Journal Literary Aesthetics
Volume No: 11, Issue No: 2, Year: 2024 (July-December)
PP: 12-18
ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

SATIRE AND SOCIAL CLASS IN REPRESENTATIONS OF POST-WAR BRITISH SOCIETY IN WILSON'S FICTION

Biresh Kumar

University Department of English, B.R.A. Bihar University, Muzaffarpur

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Angus Wilson's post-war fiction mobilises satire to anatomise British social class at a moment of rapid cultural transition. Reading Wilson's major 1950s–1960s novels alongside selected stories and contemporaneous accounts of class change, the study argues that Wilson's satire functions less as simple mockery than as a diagnostic mode: it maps the moral anxieties, institutional hypocrisies, and status performances through which post-war Britain negotiated welfare-state modernity, fading "shabby-genteel" authority, and emergent forms of affluence. Wilson's targets, professional expertise, cultural gatekeeping, domestic respectability, and elite liberal conscience, are shown to be structurally tied to class reproduction, even when voiced in progressive idioms. The study further contends that Wilson's satiric method is distinctively "mixed", combining comic exposure with psychological gravity and ethical seriousness, thereby offering a nuanced critique of social stratification rather than a purely punitive lampoon.

Keywords: Angus Wilson, satire, social class, post-war Britain, welfare state, cultural institutions, middle-class identity, moral comedy

1. INTRODUCTION

Angus Wilson emerged as a distinctive post-war English novelist whose fiction persistently confronts the question of how class is lived, narrated, and morally rationalised in the aftermath of war and during the consolidation of the welfare state. His early acclaim, beginning with story collections and extending through novels widely regarded as major achievements, coincided with a period when British society was renegotiating the meanings of authority, culture, and "respectability" across older hierarchies and newer institutions. Wilson's first novel, *Hemlock and After* (1952), is frequently read as a powerful account of middle-class hypocrisy and moral compromise, while *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956) is commonly identified as a biting satire of English academic and cultural life, positioning institutional prestige as an arena in which class and conscience collide [1].

The central proposition of this study is that Wilson's satire is inseparable from his representations of social class. Satire, in Wilson's practice, is not merely a comedic posture but a method of social cognition: it exposes how class operates through language, taste, professional codes, and domestic performance, and it scrutinises the moral self-understandings by which characters justify their privileges or resentments. In post-war Britain, where narratives of "equal opportunity" and national reconstruction coexisted with stubborn stratification, Wilson repeatedly stages the contradiction between public ideals and private conduct. His fiction therefore offers a particularly instructive case for studying satire as a form that can illuminate class not only as an economic structure but also as a set of cultural habits, ethical scripts, and institutional affiliations.

By concentrating on Wilson's key post-war novels, *Hemlock and After*, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, and *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot* (1958), with extensions to later work such as *No Laughing Matter* (1967), this study analyses how Wilson connects satiric form to classed social worlds. It also situates these novels within mid-century debates about class change,

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

including arguments about "affluence" and the contested idea of embourgeoisement, which shaped sociological and cultural understandings of British stratification in the 1950s and 1960s [2].

2. POST-WAR BRITAIN, CLASS TRANSITION, AND THE CULTURAL CONDITIONS OF SATIRE

Post-war British society is often described through overlapping narratives of austerity, welfare-state construction, educational expansion, and shifting cultural authority. For Wilson's fiction, what matters is not an abstract summary of change but the experiential texture of transition: a society where old class codes persist while new bureaucracies and professional cultures re-describe status in ostensibly meritocratic terms. The post-war settlement did not dissolve class distinctions; rather, it redistributed the sites and vocabularies through which class became legible. The "public service" professional, the cultural administrator, the university expert, and the progressive patron become central figures in Wilson's satiric imagination precisely because they embody the mid-century retooling of authority.

Cultural accounts of the period repeatedly note the pressure exerted by mass media and commercial culture on established forms of working-class community and on the symbolic boundaries between "high" and "popular" culture. Richard Hoggart's influential *The Uses of Literacy* describes a Britain moving toward "massification," in which older cultural formations associated with working-class life are strained by commercial entertainment and advertising-driven cultural production [3]. Wilson's satire is attentive to these pressures, but he typically approaches them obliquely: rather than offering documentary realism, he examines how classed identities are rehearsed and defended through moral talk, taste judgements, and cultural gatekeeping.

Sociological debates about "affluence" also reframed class in this era. Goldthorpe and Lockwood's analysis of affluence and class structure, developed against claims that prosperous manual workers were being assimilated into the middle class, provides an important context for reading Wilson's depiction of status anxiety and cultural mimicry [4]. Wilson's fiction does not treat class as a stable ladder; it depicts it as a field of symbolic struggle in which characters attempt to convert education, cultural capital, or institutional proximity into social distinction, even while declaring their distaste for snobbery.

