

Liberal Humanism in Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to view literature as a reflection of society. After two World wars in 20th century, man became aware of the horrifying effects of the war and dire necessity of human values man's own natural goodness. The paper tries to bring forth how Wilson as a humanist pleads for love, harmony and mutual understanding in human relationships in his novel *Hemlock and After*. He often suggests that true humanism is dying, its representativeness growing old and being replaced by a younger generation, whose values he deplores. The comprehensive study of the novel reveals him essentially as a humanist.

KEYWORDS: Humanism, natural goodness, ethical principles, deep concern dignity, value and freedom

Angus Wilson says "The novelist, as I shall suggest ..., is essentially a humanist. Most novelists are either Christian humanists, those who feel that man is the highest image of God's creation, or like myself, agnostic humanists, who think that man is the essential centre of the world as we understand it" (Wilson, 1967:115). This remark by Wilson himself makes it clear that he belongs to the humanist tradition. He rejects the religious approach to life; rather he possesses the secular one. S. S. Agarwalla writes in his book *Angus Wilson and His Works*: "Angus Wilson belongs to the liberal humanist tradition of Jane Austen, George Eliot, and E.M.Forster" (Agarwalla, 1995:158). One finds the meaning and application of humanism similar to one another in the novels of Angus Wilson, George Eliot, and E.M.Forster. But Wilson's humanism differs from either George Eliot or E.M.Forster in the sense that he provides evidence for the great changes that have taken place in the thinking of liberal humanists during the last hundred years. This led Peter Faulkner to remark: "Of contemporary novelists in England, it is Angus Wilson who most clearly carries on the humanist tradition" (Faulkner, 1976:184). The writing of Angus Wilson is in the tradition of liberal humanism of the nineteenth century and the twenties of the twentieth century. It is hence G.S. Fraser writes: "Mr. Wilson might be described as a liberal humanist preoccupied with the inadequacies of the liberal humanist attitude" (Fraser, 1964:153). Despite the nihilistic tendencies of the age, Wilson has retained his care of humanity. It becomes clear as he says, "the reader must care about the people you write about, otherwise it is not worth doing" (Wilson, 1977). It is hence humanistic concern remains central in almost all his novels and this very aspect made Faulkner write: "Angus Wilson is significantly seen as a humanist concerned with the ethical life in difficult times" (Faulkner, 1980:219). He has presented ample liberal humanist values in his *Hemlock*

and After through his hero Bernard Sands, a successful writer and self-declared “anarchic humanist” (11). Bernard Sands is one of those who hate the forces of power, “whether of laissez-faire capitalism or State tyranny” (Wilson, 1961:38), and find their solution in man’s own natural goodness.

Hemlock and After places the concept of natural goodness under intense scrutiny. It clearly places Wilson’s writing in the tradition of humanism. Agarwalla writes “Wilson’s *Hemlock and After* contains Forsterian theme” (Agarwalla, 1995:90). *Hemlock and After* provides ample evidence for the great changes that have taken place in the thinking of liberal humanists during the last hundred years. The novel is full of liberal and humanist values in the modern world. In the novel, he leaves the reader with the unpleasant taste of human cruelty which, though not condemned, is shown to have its own appalling appeal. The novel places the concept of natural goodness under intense scrutiny in the protagonist Sand’s own experience and tries to incorporate the sense of evil. In connection with *Hemlock and After* Wilson notes that “all the time our transcendent sense of evil is being destroyed by our psychological knowledge” (Wilson, 1963:115).

Wilson makes his protagonist face the facts rather than ignore. He makes them to accept the pattern of behavior and morality instead of self-awareness. His characters are happy in making their relationships with other human beings in a humanistic way. They are always willing to accept some sort of pleasure principle in life. They are the believers of ethical principles of life. They do want to say something about the total society. They assume the role of social observers. In *Hemlock and After* Wilson points out our smugness, our dishonesty, our snobbery, and our expedient disregard for human dignity. In the novel Wilson clearly opines his liberal view that evil is the product of bad environment and that it is an innate part of humanity.

The novel was published in 1952. It is Wilson’s first novel. It is concerned with the hypocrisies of middle-class society. It offers a candid portrayal of gay life in post-World War II England. Bernard Sands, the protagonist of the novel, is a successful middle-aged novelist. He is a secret homosexual. He has received great critical acclaims for his novels in the past. Like the humanists of the Renaissance period Bernard is a student of the literature. Through his scholarship and learning Bernard Sands registers his protest against socio-political and religious establishments. He tries to remove the economic disadvantages, habits and ways of living that foster social conflict and promotes the articulation and implementation of a large number of civil and political rights. He believes that man’s rational judgment and enlightened individualism and self-interest lead up to general welfare of the community and brings about social justice, harmony and progress.

