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## HOMECOMING IN ANGUS WILSON'S *LATE CALL*

In his *The Poetics of Space* the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard presents home as *one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind* (Bachelard 1994:6). In order to play such a role a house has to be a source of the values of intimacy and protection, which allow the dweller to experience well-being. Significantly, however, for Bachelard any space that allows man to experience this feeling of well-being *bears the essence of the notion of home* (Bachelard 1994:5). It can be a palace or a hut but also a meadow or forest. Its limits are the limits of imagination, which takes over such a space: *Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination* (Bachelard 1994:xxxv–xxxvi).

Writing about the imagination Bachelard has the poetic imagination in mind, which is a commitment of the soul: *in poetic reverie the soul keeps watch, with no tension, calm and active* (Bachelard 1994:xxii). Invested with the poetic imagination a place may assume mythical qualities: *If we give their function of shelter for dreams to all of these places of retreat, we may say [...] that there exists for each one of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past* (Bachelard 1994:15).

The aim of this article is to show in what way Sylvia Calvert, the protagonist of Angus Wilson's novel *Late Call*, finds such a home of dream-memory late in her life, in a place in which she experiences well-being for the first time since her childhood and which allows her to discover the spiritual dimension in her life.

After her retirement Sylvia, a former manageress of small hotels, is forced by circumstances to move to her son's house in Carshall, one of British New Towns.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> British New Towns reflected an attempt of the part of the state to stimulate previously undeveloped areas. They achieved the height of their popularity in the 1960s, when the novel is set.

She accepts the invitation of her widowed son to come and live with him and his three children in his big modern house because her gambler husband systematically loses all their money, and they have no savings to buy a place of their own. Sylvia is not happy about the move – she has never been close to her clever son, and, in fact, she finds herself out of her depth with him from the very beginning of her stay in his house, ‘The Sycamores’. Her son Harold, the headmaster of the local school, is an enthusiastic adherent of rationalism in all its manifestations and a vocal advocate of the idea of New Towns, which are the result of strictly rational and scientific planning. Everything which does not conform to his idea of the New Town is either irrelevant or dangerous to the success of this experiment in the new way of living. And as his family lives in the New Town, it is obvious that also they are part of this experiment (Stamirowska 1992:95). Sylvia considers Harold too clever for her and therefore does not even try to understand his ideas about the town, to say nothing about taking issue with him – her gradually growing despondency in the town is her only comment on the issue.

Sylvia herself first experiences the new way of living in a rather down-to-earth form when Harold undertakes to acquaint her with the modern kitchen equipment in the house, which conforms perfectly to his idea of the modern world. The gadgets reflect rational thinking, and in order to master them, according to Harold, it is enough to understand a few basic rules of electricity. Although Sylvia appreciates his patience while he is instructing her, she is lost in the torrent of his words: *Harold talked so much, so fast, and so indistinctly with his unfilled pipe wagging at the corner of his mouth that she really could hardly remember feeling more uncomfortable than she had on these three last evenings in that spacious modern kitchen* (Wilson 1968:74).

However, she believes that she will master the machines with practice and, to feel useful, she would like to prepare meals for the whole family. When she asks Harold to let her do the cooking for the family, he explains to her that in his household also children must work – a rule which reflects the modern idea of living in a cooperative way. Sylvia, in spite of her disappointment, tries to excuse her son: *after all an Englishman’s home is his castle. But the weeks, the years ahead, stretched out in front of her in empty uselessness* (Wilson 1968:95).

Sylvia is again a victim of Harold’s idea of cooperation for the common good (or for what **he** thinks is the common good) when he makes his friend Muriel engage his mother in the campaign to democratically influence the Ministry’s decision on Goodchild’s meadow, whose development is, in Harold’s view, against the principles on which Carshall was founded. Muriel shares with Harold progressive attitude to life and Sylvia does not feel comfortable in her company. What is more, she has a suspicion that the job she is doing has been invented for her to keep her busy working for a just cause, so after a few days she refuses to go on with it. The day she tells Harold she will not help Muriel

any more, he makes a show of his resentment during supper and later at night Sylvia is woken by her husband Arthur returning from poker, who is angry with her for upsetting Harold:

*He swore for a bit and then got into bed. Sylvia couldn't stop a kind of compulsive sobbing that had seized her. She had almost to stifle herself in the pillow so that he should not hear her. At last his snoring made her feel able to turn once more on her back. But she lay awake in empty desperation until after she heard the clock strike five. (Wilson 1968:176)*

The night spent in empty desperation is a clear sign of Sylvia's growing depression – her original apprehension about moving to 'The Sycamores' seems to be more and more justified.

