooding one passionately given to his cause of anti-nuclear armaments and sudden bursts of temper, Ray is just the sunny opposite. Good looking almost to a fault, easy-going, trouble-breaker, laughing almost all the time, Ray is an instant favourite of his grandmother, his father and many others. His perversion is reminiscent of another hero of another time: Bernard Sands in \textit{Hemlock And After} (1952). But Ray is an escapee; he has escaped from Carshall to London for fear of getting into trouble because of his friend Wilf Corney's sudden death. But there is hope yet for the saving grace of the father-son relationship as he writes to Mark, his brother, 'And that leaves you and Gran to hold the umbrella over Dad. And he needs it badly at the moment.' (299)

Judy, the youngest of the three children, is a proper lady. She is the very picture of a modern high class society 'lady', careful of whom to mix with. Her near obsession with her snobbish friend, Caroline Ogilvie, and her high-class family, her frequent quotes of their names and opinions in her speech appear jarring to the ear. Judy, with her prim and proper lady-like behaviour except on some occasions, can not bridge the gap between her family and her grandparents.

The spontaneous Egan family is a close-knit family sharing the joys of togetherness. They symbolise all that is positive in human relationships. The warmth and strength of family relations and loyalty to friendship is what the Egans stand for.
They have been the mainstay of Slyvia's lonely existence. It is ironical how the 'outsiders' have been able to remove the loneliness of an old lady in the growing chilly atmosphere of her own family. The Egans are also responsible for the return of confidence in Slyvia and her reaffirmation of faith in life. Their spontaneity is such that Slyvia finds herself looking forward to her visit to their house:

Slyvia found them wonderful company, not least wonderful because it was she they called on to entertain them. (247)

Slyvia relaxes in the affection given to her and even after her frequent visits to their house, she felt no 'great sense of imposing on them'. (250) That Shirley understands her state of mind acutely is clear as she asks Slyvia to 'let herself go' (288) and not hold back her emotions after Arthur's death.

Sally Bulmer, Carshall's welfare officer, is a hearty social worker. She quite correctly scolds Slyvia for dwelling only in the past and being concerned with the lives of the Dead:

'Why are you living in other people's lives all the time, Mrs. Calvert ? And what people ! Queen Anne who's been dead for centuries, and all that nonsense on television, - unreal people, talking unreal twaddle. You know that you're frightened of something, frightened of bogies, frightened of the dark ... Doing things, meeting people, getting on with the job. That's the answer'. (187)

All the minor characters are active participants in Harold's struggle for the future of the new town. Absorbed in this struggle, many of their idiosynrasies become apparent.
Set off against their buoyant energy and active life, the alienation of Slyvia Calvert becomes even more pitiable.

In *Late Call*, Wilson has satirised human failings perfectly. Harold's modernism which fails to accept Ray's lapses comes under virulent attack. No wonder, Slyvia can not believe this contrast in his character: 'I'm a woman and if I can forgive him for not caring about women, I should have thought you ...' (311)

Many of his novels have references to the pre-1914 World War – the Prologue titled 'The Hot Summer of 1911' in *Late Call*, in *The Old Men at the Zoo* and to 1912 in *No Laughing Matter*. Though with a lower social dimension, *Late Call* brings to mind L.P. Hartley's evocative *The Go-Between* (1953), also concerned with a hot, distant, traumatic summer.

*Late Call* celebrating the importance of recontacting and nourishing the instinctual side of one's nature is, in every other way, dissimilar from *The Old Men at the Zoo*. This may suggest on Wilson's part, a recoil from the expressionistic concerns of pervasive evil and the problem of the private life set against the public life of an individual of the previous novel, through tackling two major new subjects: life in a new town and the spiritual regeneration of an unexceptional old woman, who is markedly different from the central characters of Wilson's earlier novels in that her consciousness is unafflicted by the liberal - humanist dilemmas. In doing so, the novel expresses the author's commitment to social realism and to exploration of the inner life – to diversity and depth, manners and morals. The interpenetration of these subjects makes it more than a skilful mixture of social and psychological modes. In this, it is much more satisfying than *The Old Men at the Zoo*. The sense of pervasive evil present in the above mentioned novel of 1961 necessarily becomes recessive in *Late Call* as social and moral concerns once more become increasingly dominant.
Though the novel is shot through and through with Wilson's commitment to social realism, his 'facility to write the traditional novel' and the facility of his readers to 'gobble it up' started to worry him. The 'whole relationship' of writer to reader was 'too smooth' and their 'unthinking happy embrace' seemed to Wilson, to pose a serious threat to the health of the contemporary novel. The alienating device in \textit{Late Call} (the interpolated life story of the humpbacked old woman) followed through by an extensive use of parody and other alienating devices in \textit{No Laughing Matter} is a direct result of his apprehensions and efforts to distance his readers from his books with parody.

