

Thornton Wilder's Dramaturgy

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Introduction

Thornton Wilder is the writer who did not follow the current mode and went his own way. In the 1930s, many writers were concerned with social problems, while Wilder's concern was consistently the human being.

And we should not miss his characteristic stagecraft. It must have appeared epoch-making to the contemporary audience. The fact, paradoxically, shows us how closely American drama related to realism. His dramaturgical experiments, which show his view of the theater, are not the means to win popularity. They are indispensable to express the themes of his plays precisely. In this paper, I will consider his dramaturgy of *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act* (1931), *Our Town* (1938), *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) and *The Matchmaker* (1954), and probe his philosophy.

Chapter I

His thoughts on playwriting are seen everywhere in *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act*. "The Long Christmas Dinner," "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden" and "Pullman Car Hiawatha" are interesting as studies in both theme and technique.

"The Long Christmas Dinner" portrays Christmas dinners of generations of a family. The passage of years is shown by table talk and the actors' white hair wigs. Ninety years pass in a series of Christmas dinners without interruption, so that we feel that ninety Christmas dinners fuse into one long Christmas dinner.

The most important device is two portals on either side of the stage. The one at left is trimmed with garlands of flowers and fruits, and denotes birth. The other which is hung with black velvet shows death. Each one of the characters rises and walks slowly toward the death exit,

when his time draws near. Sooner or later, the characters go toward the dark door as if they were drawn by it. Life between birth and death, which is limited and sometime certainly ends, is skillfully visualized. Everything has its life. We may say that birth is the beginning of the road of death. The audience must face this obvious fact.

This is certainly one of the universal truths, but Wilder pursues more large-scaled truth by compressing ninety years into half an hour.

At the beginning, it is the first Christmas dinner in the new house. The family members change for generations in ninety years. Finally, the last member of the family dies and a long Christmas dinner in this house ends. But according to the letter that she received, the family who moved out seems to celebrate their first Christmas in another new house. The scene is just the same as the beginning of the play. We receive the impression that time makes a cycle. And two couples of the same names of Roderick and Lucia also help to deepen it.

After scolding the daughter for saying, "I shall sit in this house beside you forever, as though life were one long, happy, Christmas dinner," the mother suddenly bursts into tears and says, "I'm just unpredictable, that's all" (12). Undoubtedly, no one can forecast the future. However, this play, in which the curtain does not fall, awakes the expectation that although family life changes with the passage of time, the fundamental does not vary and the Bayard's life will continue somewhere.

The span of ninety years that we look at in "The Long Christmas Dinner" is a part of eternity. This play celebrates the miracles of the continuity of human experiences. Especially the repetition of births and deaths has much meaning. In order to show the enormous force behind human beings, this play deals with ninety years without pause in accelerated motion.

His conceptions of time, circulation and repetition, are expressed on a larger scale in *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Three acts of *The Skin of Our Teeth* deal with the struggles of the family Antrobus to survive three catastrophes: the glacier invasion, the Flood and the world war. The family name derives from the Greek word *anthropos*, which suggests the Antrobuses is representative of human beings.

The circular form is clearer in this play. At the close of the play, Sabina is standing by the window as at the beginning of Act I. She delivers several lines, which are the same as her first lines: "Oh, oh, oh! Six o'clock and the master not home yet" (99). The circular structure shows the playwright's historical view that history is recurring.

The play ends with these lines. Sabina addresses a message to the audience.

This is where you came in. We have to go on for ages and ages yet. You go home. The end of this play isn't written yet. Mr and Mrs Antrobus! Their heads are full of plans and they're confident as the first day they began—and they told me to tell you: good night. (178)

The passage "The end of the play isn't written yet" indicates that future is uncertainty like the above-mentioned lines in "The Long Christmas Dinner." But, conversely, we may say that future is clear when we think of the repetitious experiences of human beings. In Act II, the Fortune Teller says that forecasting the future is easy. In future humankind will grapple with many difficulties and pull through them over again. Sabina pessimistically grumbles: "That's all we do—always beginning again! Over and over again. Always beginning again. How do we know that it'll be any better than before?" (167). After humanity gets through the catastrophe, it tries to build a new world. But it is never satisfied. "When you're at war you think about a better life; when you're at peace you think about a more comfortable one," says Mr. Antrobus (174). After all, the human must keep struggling with something. Malcolm Cowley writes, "When history is regarded as a recurrent pattern rather than as a process, it becomes possible to move a character from almost any point in time or space to almost any other" (127). The Antrobus family is the Human Family. This play is a story of all mankind and includes the entire history of the human race. Wilder appreciates the ability of the human race in a sense. It seems that this play shows faith in man

and the author's optimism to some extent.

