

THE CARPE DIEM THEME IN THORNTON WILDER'S PLAYS

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH  
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE  
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY

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DENTON, TEXAS

AUGUST 1976

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Professor Dean Bishop not only for his presentation of many interesting English and American literature courses, but also for his patient and persevering guidance of this thesis. Like Socrates, he asked the right questions until he evoked the right answers. I also wish to extend my appreciation to Professor Lavon B. Fulwiler for broadening my knowledge of the Romantic Period and for taking the time to read this thesis. To Professor Eleanor James I express my thanks for calling attention to the carpe diem theme prevalent in seventeenth-century poetry and prose. Her presentation of world literature and the English novel will serve me in good stead in the days to come. Recognition is extended to the entire staff of the English Department. The various and stimulating courses presented in English and American literature made my days at the Texas Woman's University rewarding ones.

Also, I express my gratitude to my husband, who whetted my appetite for higher learning with his ingenious remarks about Montaigne. I, too, have become an admirer of Montaigne in my quest for knowledge, for the father of the essay admonishes his readers to avoid wrinkles of the mind.

My husband also aided in developing my interest in the drama with our many visits to the theater, including the cultural center of Chautauqua, New York. The members of my family have been patient in overlooking the cluttered kitchen table with its typewriter, books, and various and sundry notes while I was writing this thesis.

This acknowledgment would not be complete without my recognition of Olivia Nichols whose thoughtful gift--Malcolm Goldstein's The Art of Thornton Wilder--was an invaluable aid in my research of Wilder's life and plays. Her enthusiasm and encouragement knew no bounds, for she calmed my fears about the oral examination with these optimistic words: "You already know the answers."

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The versatile Thornton Wilder--teacher, novelist, and playwright--is also a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner. His novel The Bridge of San Luis Rey brought him instant recognition in 1928; his two plays Our Town (1938) and The Skin of Our Teeth (1942) brought further acclaim. Although he has written many novels, it is the dramatic field for which he will most likely be remembered. His themes and innovative dramatic techniques have brought fame to him as a dramatist. Like most writers, Wilder develops a single theme, man's position in the universe. This idea, latent in him for a long time, gradually gained in prominence over the years. In an interview with Richard H. Goldstone, Wilder reveals the initial stage of his theme to be "an unrelenting preoccupation with the surprise of the gulf between each tiny occasion of the daily life and the vast stretches of time and place in which every individual plays his role."<sup>1</sup> He adds that man's assertion that he has experienced an emotion seems absurd when he considers the background of the billions who have

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<sup>1</sup>Richard H. Goldstone, Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 113.

lived and died, those living and dying now, and those who will live and die in the future. In an insensitive person this idea might foster a loss of esteem for life, but in Wilder it engenders the significance of life. Consequently, he relishes whatever life brings at the moment of its arrival because this particular emotion or action can never be experienced again.<sup>2</sup> Wilder's theme presents a paradox, for man's brief role in the vast cosmos is at once insignificant and great. Great is man's role if he will "seize the day," life itself, which exists in the beauty of everyday surroundings. Wilder bears witness to this view as he tells Goldstone,<sup>1</sup> "I see myself making an effort to find the dignity in the trivial of our daily life, against those preposterous stretches which seem to rob it of any such dignity; and the validity of each individual's emotion."<sup>3</sup> As Wilder himself has admitted, he was not at first aware of the full implications of the theme, yet the elements of the carpe diem theme are at times reflected in the early novels. With the publication of his one-act plays in The Long Christmas Dinner, Wilder expresses a concern for man's precious gift of life, an awareness of mutability, and a preoccupation--both his own and that of his characters--with the everyday events of

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<sup>2</sup>Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Goldstone, p. 114.

ordinary life. But it is with Our Town, a twentieth-century Everyman, that the carpe diem theme emerges. It continues to flourish in The Skin of Our Teeth, and it reaches rollicking proportions in The Matchmaker. Yet this constant theme is revealed with ever-fresh expression, for Wilder's bold theatricality is an intricate part of his theme; one enhances the other. Moreover, Wilder universalizes his ideas with his optimistic view of life, and he acquires for himself a unique place among his American contemporaries. No other writer presents such a hopeful thesis: this age like any other has its problems, and these problems will be ameliorated with time and change. He advises all persons to love one another. With Wilder, love between persons is a primary concern. But this idea, which is embodied in the carpe diem theme of plays discussed in this study and is only sporadic in his novels, finds complete fruition in Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and The Matchmaker.<sup>4</sup> Thus, with the unfolding of the all-embracing carpe diem theme one hears the mounting voice of optimism.

Admittedly, Wilder has been criticized for the optimistic view of life present in his works at a time when pessimism was the watchword. But Wilder's background and the attitude toward that heritage substantiate his viewpoint.

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<sup>4</sup>Louis Broussard, American Drama (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 92.

Moreover, the most important element of a writer's work is his total view of life which necessarily develops from his maturing observations of that life.<sup>5</sup> Wilder's total view combines humanism with a touch of existentialism flowering into personalism. From this background and philosophy, Wilder imparts a vibrant zest for living.

Indeed, Wilder's zest for living is an outgrowth of his own experiences. He read the books of many nations, knew many people and places, and indulged his thirst for life incessantly, yet he never quenched that thirst. He spoke not only English, but also French, German, Italian, and Spanish. He lived in Yucatan and Rome, Hong Kong, and New Haven. A gregarious person, he was a friend of Gertrude Stein, stood at the sickbed of Sigmund Freud, served as interpreter for Ortega y Gasset, hiked along the Rhone valley with Gene Tunney, and at one time associated with a Chicago gunman named Golfbag. First, last, and always a teacher, he lectured at Lawrenceville School, the University of Chicago, and Harvard as well as at parties where with book in hand he read aloud. Once as he traveled across the sea, a shipboard acquaintance referred to him as the "Pied Piper of the ship."<sup>6</sup> And Garsin Kanin, commenting on Wilder's practice of

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<sup>5</sup>Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 137.