Such moments are rather difficult to represent convincingly within the framework of realistic fiction. That is why, the lightning scene has often been charged with implausibility just as the flood at the end of \textit{The Mill on the Floss} which brings release to Maggie Tulliver by a reunification with her brother and hence, her past. Wilson had admitted in the \textit{Paris Review} interview that 'All fiction for me is a kind of magic and trickery - a confidence trick trying to make people believe in something that isn't'.\textsuperscript{32} At the same time he had insisted on the reader remaining 'unaware of techniques' to be convinced about 'seeing society as a whole'. This is also an effective way of ensuring that the heart is touched. But the difference between \textit{The Mill on the Floss} and \textit{Late Call} is the ordinariness of the heroine, Slyvia. Not gifted with any exceptional gifts, she nonetheless, successfully dramatizes the workings of Wilson's restorative process. The last section of the novel shows a triumphant Slyvia Calvert who recognizes her true self at last by being content 'just to be' whereas Simon Carter in \textit{The Old Men at the Zoo} had failed in ending the bifurcation of his life.

Predictably, \textit{Late Call} was hailed as evidence of a new, mature compassion, and a sign that the novel of social realism was not yet dead.\textsuperscript{33}
Harold's much hankered-after 'new start' and 'new beginning' never materialise. In fact, 'christmas' is also a repeated season motif in Wilson's novels (The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot, The Old Men at the Zoo, Late Call), perhaps because it is the season of peace and amity meant for all new beginnings in life. Incidentally, Sylvia Calvert's salvation also occurs on Easter Sunday.

Also, there are overt references to various elements. Colours play a role in underlining the dominant impulse of the characters and in keeping with the mood of the moment.

The room of Sylvia and Arthur in Harold's house is painted mustard with white and the kitchen walls are painted dark-green which was all Beth's choice. The Calverts' do not much like the colour of their room. Their own furniture when brought in, do not match with the yellow. All her cushions - gold, orange, green, red, blue and violet clash with the mustard, and the mustard walls kill everything. Perhaps, the mustard colour suggests the strong, harsh character of Beth and the misfitting of their furniture to which they had so much looked forward to, if only to stress their independence of mind, suggests the misfitting of the Calverts in Harold's house and in Carshall society. The choice of the kitchen colour makes it look dingy whereas it should have been something bright.

Objects like 'the washing-up machine, the quick grill, the deep freeze, the cooker, the spindryer, and all the other white monsters standing in line against the green wall' (84) - all signify a mechanical modern existence.

The shadow of the 'dead' constantly lurks in the background:

'... like so many marblestones. It only wanted the crematorium oven. Beth's memories? Beth's grave? She
looked around for some escape from this enveloping whiteness but only a tiny red eye glared at her from the smooth white surface warning her off sacred ground that was not hers, off a dead woman's home'. (84)

Here, separateness or aloofness from others is enforced willingly. First, it is the craving for their own furniture by the Calverts and then, insisting on their own diet seems to strengthen their separateness from the rest of the family and establish their separate identity.

Another recurrent motif in Wilson's novels is the childhood theme. In the Prologue to Late Call, Slyvia is seen as the little Tuffield girl wandering into the country. In the chapter titled 'Wanderings Abroad', the Tuffield girl is now a woman of sixty-four. She realizes that the answer to all her questions of alienation lies in her past that was far from happy.

Though full of doubts, loneliness and alienation, the ending of the novel is positive and touches on the theme of continuity. It is implicit that Sylvia has now emerged from her web of doubts and alienation – a confident woman fully aware of her capabilities and position in society as an individual. She embodies a set of attitudes deeply at variance with the dominant assumptions of the age. Slyvia's growth of character marked by her shedding her cocoon of protective withdrawal for a life of service and the transformation into a warm human being is aptly portrayed.

Wilson's savage and uncompromising irony hits out at lonely hypocrites and middle class affectation. Personality, to him, is a mark to cover either deep-seated insecurity or egoism portrayed so well in the character of Harold. It also abounds in his short stories. 'What do Hippos Eat ?', 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse', and 'Totentanz'. Again, Harold's evasion of reality and intolerance of out-of-the-way events
is also seen among the Cockshuts in 'Crazy Crowd' and in a pair of humanists in 'A visit in Bad Taste'. Although intelligent and cultured, these humanists cannot extend their tolerance to accept into their home the homosexual relation just out of prison. Interestingly, self-pity is dwelt upon at length in these stories which blurs the honest acceptance of reality which Wilson has always idealized. Wilson's affinity with the traditional form of writing is well-known. Yet while remaining true to his traditionalist thematic predilections - the interdependence of lives, the relation of self to society, the area between motive and act, he has experimented with modified forms of realism in order to explore more and more deeply the relation of private selves to public acts and more particularly, the role of imagination in discerning and living out this relation. Technically, Late Call is highly innovative. Though apparently conventional, it is full of non-conventional techniques. Bernard Bergonzi says, 'The problems of the elderly, their retirement and their perception of pattern or meaning to their lives' is a fictional topic dealt exhaustively by the post-modernist novelists after Virginia Woolf paved the way for the appearance of aged people in English fiction. Seen from this angle, Late Call's concern with the 'newness of the new town' and 'the oldness of the elderly woman' belongs to this genre. It is also a 'highly conservative book' without any propositions and with a fair description of British life in the sixties. Wilson's satire is accurately directed at modernism without the necessary healing touch. Better written and yet, less diffuse than Wilson's earlier novels, and adumbrating a limited theme, Late Call is arguably his most achieved work of fictional art by being a lasting document of faith in human nature.

The reader is left with the happy realization that human feelings are not despicable and that every obstacle can be overcome with patience and perseverance. Above all, what is important is the will to live life [emphasis added]. This is what is presented admirably in Late Call.
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