

## IN DEFENSE OF HETTY DORVAL

by  
*Beverley Mitchell, S.S.A.*

Since its publication in 1947, Ethel Wilson's *Hetty Dorval* has intrigued and puzzled its readers. Initially dismissed by critics as a "slight first novel", it has been regarded almost as a work of apprenticeship, and Ethel Wilson charged with authorial intrusion, ambiguity, and a lack of control over her subject matter. In my opinion, however, *Hetty Dorval* is one of the most tightly-written, finely-crafted, and controlled of Ethel Wilson's published works — and such ambiguities as there are in it are deliberate. It is neither "slight" nor, strictly-speaking, a "first novel" — it raises serious issues explored more fully in the longer novels, and it was written after *The Innocent Traveller*, although it was published first.

Generally speaking, the conflict in *Hetty Dorval*, as in all Ethel Wilson's novels, is the result of the human condition: while the individual is very much a private person and 'alone', he is also a member of society and involved with others, limited in what he can know of himself and of his fellow man. In her later works, Ethel Wilson overcomes these limitations by using an omniscient narrator to reveal a character's hidden thoughts and feelings and to comment from the vantage point of wisdom and experience; in *Hetty Dorval*, she emphasizes these limitations by using Frankie Burnaby as the "dramatized narrator". An older woman when she writes of the "places and ways known to [her] in which Hetty had appeared",<sup>1</sup> Frankie develops her narrative chronologically. Frequently, however, she interrupts her story with comments in the present tense, apparently as the significance of what she is remembering occurs to her. Although these comments have been labelled authorial intrusions, Frankie is the "intruding author" — not Ethel Wilson — and they serve as the only indication that, almost inadvertently, she is led to question the criteria on which she had based her judgment of Hetty. While Hetty remains essentially an enigma, Frankie gradually realizes that Hetty had revealed much more of herself than she had been aware of at the time — and by the

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<sup>1</sup>Ethel Wilson, *Hetty Dorval* (Toronto: Laurentian Library 6, 1967), p. 57. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition.

conclusion of her story she is apparently overwhelmed, not only by the understanding she now has of Hetty, but also by the understanding she now has of herself.

Although the settings in this novel vary, the story is dominated by the sage-brush, rivers, trees, and hills of Lytton. In part, this is because Frankie describes these in such vivid detail; in part, because Hetty is indissolubly linked in the reader's mind with Lytton's solitary and lonely beauty. Like Frankie, the reader first meets Hetty "coming down the hill amongst the sage-brush" (p. 12) and neither Frankie nor the reader can forget this first impression. As Ethel Wilson was to write nearly seven years later in *Swamp Angel*,

meeting partakes in its very essence not only of the persons but of the place of meeting. And that essence of place remains, and colours, faintly, the association, perhaps for ever.<sup>2</sup>

This first meeting has significance beyond its obvious importance as the introduction of Hetty, however, for it is the only time in the story that Hetty does not appear to be "out of place". It is also the only time in the story that Frankie's opinion of Hetty is not coloured by her knowledge that Hetty does not measure up to her "family standards". Thus Frankie experienced a "faint shock of delight" when she first saw Hetty's profile, and she remembers

that it was very pure. Pure is perhaps the best word, or spiritual, shall I say, and I came to think that what gave her profile this touching purity was just the soft curve of her high cheek-bone, and the faint hollow below it. Also the innocence of her slightly tilted nose, which afterwards I called in my mind a flirt's nose, and the slight droop of her mouth, whose upper lip was perhaps a little overfull. (p. 14)

Despite subsequent revelations about Hetty's "affairs", Frankie's initial impression that Hetty was "easy and natural", "gentle", and even "pure" or "spiritual" and "innocent" appears — to me, at least, to be a valid assessment of Hetty's essentially isolated inner self. The short-comings and failures which allegedly mar her as a social being are not apparent when she is seen as a private individual. Although Frankie soon qualifies her initial impression of Hetty, her use of the past tense — "I came to think", "which afterwards I called" — suggests that she is no longer satisfied with her too-facile explanations. Indeed, Frankie's implicit questioning of the

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<sup>2</sup>Ethel Wilson, *Swamp Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), p. 75.

criteria she had used to dismiss Hetty suggests her awareness of the inadequacy — and even unfairness — of judgments based solely on society's conventional standards. The "essence of place" which colours the association of Hetty in Frankie's mind — as in the reader's — is that of the isolated and lonely world of nature to which Hetty belongs so "naturally".

I realize my defense of Hetty contradicts the views of most critics, for she is generally seen as "evil" in contrast to Frankie's "innocence", as seductress and *femme fatale*, as "murky" as the Fraser river, as heartless, cruel, devoid of feeling — even as an "allegorical sense of political intrigue",<sup>3</sup> a "psychopath" of "moral monstrosity",<sup>4</sup> and a "freak of some kind, an anomaly of nature."<sup>5</sup> I find little in the novel itself — and nothing in the rest of Ethel Wilson's fiction — to support these views. What I *do* find in the novel supports my opinion that Hetty is a much-maligned victim whose circumstances and significant comments go unremarked by a mature Frankie Burnaby, either because she is still too obtuse to understand them, or because her understanding overwhelms her — and what I find in the rest of Ethel Wilson's fiction confirms my opinion. In one sense, Hetty Dorval is the most completely 'alone' of Ethel Wilson's characters, for society is not merely indifferent towards her, but actively hostile. On the other hand, because she "loved the wild geese" (p. 34) she had the capacity for interiority which is the complement of ordinary life. In the context of Ethel Wilson's views of this, it was indeed "proof of Hetty's innocence" (p. 34) — at least, of her subjective innocence. As Hetty herself said, "You must try to believe. . .that I'm *not*-bad, and that if you knew a little more, you'd understand about it." (p. 38)

The bond between Frankie and Hetty is their shared experience of the sight and sound of wild geese. As Desmond Pacey has observed, this provides one of the "chief thematic motifs" of the novel, the other being the reiterated theme of responsibility introduced by Donne's "No man is an Island" in the epigraph. Pacey also remarks:

The wild geese symbolize not only Hetty's love of wildness and freedom, but all the redeeming features of her character: like them she is a kind of spontaneous natural force, with her own way of being.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>William New, *Articulating West* (Toronto: new press, 1972), p. 70.

<sup>4</sup>P. M. Hinchcliffe, "To Keep the Memory of So Worthy a Friend", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 11, No. 2 (1973), p. 65.