Within this context, satire becomes a particularly apt mode. As theorists of satire emphasize, the genre is historically entangled with social norms and with the contested authority to judge. Dustin Griffin's account of satire stresses its open-endedness and its complex relation to history and rhetoric, underscoring that satire often exposes social contradictions without guaranteeing political resolution [5]. Wilson's work aligns with this understanding: his satire frequently diagnoses rather than cures, implicating satirist and reader alike in the very cultural privileges under scrutiny.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SATIRE AS SOCIAL DIAGNOSIS AND CLASS AS CULTURAL PERFORMANCE

A productive way to read Wilson is to treat satire not as a fixed set of techniques but as a social practice embedded in institutions and classed languages. Northrop Frye's influential mapping of satiric modes, situating satire within irony and emphasising its capacity to reveal "normal" social life as subtly nightmarish, helps clarify Wilson's tonal balancing act, in which ordinary respectability is shown to be structured by coercion, hypocrisy, and emotional evasion [6]. Rather than constructing villains who stand outside society, Wilson often

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

presents socially competent figures whose very competence depends on strategic self-deception.

At the same time, Wilson's satire frequently draws energy from what may be called the "institutional grotesque": the exposure of revered cultural spaces, universities, committees, learnt societies, charitable organisations, as arenas of vanity, rivalry, and repressed desire. In broader satiric theory, Bakhtin's account of carnival and the grotesque highlights how comic forms can invert hierarchy, profane solemn authority, and force recognition of the body and the social underside beneath official seriousness [7]. While Wilson is not a carnivalesque novelist in any simple sense, his fiction repeatedly degrades the self-seriousness of elite moral discourse by showing how it is sustained through status, intimacy networks, and institutional power.

Class, in this framework, is treated not only as an economic position but as a cultural performance, enacted through speech, taste, credentials, and moral vocabulary. This approach aligns with mid-century cultural analysis that tracks how "culture" itself becomes a terrain on which class difference is asserted and contested. Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* is relevant here because it frames "class" as a keyword whose modern meanings emerge through industrial and democratic transformations, thereby encouraging a reading of class as historically changing and discursively embedded rather than merely structural [8]. Wilson's novels dramatise precisely such discursive embedding: characters attempt to secure class identity by narrating themselves as "liberal", "cultured", "service-minded", or "unworldly", even as their conduct reproduces exclusion.

4. METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

This study employs close textual analysis of selected novels and stories, emphasising narrative voice, free indirect discourse, characterisation, institutional settings, and satiric set pieces (dinners, committee meetings, family reunions, and professional gatherings) as formal nodes where class relations become visible. The primary corpus centers on *Hemlock and After* (1952), *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956), and *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot* (1958), with comparative reference to *No Laughing Matter* (1967) as a later extension of Wilson's family-and-class chronicle. Wilson's nonfiction commentary on the novel and the literary field is also used selectively to contextualise his self-understanding of post-war fiction [9]. Secondary scholarship includes archival and bibliographic materials associated with Wilson and critical reflections that describe his satiric orientation and thematic concerns [10].

5. *HEMLOCK AND AFTER* (1952): LIBERAL CONSCIENCE, SEXUAL SECRECY, AND THE CLASSED MANAGEMENT OF RESPECTABILITY

Wilson's *Hemlock and After* is often treated as a foundational statement of his post-war concerns, and it remains a crucial text for understanding how satire intersects with class. The novel is widely summarised as a study of middle-class hypocrisy, locating its drama in the moral compromises of social and institutional life [11]. What makes Wilson's satire distinctive here is its refusal to let hypocrisy be merely personal. The novel suggests that hypocrisy is structurally incentivised by classed expectations of respectability and by the vulnerability produced when private life contradicts public role.

A key element in the post-war setting is the policing of sexuality and the consequent culture of secrecy. Even when Wilson treats sexuality with relative frankness for his period, the narrative repeatedly shows that what is at stake is not only desire but the distribution of risk. The threat of exposure is classed: reputations, careers, and philanthropic projects depend on an appearance of moral steadiness that is easier to sustain for those whose networks can

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

absorb scandal. Wilson's satiric lens therefore highlights how liberal ideals, tolerance, service, public-mindedness, can become performative resources that protect privilege. The satire is not directed only at conservative moralism but also at liberal self-congratulation, which can function as a mechanism for avoiding genuine ethical accountability.

The novel's social world is populated by professional and cultural intermediaries whose status is neither aristocratic nor purely commercial. This "upper-middle" and professional milieu is precisely where post-war Britain's institutional authority increasingly resided. The satire arises when Wilson places lofty rhetoric, about culture, service, and reform, against the petty tactics through which such authority is maintained. In doing so, he anticipates later cultural critiques of the managerial-professional class, but he does so through narrative comedy and psychological exposure rather than ideological polemic.

