

The Universality of Thornton Wilder

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I have not had the privilege of seeing or of hearing Thornton Wilder. Only on books and magazine covers has his face appeared. It is an arresting one. He looks like a wise and contemplative owl. His eye glasses are so big that they obscure his eyes. When he removes them one is in for a shock. His eyes are light blue and exceedingly mild. It's as if he is saying, "I am listening to what you are saying, Be serious—be precise."

About himself Wilder says, "I'm a ripe old sixty and look it, I'm the kind of man timid old ladies stop on the street to ask where the nearest subway is. Students call me 'professor' and hotel clerks, 'doctor'."

That Thornton Wilder is one of the most gifted of writers living today there can be no doubt. That he has one of the most complicated minds in contemporary America is indisputable.

Wilder believes in "Experience for experience sake" rather than for "moral improvements' sake," yet, there are moral principles, or definite standards of conduct throughout his works. But he feels that too much social convention is so indispensable to some authors' thinking, that it can't be separated from creation. Wilder says of Bernard Shaw's plays,

"He writes diverting plays to sugar coat the pill of a social message!" In other words Wilder thinks that only through experiences

can a human being share with another the real feeling of what it means to be a human, Thus his probings, and response to environment, and to the source of man's faith are both a challenge and a revelation.

Born in Wisconsin in 1897 and reared by missionary parents, Wilder lived part time in China. And he never completely broke away from moral and religious beliefs inherited from his parents.

His study of archaeology in Rome, and his brilliant interpretation of the classics have given him a rare incite into the age of Greek Tragedy, and Greek Comedy as well as Roman political history.

Thorton Wilder traveled extensively. Unlike his contemporary, Ernest Hemingway, he seldom remained long enough in one place to form strong attachments. He felt at home where ever he went. Once he said in jest, "I guess I'm the only American of my generation who didn't go to Paris and write about sex, and 'The Lost Generation'."

Concerning Wilder's philosophy is the idea that the individual, should be free to work out his or her own destiny, and to make moral choices without benefit of church or state if one so desires. But aside from this, there are major responsibilities. Man should strive to live in accordance with Christian principles such as love, mercy, and humility. All of us are responsible for seeking, finding, and developing these qualities within our nature.

Wilder's characters either have a choice to find God's spirit from within, or fail to live up to their potential as human beings.

As a writer Thorton Wilder attempts to bring freshness and real meaning in terms of the spiritual and moral life. His plays and novels show the importance of life's simpliest events as the beginning

of achievement preceding all great cultures. "Universal Truth" is his aim.

Wilder thinks of the theatre as a make believe world trying to arrive at a general truth. He abhors elaborate settings which he feels limit the action. He argues that "artificial realism" in what many plays convey, is a kind of distortion. The good characters are usually too good and the bad are too bad. Human nature being what it is contradicts such imprisoned feelings of honest realism. It is commonly said that Wilder walks out of rather than sits through, a play where the actors appear to be dead before coming on stage.

Wilder got his ideas for a new kind of play after reading a Japanese Noh play. He was so intrigued by the absence of lamps, draperies, and bric-a-brac. A Japanese actor could merely walk across a stage giving an impression of long distance. "That is real acting" Wilder said. Hence the fact that in his plays a chair or two, and a table are all that are necessary to show time and place.

The theatre he believes is the greatest of all arts; the most direct way in which the actors can communicate with the audience. The finest dramas depicting the many sides of our nature are, *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*. One wonders if Wilder thinks that drama should have no social function. His answer is, "Oh, yes, the presentation of what is—We live in what is but we find a thousand ways not to face what is. Great theatre strengthens our faculty to face it."

Freedom and imagination play an important role in Wilder's plays. He has an uncanny ability to make the audiences feel that they share with the actors their triumphs and moments of trial.

Wilder even permits the cast to step out of character by means of outbursts not conducive to the theme of the play. In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Sabina, a pretty but ignorant beauty queen in love with the celebrated Mr. Antrobus, refuses to recite her lines. By nature shy and puritanical, she raves to the stage manager, "Nothing, nothing will make me say some of those lines...about a man outgrows a wife every seven years!" This utterance (not in the script) is typical of Wilder's theory that actors have a right to exercise a certain amount of freedom. Sabina, is further agitated because her best friend, recently divorced by an unfaithful husband, listens to these deceitful lines from the balcony.

Dramatists often criticize Wilder's plays as an escape from what good theatre should be. Yet as one admirer so aptly put it, "His plays will continue to bring enjoyment to audiences long after other plays and novels have died quietly on library shelves."

In distinguishing between Wilder's plays and novels, his novels tell us what we know to be true and what has taken place. His plays tell us what is taking place at the present time.