<sup>5</sup>Jeanette Urbas, "The Perquisites of Love", *Canadian Literature*, 59 (Winter, 1974), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup>Desmond Pacey, *Ethel Wilson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), p. 20.

While the wild geese serve to reveal the “redeeming features” of Hetty’s character, namely what she was like as a private being, they also serve to illustrate the disparity between Frankie as a private being with a “love of wildness and freedom” similar to Hetty’s, and Frankie as a social being, whose judgments were influenced by conventional standards of propriety. Frankie’s response to the wild geese is evidence of the former; her reaction to Hetty’s exclamation is evidence of the latter. Her inability to resolve the dichotomy between Hetty as a private being whose response to the wild geese was “exactly” like her own, and Hetty as an apparently “irresponsible” social being, provides the implicit conflict of her story and accounts for her consistently ambivalent attitude towards Hetty.

Frankie remembers that the “musical clamour” of the wild geese

cleft the skies, and as always I felt an exultation, an uprush within me joining that swiftly moving company and that loud music of the wild geese. As we gazed, the moving arrow of great birds passed out of sight on its known way to the south, leaving only the memory of sight and sound in the still air. We drew a long breath.

‘God,’ said Mrs. Dorval. Then, ‘What a sight!’ (pp. 14-15)

Her immediate reaction to Hetty’s “*God*” brings her “shockingly to earth”, and she modifies her initial impression of Hetty, considering her to be, as Pacey has expressed it, “two-faced”. For a youngster of twelve, carefully schooled in the “proprieties”, her reaction was not surprising. However, considerably older and more experienced when she tells her story, she questions not only the mixed feelings she experienced on her first encounter with Hetty but also the subtle manner in which they influenced her judgment of subsequent meetings.

Frankie realizes that her opinion of Hetty as “two-faced” was based on the assumption that Hetty had offended the proprieties which governed Frankie’s behaviour as a child. She realizes also that these proprieties limited not only her behaviour and judgment but also that of her family and friends in Lytton. Even mention of God had been confined to specific places and specific times:

The Rev. Mr. Thompson said ‘God’ in church, as it were officially, and . . . we all sang about God with nothing more than ordinary church-going emotion. But never, never, in our house (except once or twice, Father) or in Ernestine’s house or at Mrs. Dunne’s or in any of our friends’ houses (unless we were saying our prayers) did people ever mention God. It would have seemed an unnatural thing to do, which come to think of it, is strange. (p. 23)

Implicit in Frankie’s seemingly casual observation is the faint realization that Hetty’s “*God*” might have been a “natural” response appropriate to the

circumstances, for while Hetty's uninhibited reaction set her apart from Frankie's parents and conventional society, it also united her with Frankie:

"Can we often see that?" she asked. "Will it ever come again? Oh Frankie, when we stood there and the geese went over, we didn't seem to be in our bodies at all, did we? And I seemed to be up with them where I'd really love to be. Did you feel like that? "

That was so exactly how the wild geese always made me feel, that I was amazed. Perhaps Mother and Father felt like that because they, too, dearly loved watching the geese passing overhead, but somehow we would never *never* have said that to each other — it would have made us all feel uncomfortable. But Mrs. Dorval said it naturally, and was not at all uncomfortable, and it gave me a great deal of pleasure to agree with her without confusion and apology. (p. 16)

After this shared experience, Frankie remembers that she and Hetty stopped on the bridge and "looked down at the bright water hurrying to be lost in the brown." Although critics have generally accepted this as a figure of Frankie's childish "innocence" which is about to be sullied by contact with Hetty's "experience", I think that the point can be made that it is a figure of Hetty as well. The "bright water" of that facet of Hetty's character revealed by her response to the geese is lost in the "brown" of public opinion which condemns her as a "woman of no reputation". (p. 33) Despite the fact that Frankie cites Hetty's love of the wild geese as "proof of Hetty's innocence", she comes to accept the judgment of others where Hetty is concerned.

As a child, she fails to recognize the significance of Hetty's "Save me, won't you?" (p. 21) or to understand Hetty's need for a friend: "Try and stay my friend," she said. 'Even if you can't come to see, me, try and stay my friend. . . ' " (p. 38) Because Hetty shows no emotion, Frankie assumes that she feels none. Years later, when Hetty comes to Frankie after her confrontation with Mrs. Broom, Frankie condemns her because

her voice was still light and indolent; nothing headlong, nothing lost, nothing distraught about this one who had left a woman in ruins. Hetty sank into the chair and dropped furs, bag, gloves. Gloves, I thought! How curious and how like her that Hetty remembered to bring her gloves. (p. 87)

At that time, she fails to understand that the ambiguity in Hetty's evasive reply to her questions about Rick permits it to be interpreted somewhat differently than she had assumed:

'Rick?' said Hetty vaguely. 'Oh no, that was *too* much, what was the good? I didn't want. . . Oh,' as her eyes strayed around the room and she saw its plainness, 'just that bed? . . . But it'll do for tonight,' she said naively. 'I knew you wouldn't mind, Frankie.' (p. 87)

Frankie never knows what it was that Hetty "didn't want" and "almost thought" — and, at the time, she does not realize that Hetty still looks upon her as a "friend", indeed, as her only friend. Neither does she understand the significance of Hetty's seemingly casual remark about her mother:

'You know, Frankie, I liked your mother.' *Did you? You never knew my mother.* But Hetty took the words out of my mind. 'I never knew her, of course, but I observed her on the boat. Your mother's good, Frankie, and she's funny, too. Amusing I mean. She'd be fun to be with. I really wish I'd known her in Lytton.'

'Mother's a darling, she--,' I began and stopped. I couldn't talk to Hetty, of all people, about my mother — then. (p. 87)

While Frankie frequently interrupts her narrative with comments or observations in the present tense, apparently as the significance of what she is recounting occurs to her, as she reaches the conclusion of her story these revelations become more restrained — as, for example, the significant but enigmatic " — then" in the passage above — or more impersonal, as in the following:

There is that in sleep which reduces us all to one common denominator of helplessness and vulnerable humanity. The soft rise and fall of the unconscious sleeper's breast is a miracle. It is a binding symbol of our humanity. The child in the lost attitude of sleep is all children, everywhere, in all time. A sleeping human being is all people, sleeping, everywhere since time began. There is that in the sleeper that arrests one, pitying, and that makes us all the same. The rise and fall of the frail envelope of skin that contains the microcosm of wonder is a touching sign. If one had an enemy, and if one saw that enemy sleeping, one might be dangerously moved in pity of spirit by what lies there, unconscious. (p. 89)

Frankie does not state explicitly why she apparently would "talk to Hetty, of all people" now about her mother, nor why she is moved to "pity of spirit" now at the thought of Hetty sleeping. Explicit statements are not necessary, however, for the reader is aware that Frankie has been presenting Hetty as she remembered her, including in her presentation the judgments she had made both as a child and as a young woman. Thus the reader comes to the same overwhelming realization as Frankie

apparently does — namely, that these judgments may have been vitiated by Frankie's youthful inexperience and brash assumptions, and that they may have been superficial, erroneous, and unjust.