<sup>6</sup>"An Obliging Man," Time, 61 (January 12, 1953), 44.

pacing about the room lecturing to his friends, remarked, "Whenever I'm asked what college I've attended, I'm tempted to write 'Thornton Wilder.'" <sup>7</sup>

In particular, Wilder's enthusiasm for life derives from his family. The surviving member of a set of twins, Wilder was born April 17, 1897, in Madison, Wisconsin, where his father, Amos P. Wilder, operated a newspaper. Amos P. Wilder was a strict Congregationalist; Isabel Niven Wilder, his mother, was the daughter of the Reverend Dr. Niven, who was pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Dobbs Ferry, New York. <sup>8</sup> While still a young boy Wilder moved with his family to Hong Kong, where his father served as American Consul General from 1906 to 1909. Wilder had been in the Orient only six months when his father sent his mother, brother, and two sisters back to America. But his brief period in the Orient was an eventful one. Wilder became familiar not only with the Oriental culture of Hong Kong but also with the German language because he attended a German-language school in the city. When Mrs. Wilder and her children returned to the States, they resided not in Madison, but in another and very different university town: Berkeley, California. In 1911 the family went again to China, where Amos P. Wilder served as Consul General in Shanghai. For a few weeks Wilder

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Burbank, p. 21.

attended another German school before going to the English China Inland Mission School at Chefoo. When the father's tour of duty ended in 1913, the family moved back to Berkeley, California, where Wilder graduated from high school. These travels and sojourns during Wilder's early years instilled in him a feeling for limitless space and time and a fascination with the distant cultures noticeable throughout his literary career.<sup>9</sup> They also explain the difference between Wilder and his contemporaries Hemingway and Wescott. Wilder's frequent moves explain the lack of nostalgia in his work for a place known during his childhood; unlike some of his contemporaries, he never lived in one place long enough to develop an attachment for it.<sup>10</sup>

But it was his mother who most encouraged his intellectual growth. At first it might appear that Wilder's father was responsible for this growth, but Amos P. Wilder's studies at Yale, his time in editorial offices, and his work in the diplomatic service never rendered him very receptive to life, for he was never tempted to break from the narrow channels of rigorous discipline of the Congregational Church in which he was reared. Even though Mrs. Wilder was brought up as a Presbyterian, a religion no more disposed toward worldliness than her husband's, she fostered a strong desire to

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<sup>9</sup>Goldstein, pp. 2-3.

<sup>10</sup>Burbank, p. 22.

learn and did not feel that a busy intellectual life would weaken her faith.<sup>11</sup> In Berkeley she attended informal lectures at the University of California and participated in foreign-language groups. Likewise, she encouraged her children in their independent search for knowledge. As a boy Wilder felt the pull between parents; in 1935 he wrote Heaven's My Destination, in which a young comic hero, patterned after his father, his brother, and himself, never escapes the restraints of Calvinism.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to his family heritage, Wilder's educational experiences also contributed to his view of life. Because Amos P. Wilder felt that Yale was too worldly for his son, Wilder entered Oberlin College in Ohio in 1913; he interrupted his studies in 1917 for a year's service in the Coast Artillery, the only branch of the service that did not turn him down for poor eyesight; then he finished his undergraduate work at Yale, where he received his degree in 1920. But his studies at Oberlin had a most influential effect on Wilder. It was here that Wilder came under the spell of Charles Wager, whose enthusiasm for literature transcended his field of nineteenth-century literature to encompass the masterpieces of antiquity and the Renaissance. Under Wager's influence Wilder probably developed the convictions that it

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<sup>11</sup>Goldstein, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

is feasible and wise for a writer to take that which is valuable from his predecessors for the advancement of his own work and that national boundaries matter not in literary study.<sup>13</sup> Wilder learned a never-to-be-forgotten lesson from Wager, who said, "Every great work was written this morning."<sup>14</sup>

Wager's classes, which emphasized the great classic works, led Wilder to the new humanistic school of criticism. During the first decades of the century Paul Elmer More of Princeton and Irving Babbitt of Harvard proffered humanism as the principal approach to literature at the universities. They were impatient with the small-sighted naturalism of twentieth-century American literature; they viewed it as an indication of moral decay; consequently, these critics urged the academic world to adopt a view of Christian forbearance and optimism. They shut the door on the squalid aspects of life. By way of inducing a sense of moral values, they sponsored allegiance to the authority of the Christian Church. Thus, they hoped to solve mankind's problems. In large part Wilder is in sympathy with the views of More and Babbitt.<sup>15</sup> Certainly his education in the classics whetted an admiration for cultural tradition which stressed a view of life that regarded its ethical values as timeless and

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>14</sup>"An Obliging Man," p. 45.

<sup>15</sup>Goldstein, p. 7.

universal and fostered an attitude towards literature that emphasized its moral functions.<sup>16</sup> Protected by parents from emotional and physical hardship and prepared by his faith to accept self-discipline as a moral law, he was not tempted to delve into the squalor, earthiness, or coarseness found in naturalists' works. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to expect that his first works would reveal a strong attraction to humanism.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, in his early years Wilder did embrace humanism, and his themes are based on a humanistic foundation with a view of life that holds individual moral conduct as the essential element in a harmonious existence.<sup>18</sup> Wilder agrees with Babbitt's and More's Platonic assumption of the dualistic nature of man and with their idea of the ethical basis and value of the masterpieces of art and literature. He values above all the dignity of man when he lives in accord with moderation and refuses absolutes. Wilder stresses this idea in The Bridge of San Luis Rey when three people give up absolute love to embrace selfless love before the bridge falls. Further, he advocates that man be guided by a balance between reason and emotion; improvement in man's lot must be accomplished from within man himself through development of his ethical or higher nature. One

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<sup>16</sup>Burbank, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup>Goldstein, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup>Burbank, p. 29.

senses this element in Wilder's Our Town as the Stage Manager in Act I extolls the beauty inherent in the sunrise over the mountains and the change of the seasons and as Mrs. Gibbs in Act II enjoys a moonlight night filled with the scent of heliotrope. As man develops his ethical nature, Wilder feels, man must also restrain his lower nature. Like naturalists, romantics, and humanitarians, Wilder believes that man's reasoning powers are founded in nature. But he also believes that man has an ethical sense that rises above the physical; this ethical sense causes man to respond and aspire to harmony with a moral and ethical entity above the self. Wilder contends that these ethical aspirations are recorded in the great masterpieces of literature and art of ancient Greece, of Rome, of the Renaissance, and of the Hebraic-Christian tradition. Ethical perception, then, abounds in sensibility and intuition nurtured by the study of the masterpieces.<sup>19</sup> Although Wilder spurns petrified religious orthodoxy, his moral affirmations end in faith. He accepts responsibility in defending traditional moral and religious values against compelling and philosophical claims of naturalism. But Wilder avoids Babbitt's and More's efforts to make humanism a static philosophy. While Wilder calls for a full, free participation in life, evidenced in his own life as well as in The Matchmaker, he challenges the

