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SEXUALITY AND MORALITY THROUGH A SATIRICAL LENS IN SELECTED WORKS OF ANGUS WILSON

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ABSTRACT

Angus Wilson's post-war fiction repeatedly tests the boundary between private desire and public virtue, staging sexuality not as a marginal theme but as a privileged site through which modern Britain's moral vocabulary is exposed, strained, and revised. This study argues that Wilson's satire operates as a disciplined ethical instrument: it refuses both prurient sensationalism and pious moralism, instead diagnosing how sexual lives are regulated by class habits, institutional power, and liberal self-congratulation. Through close readings of *Hemlock and After*, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*, *Late Call*, and *No Laughing Matter*, with contextual reference to Wilson's essays and interviews, the study shows how Wilson's "mixed" satiric method combines comic exposure with psychological seriousness. Across these works, sexuality becomes the narrative pressure point that reveals hypocrisy in philanthropic culture, academic and ecclesiastical gatekeeping, domestic respectability, and post-war "permissive" rhetoric. Wilson's moral vision is not reductively punitive; it is diagnostic and revisionary, insisting that ethical life depends on truthfulness about desire, responsibility to others, and resistance to institutionalised bad faith.

Keywords: Angus Wilson, satire, sexuality, morality, post-war Britain, hypocrisy, permissive society

1. INTRODUCTION

Post-war British fiction is often mapped through the large social transitions of austerity, welfare-state consolidation, and the re-stratification of class through education, professions, and cultural capital. Angus Wilson belongs centrally to this landscape because his novels repeatedly insist that the era's public languages, professional expertise, liberal tolerance, and institutional respectability are most truthfully read at the point where they meet the management of sexuality. Wilson is frequently described as a satirist, but his satire is not merely derisive; it is an ethical method that exposes how moral claims are manufactured, performed, and defended by institutions and by individuals who wish to appear decent [1], [2]. Wilson's fiction is therefore especially productive for examining "morality" not as an abstract code but as a social practice: a set of rituals, evasions, sanctions, and self-narrations that stabilise status and soothe conscience.

This study studies sexuality and morality together because Wilson's work treats their relation as structurally revealing. Sexuality in these novels functions less as private identity than as a field of regulation, by the family, the law, the church, the academy, philanthropy, and the welfare-professional apparatus. The question Wilson keeps asking is not simply who desires whom, but what social work that knowledge performs: who is protected, who is blackmailed, who is rendered "respectable", and who becomes the convenient bearer of scandal [3]. At the same time, Wilson rejects the easy substitution of permissiveness for ethics. He is sceptical of mere tolerance when it becomes a posture that enables new forms of domination or self-deception. His satire therefore carries a moral burden: it compels recognition of complicity, not simply condemnation of outsiders.

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Focusing on *Hemlock and After* (1952), *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956), *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot* (1958), *Late Call* (1964), and *No Laughing Matter* (1967), the study argues that Wilson constructs a distinctively post-war satiric ethics with three recurring moves. First, he stages institutions, charities, universities, the civil service, the church, and the family, as moral theatres in which sexuality is policed while hypocrisy is rewarded. Second, he dramatises the psychological costs of moral performance: guilt, denial, displaced cruelty, and the conversion of "care" into control. Third, he offers limited but real moral alternatives, moments of truth-telling, responsibility, and tender recognition, without romanticising them as total solutions [4], [5].

2. REVIEW OF RELATED SCHOLARSHIP

Critical accounts of Wilson consistently emphasise the fusion in his writing of satiric comedy and ethical seriousness. Rather than practising a purely punitive mode, Wilson often develops what can be called a "mixed satire", where laughter does not cancel sympathy and exposure does not remove moral complexity [2], [6]. Biographical and interpretive studies also connect his recurring themes, loneliness, hypocrisy, liberal conscience, sexual secrecy, to the cultural contradictions of mid-century England and to the author's own position as a prominent gay writer navigating changing yet still coercive moral climates [1], [4]. This critical consensus matters for the present argument because it supports reading sexuality not as mere content but as the narrative mechanism by which Wilson tests the sincerity of moral languages.