It can be said that *The Skin of Our Teeth* is the most experimental of all his plays. This comic-serious play with the allegory is very complex. The world of the play is deranged by anachronism. And further, Wilder mixes the present age with prehistory. Therefore, there are two time levels in each act, and the characters live in two times. The Antrobuses are allegorical figures on three levels: as Americans, as biblical figures and as types.

In addition, the playwright breaks the wall between the stage and the audience. The audience is urged to hand up its chairs for a fire to prevent the characters freezing, that is, to save the human race. Wilder attempts the audience participation. And then, actors sometimes renounce their stage roles. They complain of their roles and give their own views on the play. They appear not as the characters but as the actors, who themselves are also the stage characters. The scene shifts from the level of the character to the level of the actor playing the role. While we are watching the play, we see several figures and the reality of them in each character. Actors live in the present and draw breath in "perpetual present."

Wilder describes one of the conditions of the drama as follows: "Its action takes place in a perpetual present time" ("Some Thoughts on Playwrighting" 115). The term "perpetual present" expresses his ideas of time very precisely. Time is the continuity of moments of the present, or now. The "perpetual present" includes all times and freely links with the past, the future, furthermore eternity.

It is an important matter how Wilder treats and presents time to capture the truths of human life. He telescopes time. And he abolishes the conventional time concept, and places the characters under the time which he creates. His sense of time and his thought of the cyclical repetition of human experiences are embodied by his original techniques. In terms of time, the human experiences and the history of the mankind are the everlasting repetition, in which the relationship between everyday lives and the destiny of the human race is hidden.

Chapter II

"The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden" begins with this direction: "No scenery is required for this play" (101). There are only four chairs, which serve as the seats

of a car. Actual properties are minimized and pantomime is much used. This is common to his other plays. The characters in "The Long Christmas Dinner" are eating with imaginary knives and forks. In *Our Town*, ladders simulate the second floors. The chairs are used to represent the berths and compartments in "Pullman Car Hiawatha." How does Wilder present reality by unrealistic stage techniques?

Wilder's attempt to relate the nonrealistic with the realistic is never unprecedented. It is nothing but revival of the technique adopted once. Originally, on stage, time and space were treated more freely. He turns to the conventions of the non-realistic theater such as Japanese Noh play. "The theater," says Wilder, "longs to represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves" ("A Preface for *Our Town*" 102). He uses the bare stage and adopts symbolism to capture the universal.

Wilder thought that the theater was the most effective in conveying generality of humankind. He thought, too, that the realistic stage fixes the action and the events to one moment in time and place. By removing realistic scenery and properties, he releases the events on the stage, for a stage becomes as vast as the universe. The stage is entirely free of time and space. The action on the stage becomes from the specific to the general. It becomes the "Act in Eternity" ("A Preface for *Our Town*" 101). And the human experiences become universal experiences. Therefore, we can share the character's feeling as not the personal but the common to us. The abstract non-realistic setting universalizes characters and their experiences.

Then, most of the characters in his plays are stereotyped. The Bayards is the archetype of family. This also applies to the Kirby family in "The Happy Journey" They are types rather than figures with individuality. Ma Kirby is not even named and she is very mother itself. Wilder embodies "the popular concepts—'images,' in the current jargon—of persons with certain definite functions to perform in life" (Goldstein 77–78). The human nature is brought out in relief by the simplification of character. A family becomes of much more value on the empty stage where there is nothing limits time and space. The town where stereotyped characters live might be any place all over the world. When the realistic setting is eliminated, the characters symbolize all families everywhere.

Furthermore, we need to direct our notice to the presence of the Stage Manager. The feature of "theatricalism" called here is that it admits the play is not the representation of actual life but an artificial product. John Gassner states: "The object of going to a 'show' is nothing else than seeing or experiencing a show, no reality" (142). The Stage Manager abandons "childish attempts to be 'real'" of the realistic theater ("A Preface for *Our Town*" 108). He arranges props like Kurogo in Kabuki. Sometimes he plays minor parts. The Stage Manager of "The Happy Journey" delivers the lines of minor roles "with little attempt at characterization, scarcely troubling himself to alter his voice even when he responds in the person of a child or woman" (101). In "Pullman Car Hiawatha" he directs the play and interprets the actions. The illusion of verisimilitude is destroyed by the absence of realistic properties and settings and by the presence of the Stage Manager.