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 30-31.

implications of Babbitt's and More's humanism because they identify virtue with the will to refrain. Wilder feels that the virtues of love, duty, responsibility, justice, and mercy equal affirmative commitments to life, and they conjure up response and development of the passions and ethical conscience as well. Although Wilder abolishes the physical restraints that inhibit the spirit, he avoids all extremes by advocating the Greek Golden Mean of Moderation and Balance. Moreover, Wilder believes that one's desires and impulses might have a higher meaning than heretofore realized and that the trivial, ordinary events of everyday life are highly important;<sup>20</sup> this belief is evident in Our Town.

Unlike More and T. S. Eliot, Wilder does not identify himself with organized religion. Protestantism divested of its various sects is at the center of his mysticism. The central Protestant concept was set forth by his theologian brother, Professor Amos N. Wilder, in the "Reformation Principle," embracing a doctrine of freedom and responsibility. This principle is at the core of all of Wilder's works. The idea sets forth that if man is to be free he must make his own moral choices despite church or state authority. Furthermore, man must carry the full responsibility for these choices in accordance with the Christian moral ideals of

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

love, humility, mercy, and charity. Therefore, each man becomes his own priest and sanctions the discovery and development of these moral qualities within himself.<sup>21</sup> This idea lies behind Wilder's comment in his preface to Three Plays: "Each individual's assertion to an absolute reality can only be inner, very inner."<sup>22</sup> In this light then, Wilder absorbs into his own philosophy some of the ethical subjectivism of Sartre and some of the mystical existentialism of Kierkegaard and Berdyaev. These three men are humanists and support the individual's responsibility for his moral choice. But Wilder is not a religious existentialist, for he avoids religious and philosophical labels and rejects atheistic existentialism. However, with the fusion of the religious life to Wilder's moral affirmations, with the persistence of the urgent development of man's potential through human relationships born from love and nurtured by reason, Wilder's philosophy becomes grounded in personalism:<sup>23</sup> a view that emphasizes man's place in the community. Personalism based on humanism cuts denominational religious ties and unites the intellectual forces of traditional idealism in opposition to philosophical naturalism. Personalism replaces science with man at the

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>22</sup>Thornton Wilder, Preface to Three Plays, Bantam Books (New York: Harper & Row), p. xi. All subsequent references to this source will be cited in the text.

<sup>23</sup>Burbank, p. 139.

center of the universe; it correlates the mental life of man with the nature of God; it states that the essence of being is one's movement to God who is the ultimate source, end, and good of the universe. Personalism emphasizes the person rather than the individual by his place in the community. It rejects extremes--the unchecked ego of individualism as well as the liberty-destroying statism of collectivism. It sets man free to seek spiritual freedom, to create philosophical values, and to respond to a destiny that transcends contemporary political or economic demands. Emmanuel Mounier, editor of the personalist periodical Espirit, agrees with the existentialists in believing that human destiny is filled with anguish and a marked degree of tragedy. He also feels that the complete realization of a person's potentialities depends upon his capacity for accepting sacrifice, insecurity, and pain. But Mounier rejects the excesses of some existentialists who see life as a desperate dive into nothingness. According to J. B. Coates, Mounier states that "if life is anguish, it is also 'radiance and super-abundance, hope and love.'"<sup>24</sup> In general terms, then, these words summarize Wilder's view of life with his look at the cosmos and his ensuing desire to give dignity, meaning, and fulfillment to the joy of living.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

Personalism adds a social and religious aspect to Wilder's humanism. It coincides with twentieth-century humanism in its justification of the tradition of literature and philosophy as evidence of man's higher nature and his principal source of moral and ethical authority. But it transcends humanism by fulfilling an affirmative social and religious purpose for the ethical will. With personalism, the person as a useful member of the community comes to understand and improve his relationships with other persons.

Indeed, personalism is selective and undogmatic. It employs many philosophical sources but rejects a static philosophy. It maintains that the subjective assumption of ethical concepts in response to specific conditions prevents an imposition of ideas from without. This outlook together with the humanistic rejection of absolutes explains the lack of social doctrine in Wilder's works. It also explains why he puts his characters under conditions necessitating a moral choice. But the conditions avoid a social aspect which implies a current manifestation of forces such as Chance and Necessity. By way of example, the people Brush meets in Heaven's My Destination are rendered unhappy not so much by social and economic forces as by their failure to stimulate themselves morally or intellectually, and so they succumb to outside forces.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

Hence, all Wilder's characters manifest personalism. They either respond to the divinity within themselves, or they fail to reach their full potential. In The Woman of Andros Chrysis and Pamphilus discover inner happiness with their commitment to a life of love and reason. Emily's farewell to the earth in Act III of Our Town mirrors the failure of many persons to realize the beauty of ordinary existence.<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Levi in The Matchmaker makes a choice; she seizes life. In doing so, she forces the characters as well as the audience to do the same.<sup>27</sup> Cardinal Vaini in The Cabala loses his humanity when he recedes from a meaningful relationship with the people of China and moves toward the life in the College of Cardinals. Through his characters Wilder suggests that one must become a human being, a "person," to realize his own divinity. Reflecting Wilder's personalism then, his characters affirm man's great potential.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, this hopeful attitude stands behind Wilder's answer to a question concerning his destiny and the part his family played in helping to shape that destiny: "We are equally distant from the sun, but we all have a share in it. The most valuable thing I inherited was a temperament

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>27</sup>Donald Haberman, The Plays of Thornton Wilder: A Critical Study (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 19.

<sup>28</sup>Burbank, p. 142.

that does not revolt against Necessity and that is constantly renewed in Hope. (I am alluding to Goethe's great poem about the problem of each man's 'lot'--the Orphische Worte.)"<sup>29</sup>

This temperament which bows to Necessity but is perpetually renewed in Hope shines throughout all of Wilder's work.

Thus, the gradual development of the carpe diem theme together with Wilder's bold theatrical techniques reflect his affirmative view.