Her troubles in 'The Sycamores' may be seen as reflecting her unsuccessful attempts to regain some sense of selfhood after the move to Carshall. That she has problems in this area is made clear by her answers to an amateur sociological survey which Harold compiled with his friend Sally. When Sally asks Sylvia '[...] *what are you?*' Sylvia first answers '*I'm very fat*' and then '*I was a manageress, but I'm nothing now*' (Wilson 1968:128). Although Sally discounts the answers, they are evidently revealing if looked at in the light of the theory of the formation of the self which assumes that the self constitutes itself in relationship to the body engaged in a mutually formative dialectic with the surrounding social space.<sup>2</sup> In the course of Sylvia's work – and life – in various hotels, a mutual suitability evidently evolved between her body and the places of her work, as a result of which Sylvia's sense of self was heavily influenced by the hotels in which she worked. Inevitably, this sense must have suffered when she lost her job and had to move to 'The Sycamores'. Harold, realizing how much his mother identified herself with the hotels, tries to cushion the shock by telling her that she can treat his house like a hotel without responsibilities. What he does not understand is that it was work that oiled the wheels of the dialectic between Sylvia's body/self and the hotels.

Her feeble attempts to regain some sense of self by replacing Harold's wife Beth as a 'manageress' of 'The Sycamores' run up against Harold's resistance to her involvement in the running of the house. As a result, she begins to perceive herself as a nonentity with a fat, old and useless body, as is the case when she learns that she will be given hardly any work to do at home:

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<sup>2</sup> According to Lefebvre, the human self and space are not two discrete and fixed entities linked only through the mediation of the body – a third separate entity. First of all, it is not possible to separate the body from the space in which it finds itself. The body is always affected by the space and the space is affected by the body. As the self constitutes itself in relationship to its body, it therefore constitutes itself in relationship to the space with which its body is engaged in the dialectic (Lefebvre 1991:199–203; see also Casey 2001:414).

*All that day she kept feeling herself too big; she seemed to have to squeeze between coffee tables, she knocked a tobacco jar off the hall windowsill, her body filled the rooms she entered so that she revolted herself – a superfluous, fat old woman (Wilson 1968:95).*

What is more, she begins to realize that ‘The Sycamores’ as it is run by Harold is in fact only a small part of the progressive, youth-oriented society of the New Town, whose values and habits she – as the old woman she has now become – finds difficult to conform to. Already during the first months of her stay in the town she discovers that her meetings with Harold’s friends are for her only a source of strain and embarrassment, as she has hardly anything in common with them and finds it difficult to make even small talk. What is worse for her, Harold’s friends are often willing to share confidences with her.<sup>3</sup> Sylvia is clearly unprepared for this, but she finds out that in Carshall strangers know more about her own family than she does herself – thus, in fact, it is she who is the stranger, even in her own family. As a result of this Sylvia feels more and more alienated.

However, the conflict with Harold over her quitting the Goodchild’s meadow job makes her more isolated than ever and she often even does not come downstairs to the family supper. To find some comfort, she turns to reading popular novels and watching television, but after some time she realizes the hollowness and falsity of the world of fiction: *the great comforting engulfing whale of fiction seemed now to have died on her, so that she looked out through its ribs to nothingness; and even that skeleton was decaying into dust from which nothing more came to her than the sweetly sick smell of romantic falsity (Wilson 1968:200).*

Finally, on Good Friday, a rainy and gloomy day, Sylvia’s spirits reach a new low. She has finished her library book and there is nothing worth looking at on television. Then she remembers that Good Friday has always been a gloomy day in her life: *On this wet Good Friday Sylvia had felt so low that she almost picked up the breadknife and made an end of it (Wilson 1968:182).*

But on Easter Saturday the weather changes and her spirits rise. On Sunday she goes with Harold to St Saviour’s church in the Town Centre. Harold thinks highly of Marchant, the vicar of the church, because his sermons are more reminiscent of the speeches of a City Council man (like himself) than of conventional sermons. However, this Easter Sunday service is a disappointment for him. After the hymn has been sung, instead of Marchant the congregation see a substitute in front of them – a very old man speaking with a Scottish accent.