In the preface to the Alcuin edition of *Hetty Dorval*, Ethel Wilson wrote:

*Hetty* had grown from the sage brush of British Columbia, from the hills and trees, from two rivers and a bridge, from a skein of honking Canada geese, from love, into anger, all without ambition, with almost passionate concentration, and with amazement, into a small book.

What the object of Ethel Wilson's "anger" was, is not explained. One could, I think, make a case for its being directed against smug self-complacency and the assumption of moral superiority, which condemns and ostracizes an individual on the flimsiest of hear-say evidence, for at no point in the novel is there any real evidence against Hetty to warrant her condemnation. Indeed, the evidence against Hetty is insufficient either to condemn or to exonerate her insofar as her relationships with others are concerned, for nearly always it is interpreted for the reader by Frankie. It is Frankie who says of Hetty:

If any person or thing threatened her comfort or her desires, then that person or thing no longer existed as far as she was concerned, and such a person or such a thing was for her exactly as though he, she, or it had never been. (p. 24)

Similarly, it is Frankie who says that Hetty was "completely selfish" and "did not feel the responsibility that love engenders", (p. 74) who terms Hetty's relationship with Richard a "pleasant seduction", who speaks of Hetty's "base treatment of her mother", and who resents the "trouble and expense" (p. 89) to which Hetty has put her. Mrs. Burnaby had recognized Hetty as "someone [who] needs help or — anyway — understanding" (p. 52) but she, too, came to condemn her. Knowing that Mrs. K-C relished gossip, Mrs. Burnaby nevertheless accepted her version of Hetty's Shanghai episode without question and concluded that Hetty "simply can't *mind*." (p. 72) Neither Frankie nor Mrs. Burnaby considered that there might have been another side to Hetty's story and neither remembered that General Connot, who apparently knew her better than anyone except Mrs. Broom, made her his wife. The "willing suspension of disbelief" given by the Burnabys to gossip concerning Hetty resembles that of critics who fail to consider Frankie's reliability as a reporter and the subtle changes in her narrative.

Mrs. Broom appears to confirm Frankie's judgment of Hetty, for she tells Hetty:

You're my daughter, Hester, and you've brought me nothing but trouble from the minute you could speak and you've never given me any real love. (p. 82)

She also tells her that she is "rotten bad and selfish", that she has led her to "trouble and hard work and shame", and that she would "bring the same to these decent people as you done to me." (p. 83) A witness to this scene, Frankie remembers that Mrs. Broom looked at Hetty with "grief and need" — thus her remarks are perhaps more indicative of her own feelings than an accurate assessment of Hetty. While they cannot be dismissed, they are not necessarily to be taken at face value. Furthermore, the reader must question Mrs. Broom's role throughout the course of the novel.

From the beginning, Mrs. Broom "closed herself in from all people." She appeared to have "consumed herself in unhappiness" (p. 76) and was typified by the "closing of doors". (p. 77) Her only apparent tie with another person was the one she had with Hetty — but as Hetty's "servant", her position was tenuous. If Hetty were alone, she was her "companion"; if Hetty had a visitor, she became the "servant" and retired behind closed doors. Thus one might assume that Mrs. Broom resented intruders and was jealous of anyone who might threaten her relationship with Hetty. Her caustic comments may result as much from fear that her position would be usurped as from valid criticism of Hetty. Similarly, her final scene with Hetty is more the pitiful revelation of her own poor judgment than proof of Hetty's "selfishness", and the reader cannot be sure whether her charges against Hetty are justified or whether Mrs. Broom is simply resentful of her self-imposed role of servant and years of "trouble and hard work and shame." Neither, apparently, can Frankie. When Hetty is seen in a social context, the ambiguities surrounding her are consistent and, I think, deliberate. The significance of the final scene between Hetty and Mrs. Broom does not lie in what it reveals of either of these characters. Rather, it lies in what the memory of it reveals to the narrator about herself.

In retrospect, Frankie views her intervention on behalf of Rick as "thankless and questionable" (p. 86) for she realizes — among other bitter truths — that she has destroyed the only permanent relationship either Hetty or Mrs. Broom has known. As Hetty told Frankie, Mrs. Broom is "all the parents I've ever had" and

she doesn't approve of me but she spoils me and I couldn't do without her. And I don't believe Mouse could do without me, either. (p. 26)

The shattering realization which overwhelms Frankie as she concludes her story includes her awareness of the irony of her role in preserving the



"integrity" of her family. Because she was so "sure" that if Hetty "entered the integrity of Cliff House, she would later as idly depart and leave wreckage behind", (p. 75) she has herself violated the integrity, such as it was, of the relationship between Mrs. Broom and her daughter — and left "wreckage behind." "(Mrs. Broom, to what a bleak morning you awoke all alone.)"

For the Burnabys and critics alike, Hetty's cardinal sin appears to have been her irresponsibility and indifference to others, made manifest by her failure to display any outward sign of emotion. Like Frankie, Mrs. Burnaby assumed that because Hetty showed no emotion, she felt none, concluding that

she really is astounding, Mrs. Dorval I mean, to have lived through so much storm and fury and caused it, too, and not a sign on her face. She simply can't *mind*. (p. 72)

The general consensus of critical views, too, is that Hetty simply didn't "mind", although few have been so blatantly censorious as P. M. Hinchcliffe's:

Hetty Dorval is not only a *femme fatale*, as has often been remarked, but a psychopath. Her moral monstrosity resides in her capacity to forget immediately any person or event that would burden her with inconvenience or responsibility.

That the Burnabys judged Hetty as they did, and that Frankie came to question these judgments is, I think, the point of *Hetty Dorval*. That critics would make these same judgments — but without questioning the evidence in the novel — confirms, with rather delicious irony, the point Ethel Wilson is making. In her preface, Ethel Wilson remarked that "human beings introduce into the world of nature the obliterating forces of . . . good or evil [and] ignorance and knowledge." The assumption critics appear to have made is that the Burnabys represent "good" while Hetty represents "evil", and that Ethel Wilson herself is morally outraged by Hetty's irresponsibility. As Jeanette Urbas expressed it, Hetty

is the only woman to whom the author attaches an obvious label of immorality. . . the immorality seems to reside, not in promiscuity, but in imperviousness to the existence of other human beings, in attempting to be an island to oneself.