From the perspective of satire theory, Wilson aligns with approaches that treat satire as open-ended and essayistic rather than as a genre with stable moral closure. Griffin's influential account of satire stresses its ambiguity, its dependence on context, and its uncertain political efficacy, traits that match Wilson's frequent refusal to provide neat ethical verdicts [7]. Frye's placement of satire and irony as modes that dissolve comforting ideals helps explain Wilson's systematic hostility to moral complacency, especially when ideals are used to conceal cruelty or self-interest [8]. Hutcheon's emphasis on irony as a social practice, requiring shared competencies and producing political "edges", also illuminates Wilson's recurrent scenes of polite conversation and institutional talk, where what is "meant" is negotiated through codes of class and respectability [9].

Scholarship in sexuality studies provides the conceptual background for Wilson's depiction of regulation and disclosure. Sedgwick's account of the "closet" as a modern epistemological regime clarifies why Wilson's narratives are full of strategic knowing and not-knowing: who must speak, who must stay silent, and how the distribution of knowledge itself becomes power [10]. Foucault's argument that modern societies do not repress sexuality so much as produce discourses about it helps explain Wilson's attention to professional and institutional speech, reports, counselling, philanthropic talk, clerical and academic judgement, through which morality is administered [11]. Historical work on British legal and cultural shifts, especially the reform climate that culminated in the Sexual Offences Act 1967, frames Wilson's career as unfolding during a transition that was real yet incomplete, producing new rhetorics of permissiveness alongside enduring mechanisms of stigma and discipline [12], [13].

The present study builds on these conversations but makes two specific contributions. First, it places sexuality and morality in a single analytic frame, showing how Wilson's satire treats "moral concern" as a social technology often activated through sexual knowledge. Second, it demonstrates how Wilson's most characteristic moral insight is not simply that society is hypocritical, but that hypocrisy is frequently experienced as virtue, especially within liberal, professional, and philanthropic cultures that believe themselves humane [3], [6].

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3. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses qualitative textual analysis, combining close reading with context-sensitive interpretation. The "selected works" are chosen to represent Wilson's sustained engagement with sexuality and moral discourse across the 1950s–1960s, moving from early post-war charity/professional settings (*Hemlock and After*) through academic-cultural scandal (*Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*), domestic and social conscience (*The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*), late-life respectability and memory (*Late Call*), and the longue durée of family morality (*No Laughing Matter*) [14]–[18]. The method is not to treat characters as sociological types but to track how the novels construct moral economies: who gets believed, who gets forgiven, what forms of speech are authorised, and how satire rearranges the reader's judgements.

Satire is treated here as a mode rather than a fixed genre. Following Griffin and Frye, satire is understood as a form that destabilises moral reassurance by exposing the gap between professed values and lived practices [7], [8]. Irony is treated, with Hutcheon, as an interpretive transaction, an "edge" produced in social space, where the reader is invited to recognise the unsaid and to evaluate it [9]. Sexuality is treated, with Sedgwick and Foucault, as a field of knowledge-power in which disclosure and secrecy are never merely personal but are organised by institutions, class, and narrative authority [10], [11]. These concepts are used heuristically: they guide what to look for in the texts, speech acts, institutional scenes, rituals of respectability, without reducing Wilson's fiction to theoretical allegory.

A final methodological emphasis concerns moral evaluation. Wilson's satire frequently tempts the reader toward easy contempt, but the novels also punish simplistic judgement by revealing how cruelty can hide inside moral zeal. The analysis therefore treats "morality" as a contested practice in the novels: a shifting set of claims that characters use to justify themselves, discipline others, and sometimes, more rarely, accept responsibility.

4. *HEMLOCK AND AFTER*: PHILANTHROPY, PROFESSIONAL VIRTUE, AND SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE

Hemlock and After is a foundational text for Wilson's satiric treatment of post-war moral culture because it places sexuality at the heart of philanthropic and professional respectability. Set amid literary and charitable networks, the novel dramatises how moral authority is accumulated through public service and cultural patronage while private lives are managed through secrecy, euphemism, and selective scandal [14]. Wilson's satire does not simply "expose" homosexuality as a hidden truth; rather, it exposes the social uses of exposure itself. The moral question is not desire, but the economy of judgement: who is permitted complexity, and who is reduced to a moral emblem?