Bernard Sands basically recognizes the dignity, value and freedom of the individual. In the moments of self-introspection, he remembers it with amused irony. When the novel opens, Bernard is on the top of the world. The Government has ultimately agreed to sanction grant for Vardon Hall, a local country house, as a home for writers. He has even won Government support for his liberal beliefs that the house should be run without state interference. Because of his persona standing, this is his public life of great achievement. In the post-war Britain, his liberal ideas cause much anxiety to those

in charge. Bernard Sands is not simply a public figure. His attempt to set up the government scheme to support young writers is endangered by his own personal behavior. He wants to help the writers to realize their potential powers and gifts, and to reduce the discrepancy between potentiality and attainment. Since his wife, Ella, lapsed into a kind of psychotic withdrawal and indifference some years earlier, Bernard had two homosexual affairs, and exposure of his behavior threatens at one point to undermine the public project. Bernard, a homosexual and a public figure, feels enormously guilty when he witnesses a young man arrested for crudely soliciting him in Leicester Square.

Throughout the novel Bernard Sands is found preoccupied with the problem of evil. Wilson wants to convey that extra-marital relations are no solution to the problems, though these give some stability to a disjointed life sometimes. Bernard's effort to understand, to help, to sympathize, is not common to all people. Towards the end of Bernard's struggle Ella recovers from her psychic withdrawal and actively helps him. They examine their past, and realize that they have significantly failed to help both their children. Perhaps private failure is part of the price of public eminence: Bernard has never been able to manage control over both the personal and the public sides of his nature simultaneously. Bernard Sands is a failure both in his public as well as private life. He does not understand either the members of his family or his workers. Thus the novel is an examination of the cruelty which exists beneath the surface of civilized people, and of the more or less unconscious hypocrisy, with which we hide our own cruelty from ourselves and refuse to see it in others. The novel also accounts to a rejection of human commitment and an opinion for isolation rather than the destruction of others. The novel thus covers a wide social canvas. The novel points out that his attitude to life has something in common with that of early Aldus Huxley.

The comprehensive study of the novel reveals him essentially as a humanist. In the novel he is satirical about his many characters but ultimately he is on the side of liberalism. He has shown an accurate understanding of English society and a sympathetic sense of the problems of the modern humanist. *Hemlock and After* provides ample evidence for the great changes that have taken place in the thinking of liberal humanists during the last hundred years. Although, in *Hemlock and After* Wilson uses all his intelligence to find new ways of satisfying conduct for the humanist, he often suggests that true humanism is dying, its representativeness growing old and being replaced by a younger generation, whose values he deplors.

In the novel Wilson comes forth with a philosophy that in life and art alike we must temper passion with intelligence and imagination with honest self-scrutiny. The novel starts with Bernard Sands victory. He puts the last ounce of his 'idealism' into project for keeping young writers. He has secured Vardon Hall, a local country house, as a home for writers. What he wants is a creation of democratic society and democratic social institution. It is only under democracy that humanist values of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice are realized by maximum number of people. In this sense Bernard is a true humanist. He believes in enjoying life and making it better through our creative efforts. His act is a kind of propagation of ideal human values. The evil is portrayed in the novel in Mrs. Curry, the procuress. She too wanted the Hall; but Bernard says, "It would have been interesting to see what Mrs. Curry made of the Hall" (20). Mrs.

Curry, the scrupulous and high minded fairness, is at once discredited by the author's comment that Bernard in fact knew very well what she would have made of it, "a second rate profiteering road-house"(20) or, as a retired admiral more bluntly puts it, "a high class knocking-shop"(Ibid). Because of his mood of exaggerated conscience Bernard Sands cannot bring himself to denounce Mrs. Curry publicly.

By the time of the opening of Vardon Hall, he realizes on the opening of his Vardon Hall for writers that his 'humanism' is based on rocky foundations, strikes a blow at a case of sexual corruption that has come under his nose. He strongly believes that every human being is an autonomous individual endowed with natural rights, talents and responsibilities and hence wants to provide them a separate place for their artistic deliberations. It is in this sense Bernard is a strong liberal humanist. Bernard wants to free the new writers, reveal and establish their full humanness, transforming, transcending and defying biological human nature and achieving its harmony with the unbounded society.