In my opinion, such assumptions not only fail to take into account the subtle complexities in *Hetty Dorval* but also suggest a naivety in Ethel Wilson where the moral categories of "good" and "evil" are concerned.

Like all of Ethel Wilson's fiction, *Hetty Dorval* stresses the theme of responsibility or "involvement in mankind". Throughout the course of the novel Frankie has repeatedly shown the significance which responsibility had for the Burnabys. However, what the Burnabys and Frankie do in the name of "responsibility" are the very things which they condemn as "irresponsible" in Hetty. Frankie observes:

Any positive efforts that one could discover on the part of Hetty were directed towards isolating herself from responsibilities to other people. She endeavoured to island herself in her own particular world of comfort and irresponsibility. ('I will *not* have my life complicated.') (p. 57)

Frankie's observation has a certain irony which is not lost on the narrator, for she deliberately draws the reader's attention to the similarities between the Burnabys and Hetty in parenthetical asides. In retrospect, Frankie sees that Hetty was not the only one who attempted to "island" herself: her parents had attempted to island Frankie in their own particular world of the family; Frankie's mother echoed Hetty's desire that life be "uncomplicated"; Frankie herself attempted to island her cousins. Finally, her declaration to Hetty at the end of the novel expresses identical attitudes to those which she condemned in Hetty:

I don't want you here again! You muddle up my life too much. Please, Hetty, look after your own affairs but keep away from me. I've got my own life to live and I don't want ever to see you again — *ever*. (p. 91)

The final irony is Hetty's reply: "I understand *exactly*."

To Frankie as a girl and young woman, however, Hetty *appeared* to be "selfish", "irresponsible", and, in Jeanette Urbas' words, "impervious to the existence of other human beings" — and nothing she said or did, at least in a social context, persuaded Frankie otherwise. But as an older woman, Frankie questions the judgments which had formed the basis of her actions. Because Ethel Wilson has distanced herself by using Frankie as a narrator, it is highly unlikely that she would accept those judgments which, as author, she makes her narrator question. The label of "immorality" was attached, not by Ethel Wilson, but by the people of Lytton who convinced Frankie's father that Hetty was a "woman of no reputation".

If *Hetty Dorval* is concerned with evil as an "obliterating force", perhaps it is the insidious evil of malicious gossip which has such tragic consequences and which human nature apparently is so prone to accept as "truth". Because a "very ugly story had followed Hetty from Shanghai to Vancouver and so to Lytton", (54) the Burnabys feared Hetty's influence

on Frankie. Consequently, they nicknamed her “The Menace”. Frankie, too, was infected with this fear and it coloured her interpretation of Hetty’s words and actions. Because of an “ugly story” and “hearsay”, the evidence that Hetty was at least capable of emotions and that her emotions were similar to Frankie’s, was overlooked. We have seen Frankie’s realization of this as she tells her story. That Ethel Wilson, too, was more concerned with the injustice which may have been done Hetty than with Hetty’s alleged “immorality” may be inferred from the epigraphs with which she prefaced this novel.

The consequence of involvement, namely that “any mans [sic] death diminishes me” introduced in the first epigraph, is illustrated by the manner in which Frankie concludes her narrative. Her account of the final scene with Hetty is told almost exclusively in the past tense, except for the admission that “I think I laughed” (p. 91) when she told Jules Stern that “Lady Connot is very well indeed”, and that she “thinks” Hetty’s offer to help with the bed was her “great atonement for everything”. (p. 92) It is as if Frankie were overwhelmed by the accumulation of evidence that her fear of Hetty, based on “hearsay”, has been the “black godmother” of cruelty in her attitude towards her. Whether Hetty was guilty or innocent of the charges gossip laid against her is beside the point, for Frankie realizes that she has “driven [Hetty] off” to probable death:

Six weeks later the German Army occupied Vienna. There arose a wall of silence around the city, through which only faint confused sounds were sometimes heard. (p. 92)

Although Frankie does not comment explicitly on the fate of a woman with a Jewish name in German-occupied Vienna, her understanding of this is implicit in the cryptic conclusion of her narrative.

The effect of this realization on Frankie is implied as much by what she does *not* say as by her actual words — as if she were “diminished” to the point where she could not comment. Following Frankie’s confession that she “watched with satisfaction” as Hetty left, “knowing” that Hetty had forgotten her and forgotten Richard, the passage quoted above is set off from the rest of the narrative by double spacing. Thus it conveys to the reader the emotional impact and significance of the conclusion, both by its visual separation and by Frankie’s eloquent silence. In retrospect, the reader sees that all Hetty’s words and actions have been as “faint confused sounds” to Frankie. Frankie will never know — nor will the reader — if her fears of Hetty were justified. Frankie does know, however, the dreadful uncertainty and moral responsibility her being “involved in Mankind” has entailed — and the truth in Donne’s “any mans [sic] death diminishes me”.

The change in attitude distinguishing the grief-sticken older woman who concludes her narrative from the self-satisfied young woman who

"drove Hetty off" has been prefigured in the second epigraph, for Frankie realizes that it is "love" which "makes one little room an everywhere". Perhaps this is most clearly illustrated by the passage on sleep noted earlier, for Frankie is moved to pity and "compassion of spirit", not only for Hetty but also for all "vulnerable humanity". The tragedy for both women is that Frankie comes to this "controlling love" too late. It is only as she tells her story that Frankie realizes how much Hetty had revealed of her "helplessness and vulnerable humanity". This, I think, accounts for the intensity of suppressed emotion in the concluding paragraphs — "I think I laughed. . ."

The final epigraph, "Good is as visible as green", is considerably more complex, for it is open to at least two different interpretations. Viewed as a literal statement, it is seeming justification for the critical opinions with which I have disagreed; viewed as irony, it is exquisitely appropriate both for the question of moral issues raised in this novel and for what I think is the author's treatment of these issues.

Seemingly a literal observation expressed as a poetic simile, "good is as visible as greene" may be interpreted to mean that because green is the colour occurring most commonly in nature, its very prevalence makes it "visible". Similarly, "good" is immediately recognizable, not necessarily because of its prevalence, but because the qualities of "goodness" are familiar to all. This is the manner in which a reviewer of *Hetty Dorval* interpreted the final epigraph:

Mrs. Wilson's story deals with a young girl's infatuation for an older woman and her final rejection of this woman with the sure knowledge that 'Good is as visible as green.'