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<sup>29</sup>Goldstone, p. 106.

## CHAPTER II

### EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

The first indications of the carpe diem theme appear in Wilder's one-act plays--"The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden," "Pullman Car Hiawatha," and "The Long Christmas Dinner" (1931). All three plays concern ordinary events. Wilder expresses his theme through the joy and sheer delight in human life with the Kirbys as they take a daytime trip to visit a relative in "The Happy Journey." Again he reveals his theme in "Pullman Car Hiawatha" as Harriet, who has just died, comes to realize the wonderful gift of life. Then Wilder shows the transience of life, a part of the carpe diem theme, in "The Long Christmas Dinner." With this omnipresent factor, Wilder weaves the past and the present into a compact pattern. And he presents his theme through his characters, especially Genevieve, who is overwhelmed by the past in a town filled with smoke and factories, for she seizes the day and life in the present when she moves to Europe.

But Wilder enhances his theme and departs from convention by displaying an artful manipulation of time and space with these one-act plays. He outlines a pattern of endless time and space in "The Long Christmas Dinner" as

three generations of a midwestern family live out their lives on the stage in thirty minutes. As death takes its toll, birth heralds a new generation. In "Pullman Car Hiawatha," Wilder presents, by chalk outlines on the stage, a train which travels through time and space during the night from New York to Chicago; this trip takes only thirty minutes on stage, but during this time Wilder successfully reveals the geographical and sociological history of the ground over which the train passes. In "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden" Wilder displays a delightful daytime trip with one family in an automobile. As they travel through New Jersey, the observant occupants of the car call to the attention of the audience rural and urban landscapes. Wilder quickens or slows time's passage by allowing the characters to dwell on some roadside scene longer than on others. Then at the end of this journey, Wilder's characters pause to enact a brief scene. Thus, in these three one-act plays the dramatist regulates the flow of time for specific effects that reflect on character or on a particular situation.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, in these three plays Wilder presents for the first time a positive approach to universal religious and moral values in American everyday lives. In doing this,

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<sup>1</sup>Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 76-77.

he raises the ordinary events of American life to a universal plane. At the same time he puts into practice his theories of the drama,<sup>2</sup> and his theories are important to the technique which he employs in "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden," "Pullman Car Hiawatha," and "The Long Christmas Dinner." However, Wilder arrived at these theories because of his dissatisfaction with the current theatrical mode. In his preface to Three Plays Wilder outlines his reasons for this dissatisfaction. He found the theater inadequate because he could not believe the stories presented there. When he went to the theater it was to admire a secondary element of the play, the work of an actor or director. Yet, of all the arts, he felt that the theater could occupy the highest plane. Wilder realized what the correct response to a work of the imagination should be: "This is the way things are. I have always known it without being fully aware that I knew it. Now in the presence of this play or novel or poem (or picture or piece of music) I know that I know it."<sup>3</sup> Wilder asserts that this characteristic response is what Plato referred to as "recollection." The theater, Wilder suggests,

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<sup>2</sup>Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 66.

<sup>3</sup>Thornton Wilder, Preface to Three Plays, Bantam Books (New York: Harper & Row), p. vii. Hereafter, reference to this source will be cited in the text.

is best equipped to awaken this storehouse of memory within all persons. Yet he felt that the theater was not performing this important function.

Indeed, Wilder found the thought which was presented on the printed page of a play or novel to be satisfactory, but when that idea was transferred to the stage, it fell short. He found the theater evasive and inadequate, for the theater aimed to soothe. In doing so, it failed to draw upon its deeper potentialities. Moreover, he thought that the fault had begun in the nineteenth century with the rise of the middle classes. Of course, the people of the middle class were comfortable, safe, and honored in their positions in the community. They were law-abiding, religious, and enterprising. They felt a distrust for the passions; hence, they tried to ignore them. Questions about injustice and stupidity filled the air but remained unanswered. The middle classes rushed to the melodrama where all tragic possibilities ended happily; they flocked to the sentimental drama, or they sought out the comedies which presented characters in such a way that they always resembled someone else rather than one's self. Therefore, the attitude and preference of the audience smothered the life in drama and caused playwrights to create dramas that were not true to life (pp. vii-ix).

Indeed, these practices made Wilder dissatisfied with the stage because the procedures obscured the universality of human experience. Wilder felt that the theater should concentrate upon the archetypal experience which cannot be limited in time or space. To him, every action, thought, or emotion that has ever taken place has done so at a specific moment in time. The emotions of joy, love, and regret have been felt millions of times but never twice in the same way, for each person's experiences are unique. Yet the more one recognizes these unique experiences, the more he becomes aware of what these singular moments have in common with each other. Thus, as an artist or spectator, one must ask which "truth" he prefers--the isolated occasion or the event which is general.. Which "truth" is more valuable? Each age differs from other ages in this respect. Is the sculpture David "one man"? Is Shakespeare's Macbeth the tale of "one fate"? Certainly, the theater is well equipped to relate both truths, for the particular aspect is represented by the actor who is a unique human being. Yet the drama tends to demonstrate a general truth because its relation to a particular "realistic" truth is entangled and suppressed by the fact that it is a mixture of lies, make-believe, and fiction. Unlike the novel, which is structured around the unique event, the theater focuses on the general one, and the

theater in elevating the demonstrated singular action to a universal plane elicits belief. But Wilder believed this power was thwarted by the nineteenth-century audiences, for they dared not face the obvious. Consequently, the stage was burdened with specific objects because concrete objects fix the action to a specific time and place. Hence, universality was lacking. On the other hand, in Shakespeare's time furniture did not clutter the stage. No one, except perhaps a ruler, ever sat down on the Shakespearean stage. During the time of Elizabeth I few chairs appeared on the English or Spanish stages. But in the nineteenth century, Wilder felt, the middle classes weakened drama as an art by emphasizing a particular time and place on the stage. To Wilder, the magnificence of the stage demands the always "now," but he felt that the middle classes pushed the action back into past time by stressing place and time. And Wilder steadfastly maintained that no great age ever tried to seize the audience's belief through this type of particularization and localization (p. x).