He cannot act properly because of his own corruption. His wife Ella urges on him the responsibility for action, but Bernard dies having accomplished only part of what she has argued. When Bernard dies, Ella comes back to life. She makes vigorous attempts to carry on for Bernard, but the epilogue insists on the value of what Bernard had achieved in human terms; something survives after the Hemlock to influence the behavior of those who had known him. The book mends with Ella's tribute to her husband who had only partly known: "My dear, 'Ella replied, 'doing doesn't last, even if one knows what one is doing, which one usually doesn't. But Bernard was something to people – lots of people – me, for example – and that has its effects in the end, I think"(246). This distinction between doing and being is perhaps Ella's rather than Wilson's. Here Bernard is justified by his influence on other people. Thus the position of Bernard is essentially that of a kind of person who has 'high hopes' for the future but this optimistic humanism is destroyed by his 'exaggerated conscience'. Before his death, in a frank talk with his wife, both of them admit that they feared responsibility. In the novel a moment arrives in the life of Bernard when he marches from self-deception to self-discovery. His children are rather lost souls – one is conservative barrister and the other a half-bright journalist. Their children wanted love. "They were and still are lonely" (215).

Wilson points out the total frustration of the modern generation and warns against splits and fragmentations and pleads for the well-being of both the sexes. He is of the opinion that one needs a great cohesion in life. Wilson as a humanist pleads for love, harmony and mutual understanding in human relationships. Angus Wilson, through Bernard, his wife Ella and his sons successfully and brilliantly brings the chaos, the confusion and the psychological tension of the modern life. Bernard's life story actually reflects the fragmentation of the society after the Second World War. The novel, thus, becomes the function of the fragmented society and the fragmented consciousness. Wilson, as a humanist, expresses deep concern over this fragmentation of human beings. Bernard once confides to his wife "although I know their motives to be wrong, I cannot fight them while I am unsure of my own" (Ibid). The realism in his novel touches the heart but his humanistic persuasions are so overpowering that they often color his narratives to an extent that corrodes the principal artistic values in his fiction. Thus the

novel is an extensive and intensive study of human life in all its perversions of violence, hatred, avarice and envy and in all its consonances of peace, love and truth that transcend the dailies of a mechanical human existence.

Angus Wilson as a modern humanist believes in naturalistic philosophy. He rejects all supernaturalism. He relies primarily upon reason, democracy and human compassion. As a modern humanist he readily embraces democratic principles, human rights and free inquiry. He rejects the notions of sin and guilt, especially in relation to sexual ethics. Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After* reflects upon the innate goodness of human beings. Its central concern is man and his happiness. It underlies the value and dignity of human beings and takes him as the measure of all things. The novel helps man to realize his potentialities. The essence of Wilson's thought lay in his firm faith in human personality as the fundamental reality whereas all social and political institutions are at best aids to human development. The study of *Hemlock and After* reveals that the relationship between a humanist and a novelist is very close as Angus Wilson himself says; the novelist is essentially a humanist. In other words, it reveals that the humanist and the novelist are intimate to each other.

Angus Wilson is intensely committed to reforming the society through her creative acts. His sense of social responsibility leads him to search for values and literary material among the well-defined groups in London. His commitment to a sense of social responsibility and a pursuit of those oppressed by society also infuses his fiction about post-war Britain which makes his theme humanistic. Wilson has encompassed in the novel all the tensions, debates and disorientations that marked the intellectual atmosphere of the post-war London in the second half of the twentieth century. Actually, he, as a humanist, deals with the collective destiny of the human race. The novel *Hemlock and After* has the power to change people's lives and influence the thoughts and feelings of an entire generation. In the novel Wilson articulates his own version of humanism.

The novel compels the contemporary society into self-awareness and introspection and arouses the conscience of humanity. It shows Wilson's inalienable faith in man. He is a humanist all the way and his prime concern is the human predicament in all its dimensions. Wilson has showed through his novel that the humanist must be a man of wide learning and comprehensive orientations to the problem of cosmos. He supports individual rights and freedom as an antidote against the violent or corrupt aberrations of power. His faith lies in achieving a kind of harmony in the face of all pain. He is conscious of the fact that social evils like divisiveness, despair and violence can fragment life beyond repair. But by laying emphasis on aesthetic release, Wilson foresees that change is possible and there is hope for the future. Instead of documenting the frustrations and failings of post-war years, Wilson succeeds in documenting the innate humanity of the characters who embody qualities that enable them to redefine themselves through reformulation and self-expressions. As a humanist and social novelist, Wilson basically recognizes the dignity, value and freedom of the individual human beings and their identity as noble creative forces having inherent tremendous potentialities in the gamut of the universe.

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