However, the epigraph may also be interpreted as a negative assertion or, in this case, an oxymoron, for "green" is one of the least "visible" colours in the spectrum, distinguished for its subtle recessive qualities. Thus it can also be interpreted as a rather cynical comment to the effect that "good" is exceedingly difficult to recognize, both in the context of Donne's "Community" from which it is taken and as it appears in *Hetty Dorval*.

Frankie Burnaby apparently takes the epigraph literally, for she says,

And when I thought of Mother, all constancy, courage, and sparkling sincerity, up came the words, 'Good is as visible as green.' In my mother, good was visible. I thought of others in whom good was visible as green, but it was not visible in Hetty. I could not tell what Hetty was really like. (p. 69)

Frankie is not the only one who sees "good" in Mrs. Burnaby, however, for both Sister Marie-Cecile and Hetty have recognized this quality in her.

Nevertheless, it is the "good" Mrs. Burnaby who is indirectly — but unwittingly — responsible for Frankie's intervention "on behalf of Rick". Because Mrs. Burnaby repeats the gossip of Mrs. K-C and because she says that Hetty causes "storm and fury" and simply "can't *mind*", her letter is the catalyst which precipitates Frankie's interference. Similarly, it is the "good" Mrs. Burnaby who — again, unwittingly — provides Frankie with the "touchstone" which will be "proof" of Hetty's guilt or innocence:

If, when I should see Hetty and show her my mind, she should become either angry or distressed, then I should have to believe that in so far as Hetty could be moved, she was moved. . . . But if Hetty should look at me with her gentle unrevealing look and keep silent, and, presently, rise and leave me and shut a door between us, then it would be plain that Hetty remained the Hetty of Shanghai and of Lytton and of how many more places, and that Menace was still her true name. (p. 75)

Frankie's "touchstone" was not a valid criterion, however, for she finally understands from her own experience that one can "mind" things deeply without giving any external sign. Throughout the course of her narrative, she has repeatedly stressed her inability to understand Hetty and her need for her Mother, "that sane little arbiter" (p. 69) and "dear little dragon" (p. 64), to advise her. With perhaps unconscious irony, in remembering her "thankless and questionable fight" with Hetty, she realizes

although I had not thought of Mother and Father in relation to this whole matter, I am sure now that it was they who had been the unconscious or subconscious cause of my intervention. . . (p. 86)

Questioning her own role in Hetty's ostracism, Frankie implicitly questions the standards of society represented by her parents. How valid are the criteria which this society uses to determine "good" in an individual — or "evil" — especially if its judgments are based only on hear-say evidence? And what is "good" in relation to the individual? I think that the conclusion of Frankie's narrative demonstrates the glibness and superficiality inherent in a literal interpretation of Donne's line. If Frankie were indeed secure in the "sure knowledge that good is as visible as green", the self-righteous satisfaction she experienced in "driving Hetty off" would still be evident at the conclusion of her narrative.

The evidence in *Hetty Dorval* appears to me to demonstrate that "good" is not "visible", for Frankie is unable to see it in her own role. Despite Mrs. Burnaby's real and alleged "goodness", her failure to be consistently like the "three monkeys" demonstrates that it was not always "visible" in her, either. No clear distinction is made between the

conventions and proprieties of society and moral “good” — indeed, “good” is never clearly defined, for the moral issues raised in this novel are in the murky area of “possibilities” and “probabilities” where a precise definition is impossible. Thus I think Ethel Wilson used Donne’s line with deliberate irony, in keeping with the mildly cynical and ironic attitude with which she viewed much in conventional society. Far from condemning Hetty for “attempting to island herself”, she has carefully shown that what is only alleged of Hetty is real in the Burnabys and Frankie. Although Hetty is not fully realized as a character, she is sufficiently realized for one to suspect that Ethel Wilson viewed her sympathetically. In some respects, she is not unlike those characters for whom the author had an obvious admiration — indeed, in some respects, Hetty is not unlike Ethel Wilson herself. The evidence for these affinities is to be found in what Hetty said of the “magic” of Lytton.

We have noted the significance which Frankie’s first meeting with Hetty and their shared experience of the wild geese had in establishing Hetty as a “natural” person. Initially, it served Frankie as “proof of Hetty’s innocence.” When Hetty refers to this episode again in London, however, Frankie considers it evidence of Hetty’s duplicity. Although she admits “how much of Hetty was artful and how much was artless I still could not tell”, her subsequent actions indicate that she really was convinced then that Hetty was “artful”. Frankie was not the only one to see Hetty’s reference to the geese in this light, for P. M. Hinchcliffe cites it as evidence of Hetty’s “moral monstrosity”:

When it suits her purpose, however, Hetty’s memory is remarkably acute. She remembers Frankie Burnaby who may be useful to her, and she remembers the migrating geese flying over the hills above Lytton, because she sees in their apparent freedom from responsibility an image of herself.

However, at the time of the London meeting, Frankie has apparently forgotten that the wild geese had a special significance for Hetty, making it not only “artless” but also very understandable that Hetty refer to them again. She does not remember that Hetty had told her, “when I saw how you loved the wild geese, I liked you.” (p. 38) Neither does she realize that because Hetty liked very few women — “they’re the worst” (p. 38) — Frankie may have meant more to Hetty than she understood at the time. The incredible loneliness of Hetty — and, I think, proof of her “artlessness” — is clear only in Hetty’s final reference to Lytton:

‘Do you remember that mare I had in Lytton? Juniper? Wasn’t she a beauty? Sometimes when the moon was full I used to saddle Juniper and ride at night down to the Bridge, and across, and up the Lillooet

road, and off into the hills. And, Frankie, it was so queer and beautiful and like nothing else. Though there was nothing round you but the hills and sage, all very still except for the sound of the river, you felt life in everything and in the moon too. All the shapes different at night. And such stars. And once in the moonlight the geese going over. I remember the shadows the moonlight made on the ground, great round sage-bushes all changed at night into something alive, and everything else silver. And once or twice the northern lights — yes, really. And then the coyotes baying in the hills to the moon — all together, do you remember, Frankie, such queer high yelling as they made, on, and on, and on?’ (p. 87)

To give the older woman who narrates this episode some credit, I think she remembers her insufferably condescending reaction to Hetty’s revealing speech with grief and shame: “Do nocturnal animals feel like that? What is Hetty?” Similarly, I think she finally understood the pathos in Hetty’s admission that “I never loved anything so much in all my life, Frankie. It sounds ridiculous, but I never felt so *free*, before or since. You know. . . *people*. . .” (p. 88)

Implicit in the half-formulated, “You know. . . *people*”, is Hetty’s assumption that Frankie would understand — and that she would remember their final conversation in Lytton:

‘People are very tiresome,’ [Hetty] said thoughtfully. ‘I have come as far away from people as I can, and yet they go on being tiresome. They make scenes and complicate life terribly. I don’t want to have my life complicated and I can’t bear scenes. I don’t really like women, Frankie — except Mouse, of course — they’re the worst, but I thought that you, being just a child. . . and when I saw how you loved the wild geese, I liked you.’ I nodded.

