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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### THE LITERARY ART OF THORNTON WILDER AS LAYING STRESS ON THE TOTALITY AND WHOLENESS OF LIFE AND THE SPIRIT OF HUMAN SURVIVAL SURVIVING COUNTLESS DISASTERS IN LIFE: AN APPRAISAL

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper is an excellent appraisal of Thornton Wilder's fine works of art. This paper attempts to bring the ideas of Wilder into limelight as it is really unfortunate that Wilder became one of the underrated writers in literary history. All his ideas remove negativism in human mind and give hope for the human beings to struggle hard and survive. Analysing two of his plays, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which won Pulitzer Prize, the former play celebrates life whereas the later encourages man to face all struggles and make a history by surviving the struggles. Thus, this paper embodies the ideas of Wilder and projects them in an encouraging way.

#### INTRODUCTION

The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel" wrote Horace Walpole in 1776. Yet our lives are enriched when the felt experiences of life are translated in to the realm of literature through the acutely sensitive vision of artists. The inexhaustible possibilities that life offers for the writers to experiment with, has made it one of the most repeated themes in literature. "Just as the scientist creates optimum conditions in his laboratory to perform an experiment so also the artist with his phenomenal imagination is master of all the surveys. He finds in the vast expanse of life the perfect laboratory with several challenging combinations on which to experiment" (Mathur 36). What evokes our amazement is the fact that despite innumerable writers attempting life as a theme, it remains as one that neither age can wither nor custom stale. Though the works that deal with life are of two kinds: Celebration of life and a negation of it, each writer is distinctly different from the other in his treatment of the subject. The traumatic scenario of the twentieth century has often driven the sensitive artists to depths of frustration wherein they find life to be a meaningless mess, making them sympathize with Macbeth's predicament when he voices the sentiment:

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more.

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It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing "(*Macbeth*, V.v.24-28).

Such a negativism is especially true of a majority of the twentieth century American writers who voice the despair born of disillusionment at the falsification of the countless American dreams. The rich tradition of twentieth century American drama, as embodied in its triumvirate of this century, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, is steeped in this sense of loss and pain. It takes a committed and confirmed optimist to look beyond the darker aspects of life, and we find one such writer whose vision is that of a man who finds life to be an enriching experience and whose chief concern is in living each of its cherished moments in all fullness in Thornton Wilder. Thornton Wilder was born of a dedicated Calvinistic father, Amos P. Wilder and an art-loving cultured mother, Isabella, on April 17, 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin. He spent his early school days in Hong Kong, where his father was a consul general for several years and returned to his native country to continue his education, due to his mother's displeasure about the education in China. This is a sample of the easy mingling of diverse elements that characterizes Wilder's life and works. His penchant for creative writing is evident quite early in his life, when several of his short plays and essays were published in the Yale Literary Magazine during his first year at the Yale University. His first full-length play *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1920) which was also published while he was at Yale, won the Bradford Brinton Award.

The months following his graduation saw Wilder catering to his interest in archaeology while travelling in Rome. During his stint in Rome, he started his first novel *The Cabala*. While the publication of *The Cabala*, “a tale about a group of Roman aristocrats whose lives suggest the decline of the older order in Europe” in 1926 launched his career as a novelist, the stage production of *The Trumpet Shall Sound* by Richard Boleslavsky in the same year introduced Wilder as a dramatist, even though the production was found to be a failure. He began *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* soon after completing *The Cabala* in 1925. The publication of *The Bridge* in late 1927, which won his first Pulitzer prize saw Wilder achieve “fame and fortune beyond his wildest dreams”. It firmly established his career as a ‘professional’ writer. He has to his credit publication of such notable works as 1) *The Trumpet* (1928), 2) *The Angel that Troubled the Waters* (1928), 3) *Our Town* (1938), 4) *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), 5) *The Match Maker* (1954), of which *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* won Pulitzer Prizes.