6. *ANGLO-SAXON ATTITUDES* (1956): ACADEMIC PRESTIGE, CULTURAL CAPITAL, AND THE CLASS POLITICS OF "SERIOUSNESS"

If *Hemlock and After* exposes the classed management of personal respectability, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* widens the canvas to institutions that produce and authorise "culture" itself. The novel is commonly described as Wilson's most famous work and "a biting satire" of academic society, and it is frequently singled out as a major achievement in his career [12]. It is not incidental that Wilson chooses academia, archaeology, and cultural administration as satiric targets: these are domains where post-war Britain's symbolic hierarchy, what counts as knowledge, heritage, and national identity, is curated and policed.

The satiric force of the novel lies in its depiction of cultural seriousness as a class practice. Academic life, in Wilson's rendering, is saturated with status competition that is masked by the language of scholarship and public duty. Institutional rituals, lectures, committees, reputational alliances, are shown to be mechanisms for reproducing class advantage under the guise of merit. The novel's long shadow of guilt and historical compromise, including the entanglement of public narratives with private secrets, functions as an allegory of how institutions sanitise their origins and protect their prestige.

Wilson's choice to tether the present to a scandal in the cultural past intensifies the class dimension of satire. Heritage, in this narrative world, is not only what a society remembers; it is what it chooses to forget. The satiric exposure of a hoax or compromise within an ostensibly noble scholarly project implicates the entire ecology of cultural authority: reputations depend on shared fictions, and those fictions are socially useful. In a post-war moment when national identity is being renegotiated, amid imperial decline and domestic reconstruction, Wilson's satire suggests that cultural institutions may offer comforting narratives that stabilise class power rather than disrupt it.

Importantly, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* is not simply anti-intellectual. Its critique is aimed at the classed organisation of intellectual life, where access, accent, pedigree, and networks can matter as much as scholarship. The novel thereby turns the university into a microcosm of post-war Britain's "meritocratic" promise and its limits: it dramatises how equality of opportunity can be rhetorically affirmed while older social distinctions persist through subtler mechanisms.

7. *THE MIDDLE AGE OF MRS ELIOT* (1958): RESPECTABLE WIDOWHOOD, DOWNWARD MOBILITY, AND THE SATIRE OF DOMESTIC CLASS SECURITY

The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot shifts Wilson's satiric attention toward domestic life and gendered respectability, using the shock of bereavement and altered circumstances to reveal how class security is woven into everyday assumptions. The novel is well known for its

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

recognition, including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and summaries emphasise its focus on a conventional wife who confronts psychological dislocation after her husband's death abroad [13]. In Wilson's hands, this scenario is not merely personal tragedy; it is a structured encounter with the fragility of class position when the institutional and marital supports of status are withdrawn.

The satire in this novel is subtler and often more painful than in *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*. Wilson exposes the moral theatre of sympathy, charity, and social inclusion, showing how "help" can be offered in forms that preserve hierarchy. Widowhood becomes a social test in which the protagonist is required to perform gratitude, dignity, and self-management to remain intelligible within her class milieu. Here, satire targets the coded language of kindness, the polite evasions and conditional solidarities through which a class maintains its boundaries while congratulating itself on decency.

The novel also complicates the class narrative by tracing how hardship is interpreted differently depending on one's social training. A fall in income does not automatically produce new identification with the poor; it can produce intensified attachment to class markers, taste, manners, moral narrative, as compensatory forms of capital. Wilson's satire captures this compensatory mechanism, revealing how class persists as habit and sensibility even when material conditions shift. The "middle age" of the title thus resonates socially as well as psychologically: it describes a stage at which the protagonist's life story must be rewritten, and the available scripts are profoundly classed.

8. *NO LAUGHING MATTER* (1967): FAMILY CHRONICLE, BOURGEOIS DECLINE, AND THE LONG AFTERLIFE OF CLASS

Wilson's later fiction extends his class analysis into longer historical arcs, and *No Laughing Matter* is often characterised as a chronicle of a middle-class family and the erosion of bourgeois life across decades [14]. While the novel ranges beyond the immediate post-war years, its significance for this study lies in how it depicts class not as a snapshot but as an intergenerational system of aspiration, repression, and narrative management.

The family form is crucial. By distributing experience across siblings and across time, Wilson can show how class is reproduced through emotional education: what is admired, what is hidden, what counts as success, which desires are permitted, and how failure is narrated. Satire here often arises from juxtaposition, between the family's self-image and its actual practices, between public respectability and private fracture, and between artistic or intellectual pretension and the mundane realities it masks. The novel's breadth enables Wilson to connect post-war transformations, new affluence, altered sexual norms, changing cultural industries, to the persistence of classed emotional patterns.

