

The Universality of Thornton Wilder

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That Thornton Wilder was one of the most gifted of twentieth century writers there can be no doubt. That he had one of the most brilliant, complicated minds in contemporary America is indisputable.

Wilder believed in "experience for experience's sake" rather than for "moral improvement's sake", yet one can find moral principles or definite standards of social conduct throughout his work. He thought too that only through experiences can a human being share with another the real feeling of what it means to be human. Thus his probings and response to environment and to the source of man's faith were both a challenge and a revelation.

According to Thornton Wilder's biographer, Richard Gladstone, Thornton was shy, bookish and rather anti-social in his boyhood days. He had no liking for sports and his school record was average. Yet he enjoyed a few friendships which lasted a lifetime. In 1913 Thornton entered Berkeley High School in Berkeley, California, where his school work considerably improved but began to decline again when he became fascinated by plays at the Liberty Theater in Oakland. At about this time he began to write his dramas.

Thornton Wilder wished to attend Yale University after graduating from Berkeley High School in 1915, but his father insisted that he go to Oberlin College in Ohio instead. Happily Thornton found Oberlin an exciting, challenging place where his interests in classical literature, music and theatre were encouraged. He also found instructors who could really appreciate his talents and rare intellectual curiosity. Thornton studied Virgil, Dante and the fascinating works of Greek literature in translation taught by the greatest lecturer he ever had-

Professor Charles H. A. Wagner. The wonderful colorful life at Oberlin helped to nourish a hunger for his aesthetic nature, and the "growing gregariousness" that would become an outstanding part of this writer's character.

In 1917 the Wilder family moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where Thornton's father was connected with Yale University, and young Wilder enrolled there in the fall. While at Yale, he published a few minor essays and short plays for the Yale Literary Magazine but he soon dropped out of school to serve in the Coast Artillery for eight months in 1918-19 at Fort Adams, Rhode Island.

Before completing his senior year at Yale in 1920 Wilder published his first full length play, *THE TRUMPET SHALL SOUND*.

After graduation from Yale, Thornton Wilder sailed for Rome where he took courses in archaeology at the American Academy. While there he began to write his first novel, *THE CABALA*, a story of a select group of aristocrats whose close-knit lives were suggestive of the decline and fall of the old European order. This novel was finished in 1926.

As the world knows today, Thornton Wilder's literary achievements have gone far beyond his expectations and he now ranks with the best of twentieth-century American writers. A three-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, once for fiction and twice for drama, he has his own honored and unique place in American letters. Above all, Thornton Wilder is a "complete original"; no writer has ever imitated him, nor has he repeated himself in any of his major works.

Until his death on December 7, 1975 Wilder further pursued his career as a professional writer in the lovely old town of Hamden, Connecticut.

Thornton Wilder traveled extensively, and unlike his contemporary, Ernest Hemingway, seldom remained long enough in one place to form strong attachments. He was at home wherever 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."

Wilder believed 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 so desirous. But aside from this, the major responsibilities were that man should strive to live in accordance with Christian principles, such as love, mercy and humility. As a writer Thornton Wilder tried to bring freshness and real meaning in terms of the spiritual and moral life. In all of his novels and plays "Universal Truth" was his aim.

The Theatre—Wilder's Main Source of Inspiration

Wilder thought of the theatre as a make-believe world trying to arrive at a general truth. He hated elaborate settings which he felt limited the action. He argued that the "artificial realism" in what many plays conveyed was a kind of distortion—the good characters too good and the bad too bad. He thought too that human nature being what it is contradicts such imprisoned feelings of honest realism. Wilder walked out rather than sit through a play where the actors appeared to be dead and not living human beings. After seeing a Japanese NOH play he was so intrigued by the absence of lamps, draperies and so much bric-a-brac. A Japanese actor could merely walk across a stage giving an impression of long distance. "That is real acting" Wilder said. He also believed that the theatre was the greatest of all arts; the most direct way to communicate with an audience. TWELFTH NIGHT, HAMLET and MACBETH were the finest dramas, depicting the many sides of human nature.