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<sup>3</sup> Social life in Carshall may be seen as reflecting one of the ideals of planning theory, that is, ‘togetherness’: *‘Togetherness’ is a fittingly nauseating name for an old ideal in planning theory. This ideal is that if anything is shared among people, much should be shared (Jacobs 1992:62).*

Sylvia immediately feels a bond of sympathy with the man: *like him, she had no ties with this dressed-up, united congregation of Carshallites*. What is more, she is increasingly interested in his words. His sermon is on the importance of having a soul, which is not gained by [...] *building up businesses or rushing to our neighbours with gossip, nor being house proud, nor family proud [...]* (Wilson 1968:185). Doing good for others, social work, will not save the human soul, if there is no soul left to save.

The rest of the congregation react to the sermon with a mixture of amusement and irritation and then simply lack of interest. It is only a comical change in the voice of the clergyman that rouses them to attention from time to time. The last such change comes at the end of the sermon, making them all listen:

*‘Said the one carlinwife to the other, “Aye, Annie,” says she, “I’ve been aye doing so muckle guid, I’ve noe had time to set me down and mind who I am.” Ah! And she can sit on her buttie to all eternity, for buttie’s all she’ll have – there’ll be no living soul to save. Is there nothing we can do to help us to God’s Grace? Indeed there is. The Lord forbid that I should preach to you folks any strait-jacketed Calvinistic doctrine. There’s a great deal you can do. You can be toward. You can go out to meet God’s Grace. Go out to mind who you are. Go out, not into the busy clamour of getting and spending, nor even into the soothing clamour of good works. No, go out into the dreadful silence, into the dark nothingness. Maybe ye are no but a wisp of straw, but if you go out to face the fire, out through the desert and the night, then indeed may the Lord send the light of his face to shine upon you then indeed may you be visited by that Grace which will save your soul alive. And now to God the Father [...].’* (Wilson 1968:186)

When they are driving home Harold is furious with the clergyman’s indirect criticism of devoting oneself entirely to the kind of life that reigns in Carshall New Town – social work, building up businesses, gossiping with neighbours, being house-proud and family-proud. But Harold finds it easier to focus in his condemnation of the sermon on its religious aspect, that is on *the barbaric doctrine of Grace*.<sup>4</sup>

However, the old parson’s criticism could be also applied to Sylvia. Up till her retirement, she also lead a busy life devoted entirely to work. But behind her work there was a different reason from that of her son’s. For him, hard work is a way of putting his ideas for the betterment of society into effect. Sylvia was conditioned to work hard by her mother during her childhood, a glimpse of which is presented in the Prologue to the novel, in which her mother, referring to

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<sup>4</sup> As a teacher and a firm believer in the potential of every man, Harold does not have to simulate outrage at the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. But he chooses to ignore the fact that the priest distanced himself clearly from the ‘barbarism’ of this doctrine, that is, its claim concerning the complete passivity of man.

Sylvia's lower-class origin, says about her: '[...] *All work. That's what the Almighty made for her. [...]*' (Wilson 1968:28).

The teachings of the old clergyman stand in sharp contrast to her mother's ideas about the place of work in Sylvia's life. What apparently appeals to Sylvia in the sermon is the parson's claim that work is just clamour which diverts our attention from what is really important – from minding who we are. Throughout her life Sylvia built her sense of self in the clamour of work. After moving to Carshall, she was devoid of this clamour and at a loss in the dreadful silence. And now this clergyman tells her that the self built in the clamour of work is not fully human, for it relates only to the body – the *buttie*. Once she is stuck in the rut of such a soulless life it is only the dreadful silence and dark nothingness that can help her to discover her fully human self by helping her to discover her soul.

What should be indicated here is that Sylvia does not treat the clergyman's appeal for soul-searching in strictly religious terms. But she is desperate to change something in her life, which has become almost unbearable for her. And the sermon, which is often on her mind after Easter, gives her hope that something could be changed.