It is unfortunate to find that Wilder remains largely on unfamiliar figure in the literary scenario though he was critically acclaimed as a popular dramatist and novelist in his own time. “In the point of intelligent criticism, Wilder is the most neglected author of a brilliant generation” (Burbank 28). Rex Burbank accounts for this neglect of a significant writer by pointing out the differences between Wilder and his better known contemporaries as indicated in Wilder’s own comment in an interview with a *Time* Reporter in 1953 where he observed wryly that he was the only American writer of his generation who did not go to Paris during the 1920’s, making him a rarity “who did not make the symbolic break with his home land that so many other writers and artists made in the 1920’s” (P 17). David Castronovo writes:

“Wilder is unlike writers whose imprints are recognized over their lifetimes and connected with certain localities and social climates” (P 1).

He further states:

“Wilder’s career was pursued against the resisting currents of twentieth century American sensibility and taste; his books are a series of affronts to the modern way of being an American artist” (3)

In the words of Fred B. McEwen, “Essentially Wilder is a happy man, and his books are all affirmative in their tone ...” (P 38). In an age where ‘inspired’ creative works are often invariably associated with abnormal states of mind of their creators, where psychosis and neurosis are considered fashionable, and where to be unusual is the usual mode, Wilder represents a unique breed of writers whose normal life and optimistic works are something extraordinary and unfashionable. But it is an ‘unfashionable’ artist like him with his sane voice of old-fashioned wisdom, who can offer a source of solid support in the midst of the chaos that is the creative scenario of the modern age. In his career as a writer, he switched with consummate ease between being a dramatist and a novelist. In his art as a playwright, he created plays that brought a wide spectrum of subjects under one basic core which is essentially the core of Wilder the creative writer and Wilder, the man: the affirmation of life in all things, great and small and in all moods, joyous and sorrowful, in all their splendor and glory.

*Our Town* presents the ‘uneventful’ lives of the people of a small town named Grover’s Corners, while *The Skin of Our Teeth* traces the allegory of man’s survival through the numerous setbacks in the history of a snobbish rich merchant who is duped into marrying a manipulating, clever woman. At first, these plays appear to stand apart and bemuse the readers who try to bring them under a common territory. But there is an essential feature connecting these seemingly divergent, disconnected plays. Beneath the irreconcilable façade lies a common base; that of affirmation of life and a celebration of it in its fullness. Vrinda Mathur makes this vital connection when she talks of *Our Town* as a celebration of “the value of life when viewed against the ultimate backdrop of death” (Preface 9). *The Skin of Our Teeth* is an optimistic ray of hope for the trauma – torn audience of 1947”, which “establishes that man is a survivor and nothing can destroy him” (Mathur 9) and *The Match Maker* is “Wilder’s appeal for a fuller and free participation in life” (P9). She concludes that in taking “a synoptic view of life as a whole”, Wilder’s chief concern was “the affirmation of life’s positive values in face of the depressing aftermath of the two major wars of this century” (Mathur 10).

Wilder, as Castronovo asserts, has puzzled even the most sympathetic of critics, with his resistance to classification as a writer of one school or the other. His works do not have any rigid or fixed pattern, but represent the numerous dimensions of life which fascinated him, though this has made even a sympathetic critic like Francis Ferguson refer to his special place between the exotic world of art and the commercial world of entertainment as “Norman’s land.” Yet, what emerges from this picture of Wilder’s art is the fact that his primary aim was to translate the joy he felt in life into art and enable his readers to share his perception and partake in the joy of life. He is what his biographer Harrison would call the writer who “is not so much a myth maker as a myth restorer, searching for the universal in the particular, the timeless in the moment, the profound in the trivial” (P 234). Almost all his plays enabled Wilder to stake claim to his share of glory in literature, considering them individually as well as in relation to each other, so as to understand how he went about celebrating life in his art.

Like most of Wilder’s works, *Our Town* too has evoked a mixed response among the critics and the public alike. For every Willa Cather who feels it to be “the loveliest thing that has been produced in this country in a long, long time and the truest” (188) and John Mason Brown who calls it “one of the sagest, warmest, and most deeply human scripts to have come out of our theater” (188) and Lillian Gish terms it “the greatest play of our century” (188). As a play with three Acts entitled “Daily Life”, “Love and Marriage” and “Death” and no scene divisions, *Our Town* opens with a bare stage where the meager stage props are arranged by a stage manager who controls the entire action of the play. The plot of the play revolves around two families, the Gibbsses and the Webbs, in Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire. The first act “Daily Life” presents an average day in the life of the Gibbsses and the Webbs. It begins with the delivery of newspaper and milk bottles at daybreak, the children getting ready for school, and the mothers chatting across the fence separating their homes, and ends with Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs returning from choir practice and the children at their homework. The second Act captures the scenario three years after the events of the first Act : the wedding between George, the son of Doctor Gibbs and Emily, the daughter of Editor Webb, with a brief switching back to the