Critically, Wilson's satire in *No Laughing Matter* also stages the problem of liberal modernity: as norms change, hypocrisy does not vanish but mutates. The family may become more "modern" in surface attitudes, yet it continues to deploy class privilege in access to education, cultural networks, and interpretive authority over its own story. The "no laughing matter" of the title can thus be read as an ethical claim about satire itself: laughter is necessary for exposure, but what is exposed is humanly costly.

9. COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS: WHAT WILSON'S SATIRE REVEALS ABOUT POST-WAR CLASS

Across these novels, Wilson's satire repeatedly returns to a set of class mechanisms that are especially characteristic of post-war Britain's institutional landscape. First, class appears as the governance of reputation. In *Hemlock and After*, reputational risk is distributed unevenly;

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

in *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, reputations are collective assets guarded by institutional solidarity; in *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*, reputation becomes a condition for continuing inclusion; and in *No Laughing Matter*, reputation is inherited as family narrative. Second, class appears as cultural authority, who may define "seriousness", "taste", and "public good". Wilson locates this authority in universities, committees, and cultural networks, thereby presenting class as embedded in institutions that claim neutrality or merit.

Third, Wilson's satire reveals class as moral language. Characters often speak in ethical idioms, service, tolerance, responsibility, yet those idioms may function as class markers. This dynamic resonates with Griffin's emphasis on satire's ambiguous political effects: satiric exposure does not automatically produce reform; it may instead disclose the resilience of the very structures it criticises [14]. Wilson's satire is therefore best understood as diagnostic: it maps contradictions that define post-war British modernity, especially the tension between egalitarian ideals and entrenched social stratification.

To clarify how the novels distribute satiric attention across class sites, Table 1 offers a compact thematic map.

Table 1. Wilson's Major Post-War Novels and Primary Class-Satire Sites

Novel	Year	Central satiric arena	Class dynamic foregrounded
Hemlock and After	1952	Philanthropy, professional life, private scandal	Respectability as class protection; uneven risk of exposure [15]
Anglo-Saxon Attitudes	1956	Academia, cultural institutions, heritage narratives	Cultural capital as hierarchy; institutional management of truth [16]
The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot	1958	Domestic respectability and social support networks	Conditional inclusion; class as habit under economic shock [17]
No Laughing Matter	1967	Intergenerational family chronicle	Long-term reproduction of privilege through narrative and emotion [18]

10. CONCLUSION

Wilson's fiction offers a sustained satiric exploration of post-war British class that is especially valuable because it refuses simplification. Rather than depicting class as a static structure or satire as a purely corrective weapon, Wilson shows how class lives inside institutions, moral vocabularies, and intimate relations, and how satire can reveal these operations without claiming to stand outside them. His major post-war novels repeatedly diagnose the social contradictions of welfare-state modernity: the promise of meritocracy shadowed by the persistence of cultural gatekeeping; the rhetoric of tolerance entangled with reputational fear; and the language of public good mobilised to protect private advantage.

At the level of form, Wilson's satire is "mixed" in tone, fusing comic exposure with psychological seriousness. This fusion matters for class analysis because it makes visible what purely sociological description can miss: the affective investments through which people cling to status, the moral narratives that justify inequality, and the subtle violences of polite exclusion. In this sense, Wilson's post-war fiction remains a significant archive of British social imagination, illuminating how class reproduced itself in new institutional

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

clothing and how satire could function as both critique and mourning within a transforming national culture.

REFERENCES

1. A. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*. New York: New York Review Books, 2005.
2. F. Devine, "The Working Class, Middle Class, Assimilation and Convergence," *The Sociological Review* (Past & Present collection), 2016.
3. R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1957.
4. J. H. Goldthorpe and D. Lockwood, "Affluence and the British Class Structure," *The Sociological Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 133–163, 1963.
5. D. H. Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. Lexington, KY, USA: University Press of Kentucky, 1994.
6. N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 1957.
7. M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, H. Iswolsky, Trans. Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press, 1984.
8. R. Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1958.
9. A. Wilson, "Condition of the Novel (Britain)," *New Left Review*, no. I/29, Jan.–Feb. 1965.
10. University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections, "Angus Wilson studys" (collection guide/finding aid).
11. Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Hemlock and After" (work by Angus Wilson).
12. A. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1956.
13. University of Edinburgh, "James Tait Black Memorial Prize, Winners" (1958: *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*, Angus Wilson).
14. Encyclopaedia Britannica, "No Laughing Matter" (novel by Angus Wilson).
15. A. Wilson, *Hemlock and After*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1952.
16. A. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1956.
17. A. Wilson, *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1958.
18. A. Wilson, *No Laughing Matter*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1967.