It is a source of wonder to me that Thornton Wilder is equally at home in both artistic fields. He won two Pulitzer Prizes for his plays *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and for his book, "The Bridge of San Luis Rey." (1927)

To enable the reader to understand better Wilder's ideas as to how men and women think and feel, I have selected his best works both in play and novel form.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey

I have re-read this novel many times and always with a profound feeling of reverence, fear, and wonder at the miracle of love. Above all, "Bridge" gives a divine truth—that in order to receive love one must give it. Thus the moral and spiritual dimensions of such a book are boundless.

Thornton Wilder derived his theme from an incident that occurred in Peru, July 20, 1714. A bridge collapsed abruptly ending the lives of five people. Wilder wondered if there were some possible justification for such a calamity. Or was it purely circumstantial affecting only external conditions.

In the character of Brother Juniper, Wilder shows him as a spectator who saw the bridge snap into hurling five people into the deep gorge below. Juniper, is anxious to know why this happened to these particular five. He sets about to discover the reasons. But years of research, and finally a thick volume cluttered with dates, events, and mysticism proves nothing. He fails to arrive at the central point—mainly, a real knowledge and understanding of the background of the victims. The right doors open only when the victims themselves, tell their personal stories full of human frailties, loneliness, and the incurable desire to be loved.

In the case of one of the victims, the Marquesa de Monte Mayor, Wilder presents a vivid picture of a proud old lady of Spanish nobility. Daily she walks to the village post office looking for her daughter's letter that seldom comes. Only a few wend their way from sunny Spain to this remote town. And their contents are as in-

differently cold as the mother's are naturally warm. In time the Marquesa realizes that her love is in vain. She finally loses faith in God and in man. She refuses to believe that any one but herself is capable of love. She yearns to hear her daughter say, 'You are the most wonderful of mothers!' After the mother's death her daughter, Dona Clara, appears before the Abbess of the monastery broken in spirit, and haunted by the sin of not having loved her mother. The Abbess tries to comfort her—"When one fails one wishes to be punished. But do you know my daughter, that in love our very mistakes don't seem to last very long." What Dona Clara would never know was that the Abbess too had lost her beloved daughter and doubtlessly wished she had been a better mother to her.

This kind of compassionate impersonal love as shown by the Abbess Wilder says is, "The highest love of all because it demands nothing in return." The fall of the bridge symbolizes life situations—and in a deeper sense love. Love, because only in death were the survivors fully aware of how much they had loved.

Wilder concludes, "We soon die and all memory of these five will have left the earth. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Memory is not necessary for love."

Truly this remarkable novel shows us that whether or not we believe in God, love is indispensable if life is to be lived in a meaningful way. Human motivation, the wisdom to accept with courage the inevitable, and to forgive, as well as to be forgiven are the gifts of the Creator to the Human Race.

The Ides of March

It goes without saying what this historical novel is about. Many critics think it to be the best novel of its kind written in this century. It shows the author's genius for transmitting classical literature into contemporary thought. Here is not just a portrait of Julius Caesar but a day by day account of his intimate thoughts, frustrations, social parties, gossip, and love letters from the queen, Cleopatra. Wilder writes in great detail describing the fantastic preparations for a dinner party. The Lady Clodia Pulcher, outlines the menu to the steward of her household in Rome. "The Dictator, my brother, will have the sea food dish; Cicero, delights in lamb; Caesar's wife will have sheep's head; and Pollio, his usual goat's milk. Thirty oysters will be dragged under water in nets to Ostia. They will be brought to Rome on the day of the dinner." And in the final scene leading up to Caesar's death his wife, Calpurnia, writes a fateful letter to her sister, Lucia.

"This morning he is not well. Now he has gone off to the Senate, Lucia and I must hurry and prepare for the guests this evening."

Thus we can imagine the violent and tragic end of Caesar. Wilder's meticulous recordings in this journal are so vivid that the reader feels himself a Roman involved in all the secrets, and schemes of life in Rome 45 B. C. The journal succeeds magnificently in portraying an ambitious man—perhaps a man of today who thinks he will die but who refuses protection. Basically Caesar is simply a human being among his millions of subjects. He can't believe all the glorious

things said about him. And he refuses to believe in himself as a god. "The Ides of March" is divided into four books. Within each book the contents are given in chronological order. Book one dates back to September, 45 B. C. Book Two concerns Caesar's loneliness and desire for love. Book Three tells of his ideas on religion. And Book Four deals with his determination to accept his destiny, and concludes with his assassination.

The Eighth Day

This is Thornton Wilder's most recent novel on faith published this year. It is the story of a man, John Ashly, living happily within the boundaries of a small town until he is unjustly accused of murder and with the help of friends, escapes to Peru. Actually, John Ashly is a very common man. His life has all the dreary aspects of the simplest ideas of faith. He's a good natured man making no demands, asking no questions, seeking no goals, Not overly ambitious, he is not interested in the demands of a small town society, nor does he wish to become a successful business man. In his way he is content to be what he is—a simple man doing what he can to help his friends and neighbours.

As a fugitive, in an alien country, Ashly matures through experiences quite foreign to his nature. He learns about a different life from thieves, fortune tellers, and mountain people. His family back home who mourn him learn too from enemies as well as friends.