scene which reveals the blossoming of love between the couple. The Third Act portrays the burial of Emily who dies during child birth, her entry into the world of the dead, her wish to relive one day of her life, and her subsequent return to the world of the dead, with a time lapse of nine years between the events of the Second and the Third Acts. All characters in the play are types, rather than individuals representing people at a particular stage of life, defined through their relationships with one another. In the Preface, he effectively summarizes the purpose behind his play:

“*Our Town* is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village; or as a speculation about the conditions of life after death (that element I merely took from Dante’s Purgatory). It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life” (P 12). In this play which celebrates the greatness of the smallest things in life, the variant vistas of life are unfolded by the Stage Manager who performs multiple functions and effectively draws the audience into the maelstrom of emotions enacted and evoked in the play, by means of his interaction with the audience as well as offering them a comfortable distance by means of his theatricality so as to enable them to observe the lives on the stage that are not too different from their own. This paradoxical state is very much like Emily’s in the end of the play, when she relives her twelfth birthday and observes herself living through the experience. His role, which Vrinda Mathur likens to the Sutradhar in the Indian theatre” (P 49) is multilayered. As Allen Lewis suggests :

“The Stage Manager who acts as a narrator, commentator and judge and participates in the action in several roles, is a genial creation. It is he who unites the play, disarms the audience, speaks for the author and breaks the limitations of time and space” (70). *Our Town* can best be described as drama in and of domestic life. Events that are touted to be significance in the history of mankind, the history of America and the history of Grover’s Corners are mentioned in passing by the Stage Manager. The drama of human life in ordinary domestic events like the delivery of milk bottles and newspapers in the morning, the casual conversation between neighbours and the children getting ready for school, is in no way less important or less significant than the movement of the planets and the journey of the stars. The play is in fact the proverbial Noah’s Ark, with the varied aspects of the cosmos, where Wilder dramatizes “the daily life of Grover’s Corners, its living and dead, its birth and death statistics and how Mrs. Gibbs ironed Dr. Gibb’s shirts, all in one great curve. Allan Lewis brings to our attention this happy mingling of the great and the small in this play of domestic play of domestic drama with cosmic implications:

“The smallest daily chores, the most repeated of living action, the local events doing homework, listening to the Albany train, watching the boy down at the stable, ironing a dress are magnified to equality with the movement of the stars” (P 70) The message of the play operates at two levels. At one level, it cautions the audience against the danger of dismissing the daily activities of life as insignificant and meaningless. At another level, it teaches us to treat their very repetitiveness with awe and wonder. Vrinda Mathur, in her study of the play, identifies four dominant theme patterns in the play: the realization of the value of life, the celebration of the ordinary, love as the fundamental essence of existence and each individuals connection with the mind of God. Actions

presented on the stage are not fantastic but are perfectly common place, those which could be scenes from the life of any common man, enacted in a different way, perhaps, on account of social, geographical or cultural differences. *The Skin of Our Teeth*, began in early 1940, originated as “a comedy about George Antrobus, his wife and two children, Henry and Gladys, and their maid Sabina, all of excelsior, New Jersey”, who survive “Five, pestilence, the seven-year locusts, the ice age... a dozen wars and as many depressions ...” (Harrison 215).

The uncomplicated and adorably simple set up of *Our Town* gives way to the stormy vision that presents itself to us in *The Skin of our Teeth* with *The Match maker*, a farce about a middle aged woman trapping a wealthy merchant into marriage sandwiched between the two. Yet, the same voice that spoke to us in *Our Town* directing our attention to the simple joys of living that we have lost sight of, can be heard in this 1940 play written at a time when the world was at one of its lowest ebbs, with the threat of the Second World War coming ominously in the background. Having firmly established the fact that life is worth living to its fullest glory in *Our Town* Wilder now shifts his attention to the human beings who make it worth living. Hence, if *Our Town* was a celebration of life, *The Skin of our Teeth* is a tribute to the indomitable spirit which enables the human race to survive the worst of the catastrophes that mark the history of its living. The playwright salutes our resilient instinct for survival which has seen us safely, albeit, by the ‘skin of our teeth’, through our ordeals.