The stage of "Pullman Car Hiawatha" consists of a runway upstage from which two flights of stairs descend to the stage. The stage is a Pullman car. The characters are types, and most of them are called by their seat numbers. The audience hears the conversation of passengers and their private thoughts as soliloquies. On the other hand, the platform is the universe. The Stage Manager calls the personified town and field, hours and planets onto the stage to direct the train's position geographically, meteorologically and astronomically. The hours recite few lines from philosophers. There is a hint of manner of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, in which Wilder portrays hours in the same way. Next, the planets hum. These all personifications make the rhythms and sounds of the earth. When one of the passengers dies, the theological situation is shown by the archangels. Finally, the Stage Manager conducts like an orchestra conductor and characters play the harmony of the solar system all together.

The car's position is shown in order. It is a part of the earth and of the universe. This conception of space is also evident in *Our Town*. At the end of Act I, Rebecca tells her brother George about the letter which one of her friends received. This is the key passage.

REBECCA. I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The

Croft Farm ; Grover's Corners ; Sutton County ;
New Hampshire ; United States of America.

GEORGE. What's funny about that?

REBECCA. But listen, it's not finished : the United States of America ; Continent of North America ; Western Hemisphere ; the Earth ; the Solar System ; the Universe ; the Mind of God—that's what it said on the envelope. (48-49)

The world increasingly extends into the metaphysical sphere. The above passage is the contrast between the minute and the universal. In "Preface to *Three Plays*" he writes, "I have set the village against the largest dimensions of time and place" (109). Indeed, everything is embraced by the Mind of God. It is nothing but one point on the earth from the point of view of God. But both the Pullman car and Grover's Corners are not portrayed as mere microcosms. Grover's Corners is the specific and the general archetypal town. Wilder combines all levels of time and space, and puts the action on them.

Our Town describes the cycle of human life everywhere on the earth. The lines of the Stage Manager, "This is the way we were : in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying," summarizes this play (41). The events portrayed are the most trivial everyday matters, and examples of the universal pattern in human lives. Because of non-realistic stage, the audience is asked to imagine the scenes. Nothing is more real than our own experiences, however.

The Stage Manager places properties as the play opens. He addresses the audience informally and comments on the action like the chorus in Greek drama. He gives the answers to the questions asked by actors in the audience. Now and then he cuts off dialogues. For example, "Thank you, ladies. Thank you very much," he says to Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb, who bow to him (32). He can freely go back and forth between the present of the audience and the time of the stage. He is a bridge between the stage and the audience.

The Stage Manager is permitted to anticipate the future. He lets the audience know what will happen in the future. The Stage Manager in *Our Town* is omniscient. Before Doc Gibbs appears on the stage in 1910, the Stage Manager says that he died in 1930 and the new hospital was named after him in the past tense. From the beginning of the play, life taken for granted is contrasted with death.

In Act II the Stage Manager switches time from the present to the past. He can manipulate time at his disposal. The audience sees how George and Emily began to love each other. "I'm awfully interested in how big things like that began," the Stage Manager mentions (60). Then time comes back to the present—the wedding scene. The Stage Manager plays the role of the minister. Before the wedding, he says :

The real hero of this scene isn't on the stage at all, and you know who that is. It's like what one of those European fellas said : every child born into the world is nature's attempt to make a perfect human being. Well, we've seen nature pushing and contriving for some time now. We all know that nature's interested in quality ; but I think she's interested in quality, too—that's why I'm in the ministry. (68)

Rex Burbank writes : "the love and marriage of George and Emily symbolize the universal rite uniting nature's physical and spiritual forces" (78). The wedding is "the central symbol of the fusion of nature's physical and spiritual purposes" (Burbank 79). This act presents the relationship between the human and nature. The Stage Manager says, "I've married two hundred couples in my day. Do I believe in it? I don't know" (73). He does not state the meaning of the wedding, for he views it from the vantage point of eternity. Wilder sees man's life through a long perspective.

The playwright uses vast numbers such as "hundreds," "thousands" and "millions" recurrently to imagine the boundless dimensions. The routine daily life or the major events are common experiences to all men and women in all times and places. Here the question arises as to what our experiences are. We are faced with the question whether what one thinks is important is really important. The reason is that every action and emotion takes place many billions of times on the earth. But it happens only one time at one moment in time and place. When we think so, little things which happen over and over again in our everyday living must have deeper meaning. Wilder thinks that minute experiences are the most important. It is tragic that we miss countless little experiences in daily life taken for granted and does not realize they are precious. We can experience these things because we are alive. Life filled with joy, grief, happiness and suffering ends with death.