Freedom and imagination played an important part in Wilder's plays. He had an uncanny ability to make audiences feel that they shared with the actors their triumphs and moments of trial. For example, 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 these lines. . . about 'a man outgrows a wife every seven years!'" What she says (not in the

script) is typical of Wilder's theory that actors have a right to exercise a certain amount of freedom.

Dramatists often criticized Wilder's plays as an escape from what good theater 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 Thornton 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 takes place at the present time. It is always a source of wonder to me that Wilder was equally at home in both artistic fields.

Popular and critical recognition came rapidly to Thornton Wilder upon the publication of his finest and greatest novel *THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY* in 1927. This book underwent thirteen printings in England and sold more than 250,000 copies in its first year alone. In 1928 *THE BRIDGE* won for Wilder the Pulitzer Prize.

One of the main reasons for the success of *THE BRIDGE* with both critics and the public is that it represented a drastic aesthetic change from the gross realism of the 1920s. Harry Salpeter, author and critic, wrote in a literary magazine in 1928 "Readers of fiction are tired of realistic fiction and are rotten ripe for a book like *THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY* whether they know it or not." Arnold Bennett, English playwright and novelist, said that he was simply "dazzled" by Wilder's *BRIDGE* and added: "The writing, simple, straight, just and powerful, has not been surpassed in the recent epoch."

To enable the reader to better understand Thornton Wilder's ideas as to how men and women think and feel, I have selected four of 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 ending the lives of five people. Wilder wondered if there were some possible justification for such a tragedy or was it purely circumstantial, affecting only outward conditions.

In the character of Brother Juniper, Wilder shows us a spectator who saw the bridge fall hurling five people into the deep gorge below. He is anxious to know why this happened to these particular five. So he sets about discovering 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—namely, 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 the 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 indifferently 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 anyone 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 wished she had been a better mother to her. This kind of compassionate impersonal love as shown by the Abbess I think is the highest kind of love, because it asks noth-

ing in return. The fall of the bridge is a symbol of life as it is—and in a deeper sense of love. Love is the central idea in *THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY* because only by death were the survivors completely 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 I believe this remarkable novel shows us that whether or not we believe in God love is indispensable if we are to live our lives in a meaningful way. The wisdom to accept with courage the inevitable, and to forgive as well as to be forgiven are gifts from God to the human race.

The Ides of March

An avid reader, and lover of anything connected with history, past or contemporary, I was fascinated with Thornton Wilder's vivid and essentially imaginative account of the last days of Julius Caesar written in journal form. Actually when reading *THE IDES OF MARCH*, I felt like a living spectator taking it all in—from the daily events of persons concerned—up to the last month in Julius Caesar's life.

Many critics think that this extraordinarily life-like novel about ancient times is the best 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-to-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 seafood 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 concerning Caesar's letter to his friend Lucius on the isle of Capri:

"The Queen of Egypt is approaching. Missy Crocodile is being fanned across the straits. My correspondence with Her Majesty has been as spirited as could be expected. Her Latin is broken, but I notice that she manages to achieve precision when an occasion requires it. I do not expect a literal obedience to the regulations that I have laid down governing her visit here. The Queen is incapable of complying precisely with any direction that may be given her. Even when she believes herself to be obeying implicitly, she manages a deviation or two."

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 one can imagine the violent and tragic end of Caesar. Wilder's meticulous recordings are so vivid that indeed the reader feels himself a Roman involved in all the secrets and schemes of life in Rome 45 B. C. What is so convincing yet imaginative about this book is that Thornton Wilder, unlike any other writer that I know, portrays so realistically an ambitious man—perhaps a man of today who thinks he will die but who refuses protection. Caesar is simply a human being among millions of his subjects. He can't believe all the glorious things said about him—especially, that he is 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 de-

termination to accept his destiny, and concludes with his assassination.