She looked at the fire a minute and then went on. ‘I know what they’ve told you, Frankie. They’ve told you I’m bad. You must try to believe,’ she turned her brilliant look on me, ‘that I’m *not* bad, and that if you knew a little more, you’d understand about it. Can you believe that? . . . Do you think I’m bad, Frankie?’ she said, laughing a little.

I almost whispered, ‘no.’

‘Try and stay my friend,’ she said. ‘Even if you can’t come to see me, try and stay my friend.’ (p. 88)

In this passage, Hetty admits her vulnerability and inability to cope with “people” — especially with women — apparently assuming that Frankie will understand. Of course, Frankie does *not* understand, for she

cannot make the distinction then between escaping from an intolerable situation because one cannot cope with it, and “islanding” oneself in comfort and irresponsibility. Hetty also reveals her utter helplessness in the face of gossip. Her only defense is to tell Frankie that she’s not “bad” and if Frankie knew a “little more about it”, she would understand. As subsequent events prove, however, Hetty’s defense is totally inadequate. Finally, she exposes her pathetic loneliness in asking Frankie to be her “friend”. Since, by her own admission, Hetty “likes” only Mrs. Broom and Frankie, her opportunities for such intimate revelations must have been rare. So, too, her opportunities for friendship. Consequently, this encounter must have been very significant for Hetty — and because Frankie and her mother later oblige her by being the “three monkeys” on the ship bound for England, Hetty apparently interprets this as confirmation that Frankie is still her friend. When they meet in London, Hetty sees Frankie in the context of sympathetic and understanding confidant, unaware of the irony that, in Frankie’s eyes, both Hetty’s confidences and the episode on the ship are “semi-admissions” of Hetty’s guilt. Even after the confrontation with Mrs. Broom, Hetty’s attitude towards Frankie is seemingly unchanged — she comes to Frankie “knowing” she would give her a bed, and “knowing” Frankie “wouldn’t mind”. (p. 87) Either she is unable to comprehend the extent of her failure to understand the only two women she has ever “liked” — or, comprehending, she despairs.

That Frankie recognizes the change in Hetty — at least subconsciously — is evident from the imagery and diction of her final chapter. Prior to this, Hetty has been described in terms befitting an older woman; at the narrative’s conclusion, she is described in terms befitting a child. Like a child, she apparently fails to understand that Mrs. Broom has left her, and complains petulantly, “But you’ve no *idea* how dreadful it’s been. Mouse was frightful to me. . .” Frankie remembers that Hetty spoke “naively”, and describes her as a little girl, “sitting up in bed, dressed in [Frankie’s] best night-dress.” (p. 87) Their roles have been reversed, for Frankie acts the part of an older woman and speaks “crossly”, while Hetty is “docile as a child”. Like a little child, Hetty is soon “sweetly asleep, the curves of her cheeks and of her lips very innocent and tender.” Remembering this, Frankie reflects that “the child in the lost attitude of sleep is all children, everywhere, in all time.” Nevertheless, when this “child” takes all the bed, Frankie gives her an “almighty smack on her round silken bottom” — and like an injured child, Hetty is “very much surprised and a little plaintive.” (p. 89)

In the morning Hetty sings, not “loudly but very sweetly”, her childish song pathetically appropriate both in its confusion of French and English and in the inconclusiveness of its last line, “C’est le pays qui m’a donné. . .” (What, the reader wonders, has any country — or person — given Hetty to



remember that she can sing about it happily?) Like a generous child, quick to pardon injury and to comfort, she overlooks the cruelty of Frankie's "I don't want ever to see you again — *ever*" and says sympathetically,

I understand *exactly*. I feel for you. . . It is preposterous the way other people clutter up and complicate one's life. It is my own phobia, Frankie, and I understand you. . . so well.<sup>7</sup>

There is, I think, considerable tragic irony in the similarity between this final speech and Hetty's farewell in Lytton. Similarly, there is a hint of tragic irony in Hetty's comment, "And young girls are all very well but. . . one can't give up one's *life*, exactly, can one?" Finally, apparently sanguine and thoughtless as a child giddy with happy expectations, she prattles:

I've always longed to live in Vienna, it sounds just what I'd like — riding in the Prater — and the music, too. Jules would look awfully funny on a horse, but he doesn't need to ride. I shall ride. But he adores music. He plays magnificently. And he's terribly rich. There's something very *sweet* about Jules. . . (p. 91)

And she makes Frankie "sick" — then.

Thus it would appear that this "woman of no reputation", feared by the Burnabys as "the Menace" and dismissed by critics as a "*femme fatale*", was only a girl grown old. In the light of this final chapter, Hetty's previous appearances in the story also reveal qualities which are essentially child-like: her spontaneous reaction to the wild geese suggest a child's sense of wonder; her plea that Frankie "save her", a child's confusion and inability to cope with an adult world — or "people", to use Hetty's term. When she is seen in the company of others — whether Frankie, "Mr. Dorval", or the men on the ship — she has the mien of a well-bred little girl who understands only that she must entertain and please. The "brilliant look" and the "soft tone of delight" (p. 64) with which she greets Frankie in London also appear as the spontaneous pleased recognition of a well-bred youngster. Even the name "Hetty" is a child's diminutive — and she is rarely addressed by the more adult "Hester" which would associate her in the reader's mind with such women as Esther of the Old Testament — or Hester Prynne. Nevertheless, she has much in common with her more mature counterparts.

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<sup>7</sup>Here, and in the ambiguous comment, "Frankie, you're incomprehensible! I thought you'd be so pleased!" (p. 92), there is an interesting change in Hetty's vocabulary. "Preposterous", "phobia", and "incomprehensible" are curiously sophisticated, in contrast to the childish simplicity of the rest of her speech in this chapter. Is Hetty being bitterly sarcastic?

