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| Wilson, Ethel (1888-1980) |
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| Ethel Wilson was a modernist prose writer who lived in Vancouver, Canada. Wilson began writing late in life; although she was only six years younger than Virginia Woolf, she published her first book, *Hetty Dorval*, in 1947, six years after Woolf’s death. Wilson was one of the first Canadian writers to represent both the growing city of Vancouver – including its Chinese-Canadian population and the class divisions in Vancouver society – and the rich landscape of British Columbia’s Interior. Her published work includes three novellas, three novels, a collection of short stories, and a collection of essays, stories, and letters published posthumously. An orphan herself, Wilson often wrote about women without families who must negotiate the difficult social world in order to become self-sufficient and self-fulfilled. For this reason, her works are latently, if not radically, feminist. Furthermore, she often presents and meditates on difficult moral questions. Wilson commonly quotes John Donne’s phrase ‘No Man is an Island’ to emphasize her protagonists’ obligation to mediate between their desires and the needs of others. Wilson died on 22 December, 1980 at a private hospital in Vancouver. |
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Wilson commonly quotes John Donne’s phrase ‘No Man is an Island’ to emphasize her protagonists’ obligation to mediate between their desires and the needs of others. Wilson died on 22 December, 1980 at a private hospital in Vancouver.  Wilson was born Ethel Davis Bryant to Methodist missionaries in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The early years of her life were full of tragedy and travel. Following the deaths of her mother and brother in 1889, she left South Africa for England in 1890. After her father’s death in 1897, she moved to Vancouver, BC to live with her maternal grandmother. Wilson attended a Methodist school for girls in England (Trinity Hall School in Southport, Lancashire) starting in 1902, and returned to Vancouver to become a teacher in 1906. She married Wallace Wilson in 1921, after which she retired from teaching and devoted most of her time to her duties as the wife of a prominent doctor. Ethel Wilson came to fiction-writing slowly and intermittently in the following decades.  Wilson’s published works can be broken into two rough periods: moral-realist and innovative-modernist. However, since she published all of her books in a relatively short period of time (between 1947 and 1961), these periods do not indicate as radical a change as they might within a longer publishing history. Furthermore, while Wilson maintained her interest in questions of morality throughout her career, her later works focus less on moral allegory and more on the challenges of living a moral life.  Wilson’s first novella, *Hetty Dorval* (1947), is a moral tale about the fate of a young and impressionable girl, Frankie Burnaby, at the hands of Hetty Dorval. Wilson suggests that Hetty, a cosmopolitan and selfish woman, is an allegorical figure for European decadence before the Second World War. This novella is the only one of Wilson’s works to be narrated in the first person. After *Hetty Dorval*, Wilson published *The Innocent Traveller* (1949), a long novel about a vivacious but naïve woman, based on Wilson’s great aunt, who lived for a century.  Following *The Innocent Traveller*, Wilson began writing works that can more easily be categorized as modernist. Wilson’s modernism is characterized by her use of a mulitiplicity of narrative perspectives, her meditations on faith and the possibility of God in a seemingly dis-enchanted modern world, and condensed symbolic allusion. The greatest examples of Wilson’s modernism are ‘Lilly’s Story’ and ‘Tuesday and Wednesday,’ published together in *The Equations of Love* (1952), and her best-known work, *Swamp Angel* (1954). W.J. Keith remarks that ‘[w]ith the publication of *The Equations of Love*, Wilson came to full maturity as a technically resourceful writer of fiction’ (55). ‘Lilly’s Story’ and *Swamp Angel* are both stories of a woman’s desire for autonomy in the modern world. Thus, they are exemplary of Wilson’s subtle yet persistent feminism. Her final novel, *Love and Salt Water* (1956), continues Wilson’s usual theme of moral responsibility, but does not demonstrate the same formal innovation as the two books that preceded it. In her collection of short stories, *Mrs Golightly and Other Stories* (1961), Wilson returned to narrative experimentation and put it to use to represent the shocking and uncanny character of seemingly banal events.  David Stouck notes in his biography of Wilson that she became ‘Canada’s grand dame of the literary world’ in the 1960s. In 1961, Wilson won a Canada Council Medal for her work in the arts. During this period, Wilson also offered support and encouragement to younger novelists, most notably Margaret Laurence, with whom she developed a close friendship. List of Works *Hetty Dorval* (1947)  *Hetty Dorval* is a short novella about a young girl’s moral education in the years leading to the Second World War.  *The Innocent Traveller* (1949)  *The Innocent Traveller* follows the life of Topaz Edgeworth, which spans a century. The book is a fictional tribute to the memory of Wilson’s great aunt, Eliza Edge.  *The Equations of Love* (1952)  *The Equations of Love* contains two novellas: ‘Lilly’s Story’ and ‘Tuesday and Wednesday.’ These novellas are examples of Wilson’s modernism and strongly thematize class differences and moral action.  *Swamp Angel* (1954)  *Swamp Angel* is Wilson’s best-known novel. It thematizes the landscape of interior British Columbia, the agency of women, and the redemptive power of love and compassion.  *Love and Salt Water* (1956)  Wilson’s final novel, *Love and Salt Water* features a meditation on the unrelenting power of accidents to undo a person’s best intentions.  *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories* (1961)  Wilson’s collection of short stories contains stories on themes that appear in her longer works, such as descriptions of the landscape of British Columbia and class boundaries. The collection is notable, however, for its darker, almost surreal stories, such as ‘I just love dogs’ and ‘Mr. Sleepwalker’.  *Ethel Wilson: Stories, Essays, and Letters* (1987)  This book is a collection of Wilson’s essays and previously unpublished correspondence and stories. David Stouck has carefully edited the collection and it is an essential resource for Wilson’s thoughts on literature and her discussions with her editor at Macmillan, John Gray. |
| Further reading: Biographies (McAlpine)  (Stouck) Criticism on Wilson Only a few critical works on Wilson’s writing exist. Below are the most comprehensive and relevant studies of her work.  (Bowering)  (Geng)  (Keith)  (McMullen)  (Moss)  (Murray)  (Pacey)  (Smyth) |