Throughout his life John Ashly is a man of faith but he's not aware of it. In "Eighth Day," Wilder expresses his philosophy of faith—"Religions are merely the garments of faith—and very ill cut

they often are...what do...men and women have faith in?" They can't explain it because what is self evident, is hard to explain. But men and women who think they have no faith, they can explain it not by words, but by love and action. Wilder believes in people who act on faith and not merely talk about it.

"Eighth Day" is a murder mystery, But it is more than that. It tells what changes take place in the soul of John Ashly. The fact that the reader finds out who did the murder is not important. But Wilder says, "The clues are important."

The Skin of Our Teeth

This play is Thornton Wilder's most direct way of expressing his idea of the relationship between man and his destiny. The play proves that too much dramatic effect is bad unless the play can relate true-to-life experiences to the audiences. Reality is more alive than too much theatrical theory! I taught this play to last year's Seniors. One girl's honest remark was, "A play showing the span of five thousand years is difficult to imagine. But I can never forget this play. In future if I have problems to overcome the moral ideas expressed in *Skin* will help me. No, I can't forget this play!"

The Skin of Our Teeth was written during World War II. It was written under strong conditions of emotionalism, and dramatic crisis. Many people thought it too fantastic and improbable, but to war torn Germany it was a revelation! Here were a proud defeated people trying desperately to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives. Hungry in body, as well as in spirit, they took pathetic interest in a sign that read, "Notice we have a new recipe for grass soup

guaranteed not to cause diarrhoea.”

In teaching this part of the play, I was somewhat dismayed by my students passive reaction. Hadn't their families suffered an even worse catastrophe? But of course one can't properly react if one has not experienced a similar tragedy!

Skin is the story of The Antrobus Family involved in struggles that they just manage to overcome. Act I shows man fighting against nature in primitive times. Act II shows man combating the moral issues (Here Wilder refers back to the Old Testament). Act III resumes the moral and religious tone of the first two acts. In the latter, We find the Antrobus Family beginning again with renewed courage, and determination to build a better world. There is something of this fictitious family in all of us. Like them, we face similar problems, are often deceptive, easily swayed by public opinion, and fearful of what we fail to understand. But somehow through super human effort we manage to break free from the wrong alternatives. And by the skin of our teeth (just in time) come up with the right ones!

Wilder believes that God gives man the freedom to choose between good and evil. Salvation comes from God. It can never be realized through the totality of lofty thoughts, and high ambitious. Human consciousness alone, is not sufficient to make right our wrongs nor can it change the soul in man.

Our Town

Our Town is most familiar to world audiences. Devoid of conventional trimmings it comes alive with chalk lines separating the

Gibbs Family from their neighbours, the Webbs. It is an attempt to find true value in the most hum drum things. And succeed it does! Emily, as the heroine, is sweet, unaffected, and at the head of her class. George, the hero, is an average likable boy proud of his physical strength, and quietly, and sincerely in love with the more spirited Emily. Emily's joys, sorrows, and drug store romance with George are all typical of a million such girls who live, love, and die.

Such a routine existence is the fate of most of us. But to Emily, each new day was one of promise and adventure. In her narrow surroundings, small happenings often assumed gigantic proportions! And She dared to dream of a rosy future.

The action takes place in a rural New England town Grovers Corners. The stage manager acts as narrator. He comes on stage before each act to announce what's going on. He talks about the weather, the latest births and deaths, and casual gossip between milk man and policeman. Act I shows the daily doings of the two families in a single day. In acts II and III the interest increases. A major event is the marriage of George and Emily and her death from childbirth. In death, Emily is allowed to return unrecognized to the scenes of her youth. She is heart broken by what she selfishly failed to do for her family while on earth.

The central idea of *Our Town* is that we, the living, don't appreciate nor understand the value of every precious moment in our lives. We take too much for granted! The play is a great one because such simplicity, and routine can captivate and hold audiences from beginning to end.

To those who may question Thornton Wilder's incomparable

genius as both novelist and dramatist, I will say, "He dares to probe more deeply into the human mind and heart than any writer I know. His works are so alive and believable. He is equally at home among the classics, and the sophisticated compelling novels, and plays of today. And he has something *final* to say to both scholar, and layman."

In conclusion Thornton Wilder's keen perception, and wit are best expressed in an informal interview.

Interviewer : "Why do you write?"

T. W. "To discover on my shelf a new book which I would enjoy reading."

Int: "Do your books fulfill your expectations?"

T. W. "No, yet, with each new book there is high hope that the expectation is prompting me."

Reference Material

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Thornton Wilder's Novels

The Cabala

The Bridge of San Luis Rey

The Woman of Andros

Heaven's My Destination

The Ides of March

The Eighth Day

Plays

Our Town

The Skin of Our Teeth

The Match Maker

The Long Christmas Dinner (I Act play)