A few days after hearing the sermon she decides to explore the countryside outside the town. 'The Midlands' that she can see from her bedroom window have held a strange attraction for her since her arrival at 'The Sycamores'. Before moving to Carshall, she lived in many parts of England, but always close to the sea, and the idea of an almost never-ending stretch of land holds a morbid fascination for her. But it turns out that the countryside which lies *open before her in such terrible enticement from her bedroom window* is hard to find. She spends hours wandering on the borders of the town, never being able to reach the real countryside: *The New Town, though it merged into the country, was yet cut off from it by a system of lanes and roads that turned back on themselves and eventually returned to Town Centre, as inevitably, by contrast, as the paths in a maze lead away from its core* (Wilson 1968:199). This is a typical New Town environment *that doesn't belong to town or country* (Cullen 1961:138), created by low density housing and obligatory patches of the countryside in the town. But her wanderings in the maze can also have symbolic meaning if they are seen as a stage of her spiritual quest – labyrinths were often used in rituals of religious initiation (Eliade 1988:93).

It is only after several days that Sylvia finally finds a path leading to the real countryside. But as her expectations have been rising proportionally to the amount of time spent seeking it, her first sortie into the countryside turns out to be an anticlimax: *She had sought it so long that she half expected some miraculous change in her feelings to come about from the discovery, to walk straight into some enchanted land of good or evil* (Wilson 1968:199). However, the only result of this first walk in the countryside is a laddered stocking and very tired feet.

After that trip, she begins to reflect on her hopes connected with the countryside and she realizes that she does not have any clear goal for her wanderings. She feels she has lost her sense of self – *the long familiar sketchy outlines of her grey life had now suddenly so blurred and dissolved that she had altogether lost herself* – and that, perhaps, she could regain it in some place:

*If she could have hidden herself in the smallest hollow in the tightest nutshell so that from its very pressure, from its very narrowness, she could find some shape in life however small, she would have sought such a cramped cell immediately. But 'The Sycamores', she now knew, was not that prison of peace.* (Wilson 1968:200)

The place that she longs for is Bachelard's intimate poetic space which *gather[s] being together in its centre* (Bachelard 1994:234) and which in daydreaming may, among many other things, take the form of nutshells (Bachelard 1994:234). In the real world, however, it is usually home that may be considered to be this intimate, absolute space, provided that it is the source of well-being. 'The Sycamores', the only home she now has, is not such a place, as Sylvia is well aware.

Therefore she leaves aside the question of *the prison of peace* and, as she continues to reflect on the purpose of her wanderings in the countryside, she suddenly and seemingly absurdly remembers the first jumper that her daughter made. It was so bad that the girl herself started to unpick the wool in order to knit it all over again. After a moment Sylvia realizes that she could be that jumper: *Perhaps to weave all the threads together again, she needed to return to the country world of her childhood – but even this idea seemed more something she had once been told than any personal conviction* (Wilson 1968:200).

The idea of the faulty jumper reflects a clear acknowledgement on Sylvia's part that the problems with her self could have started long before her retirement. For if she herself is that faulty jumper which needs to be made again from scratch, it means that her self, which was formed in the clamour of work, is defective, as the old clergyman claimed. And as the countryside is the world of her childhood, that is, of the time when human self is still at the beginning of the process of its development, the return to this countryside could bring her – in some mysterious way – back to the point from which the process of the recreation of the self could begin anew.

She continues her walks in the countryside and during one of them she sees the signs of a quickly advancing storm. She escapes into an open field to avoid the danger of lightning and, caught there by the storm, she descends into the dark nothingness deeper than any time before: *All the pressed in, tight packed nervous terrors of the past months burst out with the storm's explosion; yet at the same time all wandering fragments of nightmare came together in one sudden overwhelming flash and roar* (Wilson 1968:222–223). But if the storm is the

dark nothingness at its most intense, it is only because it is its last manifestation. Through the falling rain Sylvia hears a child screaming in terror, and, as she looks around, she sees a little girl clinging to a lonely oak. She rushes to the girl, and tears her away from the tree. As they both run away into the open field lightning strikes the tree.

In this way the life of the little girl has been saved. But the event turns out to be equally important for Sylvia, because by rescuing the girl Sylvia saves herself – or, in the old parson's words, she comes into the light. However, to understand the full significance of this scene and its consequences, one has to go back to the prologue to the novel.

The prologue gives a glimpse of Sylvia's childhood on a day which turns out to be very important for her future life. On that day, Sylvia Tuffield, an obedient, hard working girl of eleven,<sup>5</sup> living with her parents and younger siblings on a farm which is far from prospering, decides to do something different. Encouraged by a visiting upper-middle-class guest, Mrs Longmore, she leaves her chores and goes with Mrs Longmore's little daughter, Myra, to the nearby meadow. It was Myra who asked her to do so, but Sylvia agreed first of all because of the influence that Myra's mother exerted over her. Impressed and flattered by the grand and beautiful lady's kindness and interest, Sylvia takes to heart her advice: *'Doing something different is the thing. Not all the time, of course, because then it wouldn't really be different. But every now and again, when people least expect it'* (Wilson 1968:11).