Wilder always contrasts life to the image of death. In "Pullman Car Hiawatha" one character dies before the train reaches its destination. "The Happy Journey" is a trip to visit a married daughter whose baby died in childbirth. The family watches a funeral going by during a trip. Life and death are presented on stage at the same time in *Our Town*. Wilder juxtaposes the land of the living and the land of the dead. The two worlds—the real and the unreal—are unified by the Stage Manager.

In Act III, the dead appear and watch the funeral taking place. The dead Emily wants to go back and relive one day of her life despite of the warnings of the dead. The Stage Manager permits her to do. She chooses a relatively unimportant day of her life, her twelfth birthday. However, she does not only live the moment but has to watch herself living it. She perceives that even trivial and routine activities of daily life have immeasurable value. The least important day is important enough. She recognizes the true value of life and cries, "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you" (89). Emily did not appreciate life until she lost it. And she asks the Stage Manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?" (89). He answers "No. The saints and poets, maybe—they do some" (89). At the beginning of this act, the Stage Manager observes as the mouthpiece of the author.

Now there are some things we all know, but we don't take 'em out and look at 'em very often. We all know that *something* is eternal. [. . .] everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. (76)

His philosophical theory about death continues :

You know as well as I do that the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long. Gradually, gradually, they lose hold of the earth . . . and the ambitions they had . . . and the pleasures they had . . . and the things they suffered . . . and the people they loved. (76)

The dead get indifferent to life on the earth. They slowly get passionless and lose their identity. Nonetheless, they have interest in something. "They are waitin'. They are waitin' for something that they feel is comin'. Something

important, and great. Aren't they waitin' for the eternal part in them to come out clear?" (76). The dead who lost their identity are very pure existing. They free themselves from earthly desires, so they may be able to realize the real value.

In terms of space, Wilder uses the bare stage and the Stage Manager effectively. Especially, by the Stage Manager, not only space but also time becomes limitless. As the result, the routine actions of daily life portrayed become experiences beyond time and space. Wilder's time-space sense is embodied on stage. And in *Our Town*, we can see life from the point of view of God. Wilder uses the image of death in order to grasp the essence of living. Wilder's plays demonstrate the human situation and the human fate. Wilder shows the relation between the human, and the universal forces and eternity.

Chapter III

"Queens of France," "Love and How to Cure It" and "Such Things Only Happen in Books," these one-act plays have well-made plots. *The Matchmaker* also uses the conventional plotting. In these plays, Wilder tries to make the significance of life clear by slice-of-life presentation.

"Such Things" presents a novelist who is working on the plots of his novels. The novelist complains that life never offers real plots. In fact, however, various things occur in his house. He is unaware of them. By satirizing the writer who does not know what is happening in his own house, the audience perceives the blindness of humans. This dialogue is symbolic.

GABRIELLE. I don't see why that game shouldn't come out oftener. I don't think you see all the moves.

JOHN. I certainly do see all the moves that are to be seen.—You don't expect me to look under the card, do you? (100)

"Love and How to Cure It" and "Queens of France" depict people with some of irony. In "Love and How to Cure It" a young man who is madly in love with a ballerina intends to kill her, because she does not love him. He is, however, dissuaded by a comedian who talks about his dead wife. Objectively, he walks right into the stratagem. But he sees that true love is selfless. A fraudulent lawyer

of “Queens of France” gulls several women into believing that they are legitimate heiresses to the French throne. A victim, who was convinced that she was the true heir, begins to doubt his words. She tells him that she would like to receive the letter which proves that she is indeed the Queen of France. Not that she wants to announce it, but that she would like to keep it in a trunk. For her, the letter becomes proof of her hidden position. It is her spiritual sustenance of life. Ironically, the swindler’s lie is not false but true for her. The young man in “Love and How to Cure it” and the women in “Queens of France” are blind to the truth.

The truth differs from person to person. What each one believes to be truth may be only a bit of truth. And even it may not be true. The real truths of the above characters lie in what they are unaware of. In *Our Town* the dead Simon Stimson says :

Yes, now you know. Now you know! That’s what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance ; to go up and down trampling on the feeling of those . . . of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centred passion, or another. Now you know—that’s the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness. (89)

The living persons are never aware of the significance of the little things in life. The dead only recognize that even the most ordinary experience has a deep meaning. Harriet in “Pullman Car Hiawatha” and Emily in *Our Town* perceive the priceless value of life, when they bid farewell to the life they have lived. They realize the brevity of life and the wonders of life. And they understand the blindness of the human. The tragedy of human beings is the tragic waste of life, or the failure to realize the priceless value of the most common and routine experiences in life.