Like the biblical Esther, Hetty had “lost both her parents” — or so she had been led to believe — and was “exceedingly fair and beautiful.” (Est 2:7) Like Esther whose “incredible beauty made her appear agreeable and amiable in the eyes of all” (Est 2:15), Hetty was “beautiful and nice to be with.” But, again like Esther, Hetty “hid a mind full of anguish, and exceeding great fear.” (Est 15:8) This, Mrs. Burnaby had recognized:

You know, Frankie, I’m always inclined to mistrust a tremble in a woman’s voice. They do it on purpose, some of them. I’ve heard them and I always want to tremble back for fun when it’s just dramatizing. But if it’s real, then you pay attention, Frankie, because that’s when someone needs help or — anyway — understanding. And this was real. That woman is frightened of losing this security, and she very nearly has it. (p. 52)

Unlike Esther, however, Hetty did not find security. Her counterpart to Esther’s Aman was Mrs. K-C, who succeeded in “speaking against” her, for

this is proved both from ancient histories, and by the things which are done daily, how the good designs of kings are depraved by the evil suggestions of certain men. (Est 16:7)

That Hetty’s mind was “full of anguish” may be inferred from the change apparent in her after the confrontation with Mrs. Broom. Prior to this, with tolerant amusement — and considerable accuracy — she called Frankie a “dear little prig”, saying, “You’re in love with Richard yourself and you’re very jealous.” (p. 79) The immediate effect of Mrs. Broom’s revelations must be determined from her actions, however, for except for three brief and confused utterances, she does not speak again. Frankie remembers that Hetty “didn’t seem to listen. She looked through the room, through the walls, and concentrated on something.” (p. 82) She had “shrunk back on the couch as though she had been struck” and she “smoothed her hands over her eyes and forehead, over and over mechanically.” Frankie fails to see anything significant either in Hetty’s silence or in her mechanically repetitive actions, for she still condemns her for not “minding”:

And Hetty did exactly what Hetty would do. She did not speak to her mother. Without a word or a look she rose and slowly went out of the room, closing the door behind her, and left her mother standing there, looking after her with a ravaged face. (p. 83)

When Hetty re-appears in the final chapter, Ophelia-like from what I think was despair, she makes Frankie “sick”.

Except that both were “women of no reputation”, the relationship between Hetty and Hester Prynne is seemingly only ironic, for Hetty lacked the strength and inner resources of Hawthorne’s character. Their situations are similar, however, for neither woman was permitted to forget her “sin”: Hetty was pursued and literally hounded to death by an “ugly story”; Hester Prynne forced to wear a scarlet letter. Both women show that “sin” — whether real or alleged — has an effect on society, for each brings suffering to others and is made to suffer herself. Although they differed in emphasis and treatment, both Ethel Wilson and Hawthorne had the same attitude towards those who, in Hawthorne’s words, “meddle with a question of human guilt, passion, and anguish.” Hawthorne uses verbal irony — “A blessing on the righteous Colony of Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine!” — and identifies “meddlers” as the rulers of the Colony. Ethel Wilson uses the more subtle irony of situation — but the “meddlers” in her story are also the “righteous” and conventionally circumspect who “drag iniquity into the sunshine” by gossiping. Because she consistently shows in her fiction that gossip is evil, stupid, and destructive, it is clear that she regarded gossip as Hawthorne did the pillory:

There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature — whatever be the delinquencies of the individual — no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face in shame. . . .

Similarly, in *Hetty Dorval* as in her other works, Ethel Wilson demonstrates the same conviction expressed by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*:

When an uninstructed multitude attempts to see with its eyes, it is exceedingly apt to be deceived. When, however, it forms its judgment, as it usually does, on the intuitions of its great and warm heart, the conclusions thus attained are often so profound and so unerring as to possess the character of truths supernaturally revealed.

When Frankie Burnaby formed her judgment of Hetty only on the intuitions of her heart, the fact that Hetty “loved the wild geese” was sufficient proof of her innocence. From the evidence in *Hetty Dorval* and in her other works as well, this was sufficient proof of a sort of “innocence” for Ethel Wilson, too. Metaphorically-speaking, it was what “loving the wild geese” revealed about the individual as a private person that invariably enlisted and illustrated the author’s sympathies. Very often this was something which could only be intuited — not seen with the “eyes”. As she wrote in *Love and Salt Water*, the last of her novels to be published, “Knowing people by sight is not enough.”

Like Hawthorne, Ethel Wilson illustrates the ironically un-Christian

cruelty a professedly Christian society displays in its attitude and behaviour towards a “woman of no reputation”. Like Hawthorne, she views the victim with compassion, at the same time showing the social consequences of “sin”. Although she does not fault the principle of responsibility which motivated Frankie or the Burnabys, she does fault their failure to be *properly* responsible — thus for Frankie there is a somewhat bitter irony in her final realization that she is indeed “involved in mankind”. The real parallels with *Hetty Dorval* are not those in the Old Testament or *The Scarlet Letter*, however, but in Ethel Wilson’s other novels where the author is not distanced by a “dramatized narrator” and where similar situations are expanded.

The most obvious parallels are those between Maggie Vardoe (in *Swamp Angel*) and Hetty, for both women escaped from intolerable situations, seeking anonymity in the interior of British Columbia. Maggie, like Hetty, sought to get away from “people” — in particular, from Edward Vardoe. However, one wonders if the truth had been known that Maggie had walked out on her husband, would it have made an “ugly story” and would Maggie have been regarded as a “woman of no reputation” and a “menace” by conventional society? Maggie, like Hetty, was adept at hiding her feelings — but in her case it was seen as a commendable means of self-defense. Both women wanted privacy — from Maggie’s point of view, this was understandable and even necessary. Perhaps the most striking parallel, however, is Hetty’s pathetic account of her moonlit rides on Juniper viewed in the context of Maggie’s reflections on the graves she saw from the bus:

Yes, thought Maggie, it was lonely but it was nice there. The picket fence and the crosses would be covered by snow in the winter. Then the spring sunshine beating on the hillside would melt the snow, and the snow would run off, and the crosses would stand revealed again. And in the spring the Canada geese would pass their arrows of flight, honking, honking, high over the silent hillside. Later in the season, when the big white moon was full, coyotes would sing among the hills at night, on and on in the moonlight, stopping, and then all beginning again together. . . . Then the sumac would turn scarlet, and the skeins of wild geese would return in their swift pointed arrows of flight to the south, passing high overhead between the great hills. . . . It was indeed very nice there. (*Swamp Angel*, p. 56)

In both instances, the women describe their responses to the same setting and almost identical details from that setting. Maggie’s “it was lonely but it was nice there” parallels Hetty’s “it was so queer and beautiful and like nothing else.” Both women think of geese: Maggie imagines that “the geese would pass in their flight, honking, honking, high over the silent

hillside"; Hetty remembers, "once in the moonlight the geese going over." Both women refer to coyotes: Maggie imagines that "when the big white moon was full, coyotes would sing along the hills at night, on and on in the moonlight"; Hetty remembers the shadows from the moonlight and "everything else silver" and "the coyotes baying in the hills to the moon — all together, . . . such queer high yelling as they made, on, and on, and on."