Wilson constructs a world in which benevolence easily becomes a technology of control. The literary colony and charitable talk create a public image of humane progress, yet the same network tolerates exploitation and cruelty when these can be displaced onto stigmatised figures [14], [3]. Sexuality becomes a lever: it is used for blackmail, for moral superiority, for insinuation, and for the management of reputations. The satiric edge falls on the professional-liberal subject who believes himself "good" because he is tolerant in principle, while in practice he participates in structures that harm others. This is precisely the sort of moral bad faith that Foucault helps to illuminate: institutions generate speech about morality and sexuality that appears corrective but often consolidates power [11].

At the level of narrative technique, Wilson repeatedly stages conversation as a moral battleground. Polite talk allows characters to signal decency without risking truth; insinuation becomes a social art. Hutcheon's model of irony as a socially negotiated edge clarifies why

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these scenes matter: meaning is created in what cannot be said directly, and the reader is recruited as an interpreter of codes [9]. The "moral" community in the novel thus functions as a semiotic community, sharing rules about what may be named, what must remain in inference, and whose life can be discussed as a problem.

Yet Wilson's satire is not merely corrosive. The novel's moral seriousness appears in the costs of concealment and in the depiction of tenderness as fragile but significant. In this sense, the novel anticipates Sedgwick's insistence that secrecy and disclosure are not symmetrical choices; they structure entire social worlds, distributing vulnerability and authority [10]. Wilson's moral critique is therefore directed less at forbidden desire than at the social machinery that turns desire into a commodity of judgement.

5. *ANGLO-SAXON ATTITUDES*: SCANDAL, RESPECTABILITY, AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MORAL PRETENCE

If *Hemlock and After* examines philanthropic modernity, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* investigates cultural authority, academia, religion, heritage, through the structure of scandal. The novel's famous hoax-and-discovery plot is not simply a satire of intellectual vanity; it is a satire of moral gatekeeping, where reputations are protected by selective ignorance and where "truth" becomes a weapon deployed at convenient times [15]. Sexuality is interwoven with this economy because the moral status of individuals, especially those already precarious, depends on what can be insinuated, proven, or strategically forgotten.

The novel's satiric brilliance lies in its depiction of how institutions manage contradiction. The academy and the church appear as guardians of truth and virtue, yet both rely on compromise, suppression, and mutual protection. Scandal becomes a ritual: it is feared as impurity but also desired as social theatre. Wilson thereby shows morality not as a stable principle but as a performance maintained by collective agreement. Frye's account of satire and irony as modes that dissolve ideals is helpful here: Wilson drains the ideal of institutional integrity by showing the mundane negotiations that keep it alive [8]. The effect is not cynicism for its own sake; it is moral re-education, forcing the reader to see how "respectability" is manufactured.

Sexuality in *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* are not an isolated subplot but part of the novel's general claim that bodies and desires are implicated in systems of authority. A culture that claims spiritual or scholarly superiority nevertheless organises itself through gossip, insinuation, and the policing of private lives. Sedgwick's framework clarifies why this matters: the closet is not only an individual predicament but a cultural regime that structures knowledge and ignorance, who may know, who must not know, and who is punished when knowledge becomes public [10]. Wilson's satire shows that institutions often preserve themselves by deciding which truths count as "moral" truths.

Crucially, the novel does not offer cathartic purification through exposure. The hoax's revelation does not restore an ethical order; instead, it demonstrates how truth is absorbed and repurposed by the same social structures that denied it. In this refusal of closure, Wilson resembles Griffin's account of satire as open-ended and historically entangled rather than a simple instrument of moral correction [7].

6. *THE MIDDLE AGE OF MRS ELIOT*: CONSCIENCE, COMPASSION, AND THE ETHICS OF DESIRE

Wilson's satire is often associated with institutions and public life, but *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot* shows how deeply his moral inquiry enters domestic and emotional worlds. The novel is frequently read as a major portrait of a woman negotiating loss, class position, and

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ethical responsibility [16]. For the purposes of this study, its significance lies in how it connects sexuality to moral imagination. The book juxtaposes public respectability with private vulnerability, exposing how compassion can be both genuine and self-serving.

The novel's moral environment is saturated with what might be called conscientious performance. Characters articulate ideals of duty and kindness, yet these ideals can become instruments of judgement. Wilson's satire is subtler here than in the earlier novels; it appears less as overt ridicule and more as the careful staging of moral self-deception. Foucault's notion that modern moral regimes proliferate discourse, confession, counselling, expert judgement, helps clarify the texture of the novel's ethical life: morality is managed through talk that promises care but can also impose norms [11]. The novel repeatedly suggests that being "good" is not equivalent to doing good, and virtue can become a shield against recognising complicity.