Once the two girls find themselves in the meadow, *Sylvia began to do all the things that she had wanted to do for years – things for which there was never time because there were so many duties in the day, or things she could never do for herself alone but had always to do to amuse and quieten her brothers and sisters* (Wilson 1968:12). Without her siblings to look after she:

*[...] lay flat on her back and stared at the cloudless, harshly blue sky; and, when the sun's glare became too blinding, she turned over and lay on her stomach, pressing her face close among the daisies so that her eyes could follow almost at its own level a reddish ant that seemed to her as it hurried through the grass to trot like the pony in Doctor Osborne's children's cart.* (Wilson 1968:12)

With her daydream of an ant changed into a pony, Sylvia enters, if only for a moment, the world of miniature, which, according to Bachelard, is one of the manifestations of intimate space. After quoting a passage from Victor Hugo's *Le Rhin*, in which a plot of grass is described as a whole world, with parasol-shaped hemlock flowers imitating the pines of Italy and an earthworm resembling an antediluvian python, Bachelard writes:

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<sup>5</sup> On page 10 of the novel Sylvia is said to be ten and a half years old; on page 21 she is described as a girl of twelve. Both comments are the narrator's.



*To have experienced miniature sincerely detaches me from the surrounding world, and helps me to resist dissolution of the surrounding atmosphere.*

*Miniature is an exercise that has metaphysical freshness; it allows us to be world conscious at slight risk. And how restful this exercise on a dominated world can be! For miniature rests us without ever putting us to sleep. Here the imagination is both vigilant and content.* (Bachelard 1994:161)

A moment later, as Sylvia rests in the shadow of some elms, the sheer feeling of well-being becomes dominant: *She was content, lying back in the warmth of the leaf-dappled sunshine, just to be; she could not remember such a thing before, she could only recall doing things or thinking about things to be done* (Wilson 1968:19).

But Sylvia cannot be long immersed in the world of her own as from the very beginning of their trip Myra tries to attract the attention of the older girl. Following Sylvia she soils her shoes and stockings and Sylvia tries to deal with the problem: *The sunshine, a slight soft south-westerly breeze, freedom, a sense of happiness not to be lost, loosened her imagination. She said, 'Stocken and shoe'd best be taken off'* (Wilson 1968:16). She takes off Myra's shoes and stockings and to keep the younger girl company she takes off her own. After that moment the girls gradually shed the layers of their clothes. And, to ward off the almost unbearable heat of the day, they enter the wood. There, with Myra complaining about her sunburn, Sylvia is for a moment seized with panic when she imagines the reaction of her parents, *but her sense of well-being was strong enough to flood through her, washing all other thoughts away* (Wilson 1968:20). The coolness of the forest and Sylvia's endeavours pacify at last the younger girl. And Sylvia can savour the forest: *They kept along the winding path of low undergrowth with the high elms and oaks and hornbeams protective above them. The Tuffield girl led the way, treading down the elder and garlic and loosestrife, bending back the fretful arms of bramble that barred their way* (Wilson 1968:22).

In Bachelard's view, the forest may be another manifestation of intimate space. Commenting on the writings of Pierre Gueguen, Bachelard writes: *Forest peace for him is inner peace. It is an inner state.* And he quotes Rene Menard's description of his own intimate forest:

*'Now I am traversed by bridle paths, under the seal of sun and shade ... I live in great density ... Shelter lures me. I slump down into the thick foliage ... In the forest, I am my entire self. Everything is possible in my heart just as it is in the hiding places in ravines. Thickly wooded distance separates me from moral codes and cities'.* (Menard quoted in Bachelard 1994:187)

In the wood Sylvia strips almost completely:

*'Look,' she cried, and she stood up in her camisole and drawers and twirled round, 'Look! I'm cool, I'm cool!' and, indeed, she felt cool and free and happy as she had never felt before. Myra was horrified.*

*'Oh, you shouldn't, you shouldn't. Someone might see.'*

*'There's no one and if there was your mother said we was to "feel free."' (Wilson 1968:21)*

Myra is convinced and follows Sylvia's example. But when the girls soon emerge from the wood very near the Tuffields' farm, it turns out that Mrs. Longmore does not appreciate Sylvia's idea of doing something different and feeling free. But what is far worse, she fails to defend Sylvia from her mother, who is furious because of Sylvia's negligence of work. As a result, Sylvia is beaten severely by her father.