Each woman projects something of her own emotional state in these descriptions — Maggie's "singing" coyotes reflect her incipient inner peace; Hetty's "baying" coyotes, with their "queer high yelling" reflect her identification with inarticulate and incomprehensible suffering. Maggie experiences a foretaste of security in the permanence and cyclic patterns of return and departure of seasons and birds — "It was indeed very nice there". Later, she reflects, "This feels right, this is the kind of place I know, it's my kind of place." Hetty says only, "I never loved anything so much in my life. . ."

In all her novels, Ethel Wilson revealed the essentially private and hidden qualities of her characters by showing their response to the non-human elements in their surroundings — or what William New called the "balance of character with place". Usually, this was effected by showing the character's thoughts and feelings, for usually the author assumed an omniscient point of view. While the reader is given only a limited view of Hetty, there is sufficient evidence in the above of the same private qualities more explicitly developed by an omniscient narrator. Whatever Hetty's failures as a member of society might have been, her loneliness and inability to cope with "people" would not condemn her in the author's eyes, for there is no reason to suppose that Ethel Wilson would view these differently in Hetty than she did in other characters. Neither would she condemn Hetty because she was supposedly a "woman of no reputation". Both *Swamp Angel* and *The Equations of Love* demonstrate Ethel Wilson's understanding of the circumstances which sometimes make conformity to the norms of "conventional" society impossible, and there is nothing which would indicate that she viewed Hetty's attempts to acquire security any differently from those of Maggie Vardoe or Lilly Hughes.

Indeed, there is no evidence which would suggest that Ethel Wilson ever considered the norms of "conventional" society as valid criteria for assessing the individual: three of her characters are unmarried with illegitimate children — Mrs. Broom in *Hetty Dorval*, Lilly Hughes in *Lilly's Story*, Nell Severance in *Swamp Angel*; Maggie Vardoe has deserted her husband; and Mrs. Emblem in *Tuesday and Wednesday* has had three husbands — "two sod cases and a divorce" — and hopes for a fourth. Although all might be regarded as "women of no reputation" by conventional society, Ethel Wilson's attitude is never one of condemnation. Rather, with the exception of Mrs. Broom whom she pities, she appears to admire them for their efforts to make the best of a poor situation. What

Ethel Wilson *does* condemn, consistently and in all her fiction, is irresponsibility. In *Hetty Dorval*, her chief concern is not the alleged irresponsibility of Hetty but the real and destructive irresponsibility of gossip. For that reason, I think, all the evidence against Hetty as a member of society is deliberately ambiguous — either it is “hear-say” or interpreted by a narrator who has been influenced by hear-say. Neither Frankie — nor the reader — will ever know if Hetty were indeed a “menace” where others are concerned.

Although much of Hetty remains an enigma, the evidence for her as a private person is clear. Because she “never loved anything so much” as the lonely beauties of British Columbia, she has an affinity with Ethel Wilson herself. In a talk given at the University of British Columbia in 1957, Ethel Wilson said that she had a “life-long love for this province of ours”, reiterating this in her preface to the Alcuin edition of *Hetty Dorval*. Always a meticulous writer, it is highly unlikely that she would have failed to see the similarities the preface established between Hetty and herself. Similarly, it is highly unlikely that these were anything but deliberate. Like Hetty, the author says she “sought the remote beauties of British Columbia”. Like Hetty, she realized that they became an “un-lose-able permanent part” of her. Like Hetty, she identified these beauties in specific detail:

Here were those beauties which do not change, except for the exquisite and surreptitious signatures of the seasons, the surface and movement of waters, the glory of the skies, the seasonal flighting of birds, the great isolated ponderosa pines each with its solitary tall shadow that moves with the sun, the pale virginal trembling aspens, the laughter of the loon on the lake.

Although the exquisite style of the preface differs from the fragmented sentences Hetty used to describe her lonely rides on Juniper, it is obvious that, like Hetty, Ethel Wilson found this Upper Country “so queer and beautiful and like nothing else.”

In her other works, Ethel Wilson’s “balance of character with place” reinforces or complements what is revealed in more explicit statements about a character. In *Hetty Dorval*, however, it provides the only view of Hetty which is not coloured with the narrator’s bias and the only view of Hetty which reveals her essentially private and hidden inner feelings. Whatever her short-comings as a member of society might have been, Hetty’s love for the lonely beauties of Lytton established her as an individual who was

aware of the incorporeal presence in air, and light, and dark, and earth, and sea, and sky, and in herself, of something unexpressed

and inexpressible, that transcends and heightens ordinary life, and is its complement. (*The Equations of Love*)

In Ethel Wilson's view, awareness of the "invisible world of the senses" indicated a capacity for "love and friendship and beauty, joy, sorrow and the poetry of experience." It also indicated a sensitivity to human relationships, for those of her characters most responsive to beauty also appear to be most vulnerable — they are the "heavier beings" described in *The Innocent Traveller* who encounter "acute sorrow or acute joy or dull despair." Their feelings are rarely apparent, however, for those who feel most keenly are least able to express their emotions. Consequently, the final — and perhaps, the greatest — irony lies in the abrupt and cryptic conclusion of *Hetty Dorval*: because Frankie is overwhelmed by the accumulation of evidence concerning the pathetically lonely and defenseless woman she "drove off" to probable death, she can make no comment — like Hetty, she appears not to "mind".

Because my concern has been to present an argument in defense of Hetty, my article is necessarily limited. Much more might be said of this "slight" novel, for it is germinal to the works following it both in themes and characters. In turn, much in *Hetty Dorval* has its roots in *The Innocent Traveller*, Ethel Wilson's story of her family. Similarly, although I have made the distinction between the "dramatized narrator" and the author, Frankie Burnaby obviously has much in common with Ethel Wilson. Perhaps Frankie's bitter but enlightening experience provides a clue to the almost complete absence of moral judgments in Ethel Wilson's fiction, to the wisdom and compassion of her view of "vulnerable humanity", and to her insistence that "knowing people by sight is not enough."