Sexuality enters this landscape as a test of relational ethics. The novel's treatment of queer partnership and social marginalisation is not sensational; it is one of the sites where Wilson measures the sincerity of compassion. When characters respond to non-normative desire, their response reveals what their morality is made of: whether it can accommodate complexity, whether it can acknowledge suffering without converting it into spectacle, and whether it can relinquish the pleasures of superiority. In Sedgwick's terms, the management of knowledge about sexuality becomes a measure of ethical capacity: the question is not only what is known, but also how the knowing is used [10].

What distinguishes Wilson's moral vision here is that satire does not eliminate sympathy. The novel repeatedly allows readers to recognise moral effort, not only moral failure. This is consistent with Bradbury's emphasis on Wilson's capacity to mix irony with moral wisdom, refusing a purely destructive satiric stance [6]. In this sense, *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot* strengthens the central claim of this study: Wilson uses sexuality to probe morality as a lived practice, uncertain, compromised, but still answerable.

7. *LATE CALL*: AGING, RESPECTABILITY, AND THE RESIDUES OF MORAL DISCIPLINE

Late Call shifts Wilson's satiric lens toward ageing, provincial respectability, and the afterlife of moral judgement. The novel's world is quieter than the metropolitan arenas of earlier works, but it remains sharply attentive to how communities police belonging. In such settings, sexuality is often not openly discussed; instead, it survives as rumour, insinuation, or the quiet knowledge that structures social distance [17]. Wilson's satire here shows how moral discipline can persist even when formal norms appear softened.

The novel's ethical texture is shaped by memory and retrospection. Ageing characters confront the narratives they have used to justify themselves, and the community confronts the stories it tells to preserve its own decency. This is where Wilson's satire becomes almost anthropological: he observes how moral communities manage ambiguity. They do so, Wilson suggests, by converting difference into "character", by treating desire as eccentricity rather than as a legitimate dimension of personhood, and by distributing kindness in ways that maintain hierarchy. Hutcheon's account of irony as social positioning helps illuminate these dynamics: the community's speech practices create insiders and outsiders through shared insinuations and controlled meanings [9].

In the background of *Late Call* stands the broader mid-century shift toward a so-called permissive society. Yet Wilson's point is that permissiveness, where it exists, does not automatically create moral justice. Legal reforms do not erase social sanctions; they often

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relocate them. The historical context of reform debates and the later passage of the Sexual Offences Act 1967 frame this tension: decriminalisation in England and Wales was conditional and limited, and it did not dissolve stigma [12], [13]. Wilson's satire is attuned to precisely this gap between public reform and private discipline.

The moral achievement of *Late Call* is its insistence that ethical life is measured in ordinary relations, how people speak, how they forgive, how they allow others to exist without being reduced to moral lessons. Sexuality in this novel is therefore less an event than a moral atmosphere: it is one of the registers through which the community's capacity for truth and generosity is tested.

8. *NO LAUGHING MATTER*: FAMILY, SELF-DECEPTION, AND THE INHERITANCE OF MORAL SCRIPTS

No Laughing Matter expands Wilson's moral inquiry across decades, presenting family as the primary institution where moral scripts are learnt, repeated, resisted, and internalised [18]. The satiric target is not the family as such but the way "family morality" becomes a mechanism for producing self-deception. The novel's panoramic structure enables Wilson to show how sexuality and morality are inherited together: the family transmits not only norms of respectability but also strategies for concealment, denial, and displaced aggression.

Wilson's satire in *No Laughing Matter* is distinctive because it is cumulative. Instead of building toward a single exposure, the novel builds a sense of how lives are shaped by repeated small evasions. Sexuality appears within this long moral education as both a point of vulnerability and a point of resistance. The family's moral language often frames desire as either shameful or as something to be managed for appearances. Yet the novel also depicts the longing for authenticity, the desire to live truthfully, as ethically significant. Sedgwick's emphasis on the closet as a structural rather than episodic phenomenon is particularly relevant here: secrecy is not a single act but a way of organising life and relationships [10].