Thus Wilder set out to correct his dissatisfaction with the theater by developing his theories of drama. In his comments on playwriting, he lists four basic conditions relating to the drama which separate it from the other arts. These conditions necessitate a specific aptitude from the

dramatist; from each, certain instructive processes may arise. These conditions are listed below:

1. The theatre is an art which reposes upon the work of many collaborators;
2. It is addressed to the group-mind;
3. It is based upon a pretense and its very nature calls out a multiplication of pretenses;
4. Its action takes place in a perpetual present time.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the dramatist finds the theater a challenge with its many collaborators, its unfolding action, and its arrangement of events. In particular, while learning to take into account the presence of many collaborators, the dramatist derives advantage from them. He structures the play in such a way that its power lies in the sequence of events and in the unraveling of an idea in narration. For the author must exercise complete control over his organization of events so that possible distortions arising from the physical appearance of actors, from the creative imaginations of scene painters, and from misunderstandings of directors fall into relative unimportance. Therefore to avoid misinterpretation of his art, the dramatist must focus his attention on the laws of narration and their power to present a unifying idea more forceful than its collection of events.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Thornton Wilder, "Some Thoughts on Playwriting," in Playwrights on Playwriting, ed. Toby Cole (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 106.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 107-108.

Furthermore, of these many collaborators, the actors are the most important. An actor needs the gift of observation, imagination, and physical co-ordination. By the gift of observation, Wilder means the actor must possess an observing, critical eye for all kinds of behavior, for dress and manner, and for evidence of idea and emotion in one's self and in others. An actor's imagination and memory are of utmost importance. After reading the author's text he may delve into his storehouse of observations to reveal the appearance and intensity of such emotions as joy, grief, hatred, and love, and through the imagination may intensify or lessen the emotion according to the needs of the text. The actor must possess physical co-ordination so that he may express this inner feeling by face, voice, and body. The actor must recognize outward signs and mental states; he must apply this recognition to the specific role demanded; he must physically communicate this knowledge. It is readily apparent then that the dramatist must prepare his characterizations so as to take advantage of the actor's gift.

Moreover, as Wilder indicates, characterization on the part of the dramatist is an exacting art. In the drama the audience beholds the person, and no intervening by the author is possible. For this reason Wilder notes that great attention is given in the play to

(1) highly characteristic utterances and (2) concrete occasions in which the character defines himself under action and (3) a conscious preparation of the text whereby the actor may build upon the suggestions in the role according to his own abilities.<sup>6</sup>

Wilder compares characterization in a play to a blank check for which the actor is accorded the right to fill in the blanks, to a degree. Since Wilder maintains that the dramatist's primary duty is the movement of the story, specific aspects of characterization must be left to the actor.<sup>7</sup>

The second condition of the drama deals with the group-mind. That the theater is an art addressed to a group-mind is obvious when one considers that a play requires an audience, for the make-believe and fiction on stage would pass into absurdity without the support presented to it by the audience. Thus the group-mind entails two consequences. First, the group-mind necessitates that a play have a wide audience appeal. While artists in other fields may presume an audience of connoisseurs, the dramatist may be blocked in presenting detailed revelations of specific moments of history that necessitate specialized knowledge on the part of the audience.<sup>8</sup> The dramatist, in recognizing this limitation, perceives the need to make material comprehensible to the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 109-110.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 110-111.

spectators. Second, the presence of the group-mind demands forward movement, and action is an essential part of this movement which cannot be separated from it.

The third condition of the drama demands a world of pretence. By convention, a dramatic action is an accepted falsehood, "a permitted lie." To support this idea of pretense, Wilder discusses the passage from Medea in which she considers the murder of her children. According to an anecdote from antiquity, during one performance, the audience became excited and created a disturbance. By way of explanation, Wilder outlines the conventions which were involved:

1. Medea was played by a man.
2. He wore a large mask on his face. In the lip of the mask was an accoustical device for projecting the voice. On his feet he wore shoes with soles and heels half a foot high.
3. His costume was so designed that it conveyed to the audience, by convention: woman of royal birth and Oriental origin.
4. The passage was in metric speech. All poetry is an "agreed-upon falsehood" in regard to speech.
5. The lines were sung in a kind of recitative. All opera involves this "permitted lie" in regard to speech.<sup>9</sup>

Today's audiences might feel that the passage would impart greater pity if a woman "like Medea" recited it, for without a mask, she can demonstrate the emotions she is undergoing. The Greeks, however, needed no pretense that Medea was on the stage. The mask, the costume, the way in which the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 112-113.

passage was delivered were all signals which the spectator decoded and assimilated in his own mind: Medea was created in the imagination of the audience.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, history reveals that in the great periods of drama, notably the Greek and the Elizabethan, the stage relied upon convention. For example, during the Elizabethan age placards rather than scenery revealed location to the audience; in the Chinese theater a whip carried in a man's hand plus a jogging motion of his body signified that he was on horseback; the imagination of the audience filled in the void left by the absence of stage props.<sup>11</sup>

Pretense, however, serves a two-fold purpose: it forces audience participation through creative imagination, and it lifts the action from the specific to the general. The latter is of greater importance than the former. If Juliet is represented by an actress "very much like Juliet" and the stage is cluttered with furniture and the necessary stage props, the idea is fixed to a specific place at a given moment in time and to a particular girl. But if the scenery is supplied by the creative imagination of the audience, it does not limit action to a specific moment or place in time. For in a play presented as Shakespeare planned it, the bare stage raises the occasion from the particular to

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

the general, and Juliet's experience becomes "that of all girls in love, in every time, place and language."<sup>12</sup> As Wilder steadfastly maintains, from the make-believe of the theater comes a greater truth than any novel can inspire, for the novel by its own rules is compelled to relate an action that happened "once upon a time."<sup>13</sup>

The fourth basic condition states that the action on stage take place in a perpetually present time. In the theater one is unaware of the storyteller. Says Wilder, "A play is what takes place. . . . A play visibly represents pure existing."<sup>14</sup> This evocation of the present marks the art of the dramatist. Now is always the time on the stage with the actors setting forth a spontaneous dialogue.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Wilder considers the theater the greatest art form and the most important way for one to share with another what it is like to be human. He finds the function of the drama to be the revelation of "what is," for men exist in "what is." Wilder believes that the theater fortifies man's ability to face this fact. He also thinks that to see a play--to see man's work and realize his intellectual

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 113-114.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Richard H. Goldstone, "Thornton Wilder," in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 109.

power--is to confirm one's belief in the capabilities of man.<sup>16</sup> To effect this goal, the dramatist turns to imaginative narration. This Wilder did when he began writing one-act plays "to capture not verisimilitude but reality" (Preface, p. xi). His aim is especially evident in "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden," "Pullman Car Hiawatha," and "The Long Christmas Dinner," for they reveal Wilder's development of the carpe diem theme in conjunction with inventive theatrical techniques.