Like *Our Town*, this play also falls into three Acts which capture the Androbus family Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, their children, Henry and Gladys the maid temptress Sabina, who are representative of the human race, sailing through disasters like the Ice Age, the Deluge and Universal war. With his customary disagreed of sequential narration and chronological arrangement of events, the author takes us on a mind-boggling journey of cosmic disasters of the past and the present, and also offers a glimpse of a nightmarish future, with the human race emerging as a persevering survivor from the tumultuous trial of the will to live. The disasters prophetic (the Wall of Ice in the First Act), biblical (the Flood in the Second Act) and contemporary (the war in the Third Act), represent the Malevolent Force which is a constant threat to the survival of mankind. This malevolent force is not something that can be banished with a single stroke. Its constant presence in the life of mankind is indicated through numerous other obstacles like the threat of the dinosaurs and the biblical curses like the locust and the plague. The cataclysmic catastrophes enacted as well as alluded to in the play are offered in the manner of a touchstone to measure the instinctive will to survive, that is inborn in human beings. It is the intuitive spirit of survival rather than an intellectual drive governed by reason that is celebrated in this play which is offered as Wilder’s affirmation of “his belief in man, in human life, in all of human life, ordinary and extraordinary, petty and heroic, ugly and beautiful, evil and good” (McEwen 37). It becomes in its celebration of the positive potential of Man”, a ‘checkmate for “the contemporary prophets for doom” (Mathur 51). Wilder does not in any way glamorize struggle and suffering in this play. One who seeks consolation in the form of an assurance that God is in His Heaven and all is well with the world is bound to be disappointed with this play which presents undiluted reality of live with the brutality of the malevolent force on one hand and the courage of mankind on the other, as

two faces of the same coin called 'life'. The play *The Skin of our Teeth* does present the perennial struggles of mankind, establishing "the theme of continuity, in spite of all odds" (51), a theme that so strongly dominates the play that Vrinda Mathur calls it a "testament of faith" (51). All the five characters Mrs. Antrobus, Mrs. Antrobus, their son Henry, Cain, the original prodigal son, Sabina are endowed with the variant facets in the life of human beings. Along with the three mammoth catastrophes that are presented in the Three Acts, there is an equal emphasis that is given to the sparks that erupt between these characters who are ruled by their distinctive passions. In the First Act, there is a friction between Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus over Mr. Antrobus' decision to grant refuge in his home to the homeless tramps who knock on his door, a decision that is violently denounced by Mrs. Antrobus who rebels against the additional burden. In the Second Act, tension surfaces between the couple when Mr. Antrobus is temporarily led astray by the lure of Sabina who masquerades as the beauty pageant winner, Mrs. Fair weather. In the Third Act, the antipathy between the father and the son, though with no Oedipal undercurrents, is reminiscent of the war between the human race / God represented by Mr. Antrobus and the fascist force / Lucifer symbolized in Henry. But all these external realities are used by Wilder as tools to establish the underlying theme of human resilience, much in the same way as characters that are used for the utilitarian purpose of developing the theme in *Our Town*. As Vrinda Mathur indicates, "the emphasis in Wilder's depiction is not so much on events themselves as on their inner significance" (90). For it is the final cry in each of these three Acts, constituting the appeal for the continuance of life, which is more important than these external realities. To conclude, this play *The Skin of our Teeth* is offered as a pessimistic view of the meaninglessness of life, cursing the perennial struggle against a dark force that is too strong a phenomenon for mankind to overcome. There is every indication that mankind has tenaciously survived countless disasters in the past and will continue to do so in the future. Only giving up now, after surmounting difficulties in the past, will render the life of man meaningless.

As N.S. Pradhan categorically states, "If the human race survived the calamities of the Genesis, it will pull through the modern disasters. The spirit of survival and of goodness, is stronger, than the spirit of destruction and evil" (P 80). In the end, the readers are left with a refreshing feeling of man's indomitable will to survive and undaunted spirit of resilience which enable him to emerge from dire disasters with battered, but still alive faith in life. In a word, the art of Wilder lies in his stress on wholeness and totality, giving importance to the simple, unadulterated joys of living.

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