In *Our Town*, the Stage Manager tells the audience, “You’ve got to love life to have life, and you’ve got to have life to love life . . .” (51). One should treasure ordinary life before it is too late. We must live every moment to the full while we can. As the Stage Manager says, “unfortunately our time is limited” (33).

On the other hand, the characters in *The Matchmaker* desire to live a freer life. Wilder writes about this play :

“My play is about aspirations of the young (and not only of the young) for a fuller, freer participation in life” (“Preface to *Three Plays*” 110). *The Matchmaker* is a slapstick farce, which contains people hiding under the table, men disguising in women’s clothes, and so on. The characters are stock characters. For example, the merchant Vandergelder is a miser and the villain who prevents the marriage of a young couple. “One way to shake off the nonsense of the nineteenth-century staging is to make fun of it,” Wilder says (“Preface to *Three Plays*” 109). He parodies this type of plotting.

Dolly Levi, a matchmaker, enjoys life by participating in it. She tells her philosophy of life as follows : “Life as it is is never quite interesting enough for me—I’m bored, Mr Kemper, with life as it is—and so I do things. I put my hand in here, and I put my hand in there, and I watch and I listen—and often I’m very much amused” (199). Vandergelder’s two clerks go to New York to “try and get some living and some adventure” (210). In contrast to them, Vandergelder’s niece who comes to New York to elope says, “Oh, I wish I were in Yonkers, where *nothing* ever happens!” (239)

Mrs. Levi consciously tries to live each priceless moment which Emily understands after death. She has the point of view of the dead Emily. The monologue of her in the last act is more important. In this play, the monologues express Wilder’s ideas and philosophy of life clearly as the comments of the Stage Manager in *Our Town* do.

And one night, after two years of this, an oak leaf fell out of my Bible. I had placed it there on the day my husband asked me to marry him ; a perfectly good oak leaf—but without colour and without life. [. . .] I saw that I was like that oak leaf, and on that night I decided to rejoin the human race. (277)

She decides to live among human beings. She loves every moment and lives it fully for the enjoyment of life. The full enjoyment of life is to fully participate in it. At the end, Barnaby tells the audience,

What we would like for you is that you have just the right amount of sitting quietly at home, and just the right amount of—adventure! [. . .] we all hope that in your lives you have just the right amount of—adventure! (281)

The Matchmaker achieves something more than the mere

farce which amuses the audience. The characters who try to sing the joys of life make us become conscious of the meaning of living.

How does one live? This question is common to all men in all times and places, and it is universal. Wilder does not answer it. He gives the audience the opportunity to think over life.

Conclusion

Wilder's purpose of playwriting is to capture not verisimilitude but reality. He writes plays with the inevitable two aspects of human life—living and death—as their theme. Wilder uses the form of the drama to wrestle with this eternal truth, and attempts some experiments in technique.

Wilder chooses the routine events in the lives of ordinary people, which are common to all times and all places. He releases it from the particular to the general by eliminating scenery and properties which fix the action to specific time and place. The bare stage universalizes the events. So, he is able to convey true value of little things of life common to all men everywhere. He represents reality—the universal truth—by unrealistic technical devices. Wilder relates realistic to unrealistic, tiny to huge, and specific to general.

His plays deal with “the relations of one to one, or of anyone to the All, the Everywhere, and the Always” (Cowley 129). The theme of his plays is eternal human truth beyond time and space. The theatricalist and presentational technique successfully achieves his thematic purpose.

However, it is doubtful that how fully the audience is able to understand the playwright's intention when the plays are performed. The audience participation is indispensable to the success of performance. Wilder's plays depend on the audience very much. It may be said that

how the audience can exercise their mind eyes, imagination, is checked. In *Our Town* the Stage Manager ironically says “There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery” (22). In fact, it seems that we cannot deny there is a risk that when the audience concentrates its attention on imaging the scene too much, it misses the point of the play. Yet, only those who can participate in plays with full imagination may be able to appreciate the experiences beyond time and space and the priceless value latent in life.

Wilder's theories on drama and his philosophy can be found in all his plays. The experimental dramatic structure is related closely with the subject matter of them. Wilder keenly observes human beings in perspective. He probes into the wonder of life and searches for the universal and eternal truth repeatedly.

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