Wilder presents his carpe diem theme in "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden" by combining family life with an ordinary event: the Kirby family are about to begin their journey to visit an absent member of the family. This family like any other has a rush of frenzied activity prior to departure. The flurry of excitement occurs because Arthur has mislaid his hat. But Mr. Kirby saves the day when he finds his son's hat in the car where Arthur left it last Sunday. Then Caroline, a daughter of the Kirbys on the verge of becoming a young lady, prompts Ma's concern:

Ma. . . . Caroline Kirby, what you done to your cheeks?

Caroline (defiant-abashed). Nothin'.

Ma. If you've put anything on 'em . . .

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 110-111.

Caroline. No, ma, of course I haven't. (hang-  
ing her head) I just rubbed'm to make'm red.  
All the girls do that at High School when they're  
goin' places.

Ma. Such silliness I never saw. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Then with a lurch or two the family is off on its happy journey, and the sheer delight in life itself as well as the country ride becomes apparent with Caroline's dialogue: "Ma, I love going out in the country like this. Let's do it often, ma." And Ma's reply notes her appreciation of the day: "Goodness, smell that air will you! It's got the whole ocean in it" (p. 109). Then as they stop for lunch Ma's awareness of the beauty surrounding her is evident with her words: "What's that flower over there?--I'll take some of those to Beulah." When Caroline announces the flower's origin as a mere weed, Ma retorts: "I like it.--My, look at the sky, wouldya! I'm glad I was born in New Jersey. I've always said it was the best state in the Union. Every state has something no other state has got" (p. 114). Ma's appreciation continues, for a little later she says: "There's a sunset for you. There's nothing like a good sunset" (p. 115). So throughout the trip the Kirby family exhibits humor, joy, and optimism. But like any other family they have their

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<sup>17</sup> Thornton Wilder, "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden," in 'The Long Christmas Dinner' & Other Plays in One Act (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1931), p. 104. Hereafter, material from this play will be cited in the text.

share of disagreements. Ma comforts the children after a succession of scoldings: "Sakes alive, it's too nice a day for us all to be cryin'. Come now, get in. You go up in front with your father, Caroline. Ma wants to sit with her beau [Arthur, who has been soundly reprimanded for his behavior]. I never saw such children. Your hot dogs are all getting wet" (p. 115). But the disagreements are soon forgotten, for there is a sense of family pride and loyalty among the members.<sup>18</sup> The joy in being together on such a happy day prompts Ma to say: "Why doesn't somebody sing something? Arthur, you're always singing something; what's the matter with you?" (p. 116). And Arthur complies:

All right. What'll we sing? (He sketches.)  
 In the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia,  
 On the trail of the lonesome pine . . .  
 No, I don't like that any more. Let's do:  
 I been workin on de railroad  
 Just to pass de time away.  
 Caroline joins in at once.  
Finally even Ma is singing.  
Even Pa is singing. (p. 116)

Moreover, in order to signify the importance of this ordinary event to everyday life, Wilder develops his theme by avoiding reality at the concrete level. Although the characters make the customary stops at a gas station, eat the usual hot dogs, and read billboards on their way to Beulah's home, the verisimilitude of life is absent because it is

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<sup>18</sup>Sister Mary Fabian, O. P., "The Contributions of Thornton Wilder to American Drama," Horizontes, 7 (April, 1964), 76.

avoided by the presence of the Stage Manager, by pantomime, and by a lack of scenery. Consequently, the audience is reminded that what they are watching is make-believe, not actual life. It is life's meaning that is presented. Paradoxically, the journey to Camden is a happy one because these seemingly unimportant events are important; by inference these ordinary events become significant in a meaningful cosmological process.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Wilder sets the action of the play on a moral, philosophical, and theological level, for Ma Kirby attaches a moral-religious significance to each incident which either fills her children with joy or throws them into dejection. But her moralizing is satirized because it is conscious. One sees the real meaning behind her life when she is not intentionally moral in her actions--her joy, for example, at Arthur's shame for having belittled her. Ma is exceptionally moral and religious in her reaction to concrete events. But regarding her real purpose, she is unintentionally moral. The audience sees the meaning behind her life: Ma's faith strengthens and fortifies her and keeps her family intact. She consoles her daughter, Beulah, whose baby died at birth: "God thought best, dear. God thought best. We don't understand why. We just go on, honey, doin' our business" (p. 121). So with Ma's dialogue Wilder puts

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<sup>19</sup>Burbank, pp. 67-68.

the action of the play on a philosophical and theological level. Although she has led an apparently simple existence, Ma knows the principles concerning the conduct of a good life, and her trust in God is an important part of her philosophy.

Indeed, Ma Kirby plays a significant part in carrying Wilder's theme forward. With her role he fashioned his favorite one-act play, for Wilder said "Happy Journey" was a tribute to the ordinary American mother, who rears her children as naturally as a bird makes its nest, for the mother's strength lies in her ability to meet the circumstances of life with fortitude and courage.<sup>20</sup>

But fortitude and courage are not Ma's only attributes, for as she tells Arthur that all mothers and fathers "like to drive out in the evening with their children beside'm" (p. 116), it is apparent that this play concerns love and that Ma's heart is brimming with love for her family. Love is an important part of the carpe diem theme which threads its way through Wilder's work. In an interview by Goldstone, Wilder states his views on the nature of love: "Love started out as a concomitant of reproduction; it is what makes new life and then shelters it. It is therefore

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<sup>20</sup>Donald Haberman, The Plays of Thornton Wilder: A Critical Study (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967, pp. 103-104.