The Skin of Our Teeth (a Pulitzer Prize Play)

This play begins by making fun of old-fashioned playwriting, but the audience soon know that they are seeing 'two times in one'. The Antrobus family is living both in prehistoric times and in a New Jersey suburb of today. The events of daily life—a family life, that is—are shown against the vast dimensions of time and place. SKIN was written on America's entrance into World War II under strong emotion, and it comes alive under conditions of 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 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.'

I taught SKIN to a former Senior class and one student's honest remark was:

"A play showing the extension of five thousand years is hard to imagine. But I can never forget this play. In future, if I have problems to overcome, moral ideas in THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH will help me. No, Miss Ward, I can't forget this play!"

In the first act Wilder depicts man fighting against nature in primitive times.

An Announcer's Voice: "The Society for Affirming the End of the World at once went into a special session and postponed the arrival of that event for twenty-four hours and here it is the middle of August and the coldest day of the year. It's simply freezing; the dogs are sticking to the sidewalks, can nobody explain that?"

Act II shows man combating the moral issues:

Mrs Antrobus: Yes, my friends, Mr Antrobus and I will celebrate our five thousandth wedding anniversary. I don't know if

I speak for my husband, but I can say as for me, I regret every moment of it."

and further along in the play:

"We have two children. We've always had two children, though it hasn't always been the same two. But as I say, we have two fine children."

Act III resumes the moral and religious tone of the first two acts. In the third act we find the Antrobus family beginning again with renewed courage and determination to build a better world. There is something of the Antrobus family in all of us. Like them, I believe we face similar problems, are often deceptive, easily swayed by public opinion and afraid of what we don't really understand. But somehow through our efforts we can and do break away from the wrong alternatives. And by the skin of our teeth sometimes come up with the right ones.

Our Town (a Pulitzer Prize Winner)

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 humdrum 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 likeable boy proud of his physical strength and quietly and sincerely in love with the more spirited Emily. Emily's joys, sorrows and drugstore romance with George are all typical of a million such girls who live, love and die.

Such a routine life seems to be the fate of most of us. But to Emily, each new day was one of promise and adventure. In her narrow surroundings, small events often took on 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 milkman and policeman.

"The sky is beginning to show some streaks of light over in the east there, behind our mount'in. The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go—doesn't it?"

Act I shows the daily doings of the two families in a single day. In Act 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.

Emily: "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back—up the hill—to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Goodbye, world goodbye Grovers Corners. . . . Mama and Papa. . . goodbye to clocks ticking. . . and Mama's sunflowers. . . and food and coffee. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?"

Stage Manager: No—the saints and poets, maybe—they do some.

Emily: I'm ready to go back."

The central idea of *OUR TOWN* is that we, the living, don't appreciate nor understand the value of precious moments in our lives. We take too much for granted. *OUR TOWN* is a great play 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 that he dared to probe more deeply into the human mind and heart than any writer I know with the exception of William Shakespeare. His works even today are so alive and beautiful. He was equally at home among the classics, sophisticated novels and rare plays that he penned with such depth and beauty of wit. And he had 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 fulfil your expectations?

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

References

WORKS BY THORNTON WILDER

NOVELS

THE CABALA 1926
THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY 1927
THE WOMEN OF ANDROS 1930
HEAVEN'S MY DESTINATION 1935
THE IDES OF MARCH 1948
THE EIGHTH DAY 1967
THEOPHILUS NORTH 1973

PLAYS

OUR TOWN 1938 (Pulitzer Prize)
THE MERCHANT OF YONKERS 1938 (later rewritten as
THE MATCHMAKER 1954)
THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH 1942 (Pulitzer Prize)

SHORT PLAYS

THE ANGEL THAT TROUBLED THE WATERS 1928
THE LONG CHRISTMAS DINNER 1931
A LIFE IN THE SUN 1954

Both THE MATCHMAKER and A LIFE IN THE SUN were first performed at the Edinburgh Festival, 1954.

OTHER REFERENCES

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Presbyterian Life n.d.

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Goldstone, R. H. Anderson, G. AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS BY AND ABOUT THORNTON WILDER. New York, A. M. S. Press Inc., 1982.