This betrayal is at the heart of Sylvia's reserve in the contacts with other people and her escape into the clamour of work. Therefore, those few hours of freedom and well-being, instead of stimulating the development of a different self, become associated by her with the resulting punishment. She will be convinced for a long time that for her it is all work, as her mother claimed. And indeed, she finds a relative safety in her work. But it is a soul killing safety.

Now, many years after that hot summer day, the storm gives Sylvia a chance to regain that moment in her life when she was truly her self. The symbolism of the scene of saving the girl makes it clear that Sylvia is in fact acting for herself as much as for the girl. The tree, a *tall crumbling, leafless, ghostly-fingered oak tree*, is Sylvia herself, or rather her disintegrating adult self, left naked without the protection of work. There, at the bottom of it is a frightened child – her childhood self, which appeared for a few moments during that summer morning and was then crushed by punishment. Taking the child away from the tree Sylvia is freeing her childhood self from the crust of her older self. And back in the open field, *herself shivering with the cold drenching rain and with shock, Sylvia held the small trembling girl to her until they seemed to merge into one sodden mass*. While Sylvia is reunited with her younger self, lightning strikes the oak, and the tree goes down *in a moment's flame and a long plume of funeral smoke* (Wilson 1968:223). Her older self is destroyed and, bearing in mind the old parson's sermon, one may say that the lightning symbolizes the light of God's face shining upon Sylvia the moment when she is *visited by that Grace which will save [her] soul alive* <sup>6</sup> (Wilson 1968:186).

However, the scene represents change in Sylvia's life only on the symbolic level. It is what happens after this scene that constitutes the real change. When the

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<sup>6</sup> In archaic religions lightning was often considered an attribute of the highest gods and therefore it (or a symbol of it) was utilised in various religious rites such as purification or initiation (Eliade 1993:79). What Sylvia experiences in the field can of course be viewed as a kind of purification – she sheds her old self in order to assume a new one.

initial shock of the lightning strike passes, Sylvia begins to talk to the girl reassuringly, but soon Amanda, for such is the name of the girl, takes the initiative.

*[...] Here, we'd better get out of this before it rains hard again. All the water's falling off your hat on to your nose.'* Amanda was now very talkative.

*'But where do we go?'*

*'Why, home, of course. Least, my home, that is.'* She pointed into the distance past the smoking tree, over the slope. (Wilson 1968:224)

Amanda need not have corrected herself. For at Murrel Farm, where she lives, Sylvia finds a home that she has never had.

She spends the first night after the storm in a guest room, where on the next morning, lying in bed,<sup>7</sup> she has a long chat with Shirley Egan, Amanda's mother. The room is full of old things and Sylvia likes it, although Mrs Egan thinks the room, and the whole house, is a mess. She moved to the farm recently and is still at a loss what to do about the house. Sylvia does not know, for, as she tells Mrs Egan, her son's house is very modern. There is a strong contrast between 'The Sycamores' with its no-nonsense modern furniture and this old beamy house, full of junk, and it is this contrast that apparently appeals to Sylvia.

What is more, Mrs Egan's child-like puzzlement stands in clear contrast to the cheeky certainties of Harold and his friends. This may be the reason why Sylvia feels a strange pleasure in the presence of Mrs Egan: *Despite everything – exhaustion, stroke, painful legs – Sylvia felt curiously happy lying there with this strange lanky girl – she was no more than a girl – talking at her* (Wilson 1968:226).

Shirley's youth no longer seems to be a downside for Sylvia. For this is not youth which, because of its ostentatious fertility and self-confidence, makes old age appear useless and therefore unwanted. This is the youth of a child who respects old age. Of course, this respect is conditioned by the fact that Sylvia has saved Mandy's life, but this does not detract from its genuineness and it is precisely Shirley's youth that allows Sylvia to view this respect from a proper distance:

*But, in fact, she never felt in danger from Shirley Egan's praises any more than from Mandy's wonder, for she didn't really take any notice of what Shirley said; she just let herself relax in the affection which was given her; after all Shirley was almost as much a child as Mandy.* (Wilson 1968:240)

In fact, Sylvia basks in the gratitude of the Egans from the very first day of their acquaintance. When she lies in bed the morning after the storm, she easily dismisses all her concerns and concentrates *solely on this comfortable sense of*

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<sup>7</sup> She suffered a minor stroke after the storm from which she now slowly recovers – this can be seen as another symbol of her rebirth.