an affirmation about existence and a belief in value."<sup>21</sup> But he reflects that thousands of years have gone by; just as a river forms tributaries, so love assumed various outlets of expression with a more sophisticated society. Love became a whirlpool of conflict between male and female in their struggle for power. Wilder asserts that love "got cut off from its primary intention and took its place among the refinements of psychic life, and in the cult of pleasure; it expanded beyond the relations of the couple and the family and reappeared as philanthropy; it attached itself to man's ideas about the order of the universe and was attributed to the gods and God."<sup>22</sup> But as Wilder looks beyond this collection of ideas, he muses about love and finds it to be "the urge that strives toward justifying life, harmonizing it--the source of energy on which life must draw in order to better itself."<sup>23</sup> Love as a source of energy which gives meaning to life is reflected in "Happy Journey." For this absorbing presentation of family love filled with a warm sense of intimacy reaches its climax as Beulah questions her father: "Are you glad I'm still alive, pa?" (p. 120). With this dialogue Wilder depicts three of man's basic feelings: the need for

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<sup>21</sup>Goldstone, p. 114.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 114-115.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

love, the apprehension connected with rejection, and the dread of death. At the conclusion of the play there is a sense of well-being for the Kirby family and for humanity in general.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, Wilder intensifies the theme of his drama by forceful audience participation. In particular, this is a play for the imagination because the reality of this human drama comes alive in the mind. It is here that Ma and Pa Kirby and their children--Arthur and Caroline as well as their married daughter-Beulah--assume life. The scenes--the home and neighborhood in Newark, the Chevy travelling along, Beulah's home in Camden--are seen in the mind's eye. "The Happy Journey" comes alive with the devices employed by Wilder. For despite lack of scenery, Wilder captures motion, a sense of sight, and reality itself, for example, with Ma's comment: "Elmer, don't run over that collie dog. (She follows the dog with her eyes.) Looked kinda peaked to me. . . . Pretty dog, too. (Her eyes fall on a billboard.) That's a pretty advertisement for Chesterfield cigarettes, isn't it? Looks like Beulah, a little" (pp. 109-110). The pantomime involved with the task of driving entertains reader as well as spectator. With amazingly vivid detail Wilder

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<sup>24</sup>Goldstein, p. 82.

sketches a journey in the imaginations of readers and viewers.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, Wilder enhances the theme of the journey with his excellent grasp of colloquial speech and with his respect for average people leading simple lives. By way of example, Mrs. Kirby scolds her daughter Caroline in a classic motherly manner:<sup>26</sup> "Mind yourself, Missy. I don't want to hear anybody talking about rich or not rich when I'm around. If people aren't nice I don't care how rich they are" (p. 118).

So Wilder achieves a correlation between theme and technique as he practices his theory of the drama: theory, technique, theme--all are revealed through the use of imaginary properties and language. "Happy Journey" employs no scenery; four chairs and a low platform constitute the automobile; the Stage Manager not only sets up what few properties are used, but he also plays minor roles--the neighbors and a garage hand. Since Wilder turns to expressionism to portray the inner life of man, the reader, spectator, or family next door can identify with the Kirbys. And Wilder's carpe diem theme in this simple journey recalls to the mind of both reader and spectator their particular family journeys

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<sup>25</sup>Charles W. Cooper, Preface to Drama (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955), pp. 122-123.

<sup>26</sup>Joseph J. Firebaugh, "The Humanism of Thornton Wilder," The Pacific Spectator, IV (Autumn, 1950), 437.

and the love, pleasure, and warmth which took place on these memorable occasions. Thus by creatively employing a single ordinary event, Wilder takes modern drama back to the simplicity of the past.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, another journey, this one by train, becomes the subject of Wilder's "Pullman Car Hiawatha." The play, however, concerns not only the train's journey but also man's life, which is a journey from its beginning at birth until its end at death. Yet, Wilder does not trace this journey from birth but begins in medias res. For the passengers are embarking on a trip on December 21 from New York to Chicago. As Wilder sketches the train's progress through various towns and fields to its given destination, he follows man's quest for his place in the universe. And within his theme emerges man in a meaningful cosmological process. Just as the train arrives at Chicago only to begin another journey later on, so life goes on as man searches for his place in the universe; however, Wilder suggests that during this search each individual not only should realize his full potential but also should seek out the beauty of this life.

Moreover, to develop his theme Wilder uses a technique similar to that employed in "Happy Journey." In this play, however, the Stage Manager not only arranges the action

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<sup>27</sup>Fabian, pp. 76-77.

but also interprets it, thereby introducing Wilder's carpe diem theme in relation to man's place in the universe. For as the Stage Manager establishes the train's position, he reveals man's place as well. At the beginning of the play the stage is bare, and the Stage Manager is busy marking off the outlines of the train on the stage floor; he calls in the actors, and they enter bringing their chairs to their respective berths or compartments. Wilder develops the theme by outward as well as inward revelation of his characters. Again he employs expressionism not only to reveal man's inner mind, but also to present the characters as types: a maiden lady, a middle-aged doctor, an engineer going to California, another engineer, an insane woman, a young couple (Harriet and Philip). Furthermore, these passengers are named by their positions on the train--"Compartment Three," "Compartment Two," "Compartment One," "Lower One," "Lower Seven," "Lower Nine." Then Wilder begins his play with the dialogue of the actors in the berths where the characters are busy with the trivial matters of life, such as getting situated comfortably:

LOWER FIVE [actually portly, friendly woman of fifty] (sharply to the passenger above her). Young man, you mind your own business, or I'll report you to the conductor.

STAGE MANAGER (substituting for Upper Five). Sorry, mam, I didn't mean to upset you. My suspenders fell down and I was trying to catch them.

LOWER FIVE. Well, here they are. Now go to sleep. Everybody seems to be rushing into my berth tonight.

She puts her head out.

Porter! Porter! Be a good soul and bring me a glass of water, will you? I'm parched.<sup>28</sup>

Then an engineer calls to another engineer for his immediate needs:

LOWER NINE. Slip me one of those magazines, willya?

LOWER SEVEN. Which one d'y'a want?

LOWER NINE. Either one. "Detective Stories." Either one. (p. 51).

From this point, however, the characters' dialogue reveals their thoughts in soliloquies, for the Stage Manager quiets the actors and says to the audience: "Now I want you to hear them thinking. There is a pause and then they all begin a murmuring-swishing noise, very soft. In turn each one of them can be heard above the others" (p. 52). It is here that one glimpses the inner man, for the characters are concerned with personal affairs within their minds.<sup>29</sup> Lower One (a maiden lady) reveals her apprehension:

I know I'll be awake all night. I might just as well make up my mind to it now. I can't imagine what got hold of that hot water bag to leak on the train of all places. Well now, I'll lie on my right side and

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<sup>28</sup>Thornton Wilder, "Pullman Car Hiawatha," in 'The Long Christmas Dinner' & Other Plays in One Act (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1931), p. 51. Hereafter, material from this play will be cited in the text.