At the same time, Wilson refuses to sentimentalise authenticity as pure liberation. He repeatedly shows how truth can be used cruelly and how moral righteousness can be another form of violence. This is where Griffin's model of satire as morally ambiguous and politically uncertain aligns with Wilson's practice: satire reveals, but revelation does not automatically heal [7]. The family remains a site of attachment as well as harm, and Wilson's moral vision consists in refusing easy totalisations. In a sense, the novel offers a secular moral theology: it insists that the self is accountable, but it also insists that judgement without understanding is itself immoral.

Placed against the cultural context of shifting sexual discourses in the mid-twentieth century, the novel can be read as an anatomy of modernisation's unevenness. Public discourse about sexuality proliferates, through law, media, and professional expertise, yet the intimate moral scripts of family remain stubbornly durable. Foucault's argument about the productive nature of sexual discourse clarifies this paradox: more speech about sex does not mean less regulation; it can mean regulation by new means [11]. Wilson's satire captures this transformation at the level of everyday life, where modernity brings new vocabularies but not necessarily new kindness.

9. DISCUSSION: WILSON'S SATIRIC ETHICS OF SEXUALITY AND MORAL LIFE

Across the selected works, Wilson's fiction develops a coherent satiric ethic with sexuality as its primary diagnostic instrument. The first major pattern is the institutionalisation of morality. Whether the institution is philanthropy, academia, the church, or the family, Wilson

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shows moral talk operating as social capital: it grants authority, polices boundaries, and protects reputations [14], [15], [18]. Sexuality enters these systems as a privileged site for moral performance because it can be used to mark deviance, to mobilise disgust, or to dramatise tolerance. Wilson's satire exposes how both condemnation and tolerance can serve status. This is the heart of his critique of liberal conscience: the self-image of decency can coexist with complicity in harm.

The second pattern is the management of knowledge. Wilson's novels are saturated with who knows what, who pretends not to know, and when knowledge becomes actionable. Sedgwick's model clarifies why this is not merely thematic but structural: the closet is a regime of knowledge that organises relationships, institutions, and narrative tension [10]. Wilson's satire repeatedly demonstrates that moral judgement often depends less on acts than on their narratability, on whether something can be said without threatening the community's self-concept.

The third pattern is Wilson's resistance to moral simplification. His satire rarely offers stable heroes. Instead, it offers moments of moral recognition: the acceptance of responsibility, the refusal of cruelty, and the willingness to see others as more than scandals. These moments are limited, sometimes compromised, but they matter because they indicate Wilson's ethical seriousness. Bradbury's description of Wilson's tone as mixing irony with moral wisdom is thus not incidental; it identifies Wilson's central artistic problem, how to expose hypocrisy without becoming hypocritically superior [6]. Wilson's answer is a satire that aims not at purity but at honesty.

Wilson's fiction engages the historical tension between reform and stigma. The movement toward legal reform and the later decriminalisation of homosexual acts in England and Wales did not erase moral discipline; it altered its mechanisms and vocabularies [12], [13]. Wilson's work remains valuable because it dramatises this uneven transition at the level of everyday moral life. In his novels, sexuality is neither a private essence nor a simple transgression. It is a social field where morality is negotiated and where satire becomes an instrument for ethical clarity.

10. CONCLUSION

Angus Wilson's selected works show that satire can be a serious moral art, an instrument for diagnosing how societies convert virtue into performance and compassion into control. By placing sexuality at the centre of moral and institutional life, Wilson refuses the consoling separation of private desire from public ethics. In *Hemlock and After* and *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, he exposes how charitable and cultural institutions manage sexuality as reputational risk while preserving hypocrisy as decency. In *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*, he moves the satiric gaze inward, revealing how conscience and compassion can be corrupted by the desire to remain "good". In *Late Call* and *No Laughing Matter*, he shows how moral discipline persists through community and family scripts long after public discourse claims modernity and tolerance.

Wilson's enduring achievement is the construction of a satiric ethic that refuses easy verdicts. His novels do not propose permissiveness as moral progress, nor do they offer punitive moralism as truth. Instead, they insist on responsibility: the responsibility to speak honestly about desire, to recognise the institutional uses of moral language, and to resist the pleasures of hypocrisy. In this way, Wilson's satire remains a critical resource for understanding the moral life of modern societies, how morality is performed, how sexuality is regulated, and how ethical clarity may still be possible amid compromise.

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