*being made a fuss of* (Wilson 1968:229). And later on that day she overhears Mrs Egan talking to her husband: *Sylvia tried to hear no more, but her sense of well-being was complete when Shirley's highest note floated up the stairs to her, 'I'm going to spoil her a little. That's what I'm going to do'* (Wilson 1968:234).

At 'The Sycamores' her comfort of doing nothing did not fill her with pleasure. At first because she was not used to inactivity, but then also because she became aware that her leisure was forced – she was not given any work because her work simply would not fit in with her son's progressive ideas. Therefore the fact that she did not have to do anything was not the result of any fondness for her, but it was simply part of a larger scheme. Now, when the comfort that she is surrounded with has its origin in affection for her, Sylvia can savour it without any misgivings about being idle.

Although the ostensible reason for Sylvia's afternoon visits to the farm after the storm is to keep Mandy company, for Shirley does not want to send her to school for a while, both Sylvia and the Egans know what a beneficial influence the farm has on Sylvia: *It was the fiction that she was at Murrel Farm only, or almost only, for Mandy. And in the first weeks for whole afternoons the fiction would reign* (Wilson 1968:237). However, the company of Mandy is not only an excuse. With her questions, the girl directs Sylvia's memories to her own childhood. Sylvia remembers more and more from her childhood – but not necessarily the facts: *memories that came from she couldn't really tell where of long, happy summer country days, or so they turned out to have been as Mandy picked them up in wonder and turned them over and handed them back for more detail and more wonder* (Wilson 1968:239). Mandy's company makes Sylvia rework in her imagination her own childhood, so that in surprising Mandy she surprises herself.

This phenomenon of memories coming from nowhere is described by Gaston Bachelard in his *The Poetics of Space*. Writing about the process of remembering our childhood home, Bachelard claims that

*[...] if beyond memories, we pursue our dreams to their very end, in this pre-memory it is as though nothingness caressed and penetrated being, as though it gently unbound the ties of being. We ask ourselves if what has been, was. Have facts really the **value** that memory gives them? Distant memory only recalls them by giving them a value, a halo, of happiness. But let this value be effaced, and the facts cease to exist. Did they ever exist?* (Bachelard 1994:58)

In Sylvia's case they did not. The moments of happiness she experienced during her childhood have always been clouded in her mind by the following punishment. Now the well-being that she feels at Murrel Farm stimulates her imagination, which gives a new, unclouded dimension of happiness to her childhood.

In the process, Sylvia rebuilds her self – the ties of her being are gently unbound. Her old fat body at the farm is no longer a liability but an asset: *The long walks were out, Sylvia's corpulence even allowed them the happy excuse of a joke: between Mandy and her it was quite agreed that if fat people walked too long in the heat, they just melted away like candle grease* (Wilson 1968:238). Sylvia's corpulence becomes part of a mixture of imagination and reality which reigns for Sylvia at the farm. There is nothing which could detract from her well-being – the disintegrating jumper of her self is remade according to the pattern which appeared for a short time on that morning in 1911, and which is now laid before her for contemplation. At Murrel Farm Sylvia at last comes into the light.

Her visits to the farm, although limited to afternoons, become in this way the centre of her life. Her newly gained happiness allows her to cope with the problems which appear at 'The Sycamores': Harold breaks down after the Ministry's decision to develop Goodchild's meadow, one of her grandsons, Ray, has to escape to London because of his homosexuality and, worst of all, her husband suffers from a stroke and dies several days later. As David Higdon points out, Sylvia is able to confront these events because of her re-established self: *A year earlier these events would have paralyzed Sylvia, but having re-established a whole personality, she faces them with equanimity and surprising control* (Higdon 1985:49).

In this way Murrel Farm has changed her life. Sylvia found the house as a result of a desperate quest for meaning in her life. Although this quest was instigated by a clergyman in an attempt to save her soul, Sylvia did not treat her search in strictly religious terms and Murrel Farm had nothing in common with religion. With its caring and loving inhabitants the farm allowed Sylvia to return in imagination to her childhood and to re-experience it with a touch of bliss that she found on the farm. In this way she found and revived her long-lost soul.

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