<sup>29</sup>Burbank, pp. 69-70.

breathe deeply and think of beautiful things, and perhaps I can doze off a bit. (p. 53)

Then Lower Nine, actually Fred, who is one of the engineers traveling on the train, laments his folly from an earlier time:

That was the craziest thing I ever did. It's set me back three whole years. I could have saved up thirty thousand dollars by now, if only I'd stayed over here. What business had I got to fool with contracts with the goddam Soviets. Hell, I thought it would be interesting. Interesting, what-the-hell! It's set me back three whole years. I don't even know if the company'll take me back. I'm green, that's all. I just don't grow up. (p. 53)

The Stage Manager then quiets their whispering dialogue with "Hush," and the action moves to the compartments, where Wilder reveals the troublesome aspects of life. Indeed, his glimpse into the problems of mankind suggests the change which is fundamental and sometimes necessary in order to manifest the beauty inherent in man's life. The dialogue takes place between Compartment Two, actually Philip, and Compartment One, Harriet, his wife, who is ill:

PHILIP. There.--Good night, angel. If you can't sleep, call me and we'll sit up and play Russian Bank.

HARRIET. You're thinking of that awful time when we sat up every night for a week. . . . But at least I know I shall sleep tonight. The noise of the wheels has become sort of nice and homely. . . . (pp. 54-55)

The problems besetting mankind continue with the dialogue emanating from Compartment Three, occupied by an insane woman and her male and female attendants:

THE INSANE WOMAN (her words have a dragging, complaining sound, but lack any conviction). Don't take me there. Don't take me there.

THE FEMALE ATTENDANT. Wouldn't you like to lie down, dearie?

THE INSANE WOMAN. I want to get off the train. I want to go back to New York.

THE FEMALE ATTENDANT. Wouldn't you like me to brush your hair again? It's such a nice feeling.

THE INSANE WOMAN (going to the door). I want to get off the train. I want to open the door. (p. 55)

Then a discussion between the female and male attendants follows in which they describe the beauty surrounding the sanitarium, which the insane woman dreads. But the insane woman's irrational attitude emerges with her dialogue and suggests that perhaps the immediate obsession brought her to this sad state: "I'm not beautiful. I'm not beautiful as she was" (p. 56). As the attendants reassure her, groans and coughs can be heard from Harriet's compartment. She calls for a doctor, but when he arrives Harriet is already dead. At this point the Stage Manager comes forward to announce: "So much for the inside of the car. That'll be enough of that for the present" (p. 58). Thus, with the action and dialogue emanating from the berths and

compartments, Wilder locates the car's position in reference to its inhabitants.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, to present man's place in the universe more clearly, Wilder then sketches the train's journey, as the Stage Manager announces, "geographically, meteorologically, astronomically, theologically" (p. 58). As the train races across the country, Wilder locates the car's position geographically by a short speech from an actor representing the town of Grover's Corners, Ohio; the actor also gives the town's population, "821 souls" (p. 59). He then proceeds with his motto: "There's so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, that it ill behooves any of us to criticize the rest of us" (p. 59). With these words Wilder identifies man as a universal creature with good and bad sides to his nature. From there, the train moves through a field between Grover's Corners and Parkersburg, Ohio. The actor representing the field gives its population:

In this field there are 51 gophers, 206 field mice, 6 snakes and millions of bugs, insects, ants, and spiders. All in their winter sleep. "What is so rare as a day in June? Then, if ever, come perfect days." (p. 59)

Both the population of the field and the motto reveal Wilder's regard for God's universal plan concerning all creatures and the beauty contained therein. Then as the train continues

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<sup>30</sup>Haberman, p. 35.

to progress Wilder interpolates a sociological reference with a speech from a tramp captivated by wanderlust; to satisfy his enslavement the hobo has been riding under the car. His motto follows: "On the road to Mandalay, where the flying fishes play and the sun comes up like thunder, over China cross the bay" (pp. 59-60). Wilder shows compassion for this creature but notes the importance of discipline, which is necessary to keep one's life from becoming an aimless wandering. When the tramp exits, man's place and the train's position continue to be identified as a farmer's wife representing the town of Parkersburg, Ohio, again reveals the problems of mankind when one allows alcohol to gain control of his life. As she exits, the ghost of a simple workman, who was killed while helping to build a trestle over which the train is now passing, voices a motto: "Three score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation dedicated. . ." (p. 61). With these words Wilder suggests man's place in history and the significant role this nation played in shaping that history. As the ghost exits, a worker, who is a watchman in a tower just outside the city limits of Parkersburg, enters to reveal the importance of self-discipline with his motto: "If you can keep your heads when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you. . ." (p. 61). Then an actor, who has

found his place in the world, presents certain meteorological data:

It is eleven degrees above zero. The wind is north-northwest, velocity, 57. There is a field of low barometric pressure moving eastward from Saskatchewan to the Eastern Coast. Tomorrow it will be cold with some snow in the Middle Western States and Northern New York. (p. 61)

As he exits the Stage Manager announces the Hours, which are portrayed by girls who in short speeches repeat words of renowned philosophers. Ten O'clock represents Plato: "Are you not rather convinced that he who sees Beauty as only it can be seen will be specially favored? And since he is in contact not with images but with realities . . ." (p. 62). Here Wilder's carpe diem theme provides an insight into the reality of beauty surrounding everyone; this beauty gives meaning to man's life. Perhaps Wilder is suggesting that each individual must realize this life in order to appreciate the next. Then as Ten O'clock continues her speech in a murmur, Eleven O'clock appears: "What else can I, Epictetus, do, a lame old man, but sing hymns to God? If then I were a nightingale, I would do the nightingale's part. If I were a swan I would do a swan's. But now I am a rational creature. . ." (p. 62). With Eleven O'clock's speech Wilder suggests that man must find his place in this world, for it is God's plan that everyone play out his role in this life.

Then the hours disappear, and Wilder's theme, which reveals man's role by analogy with the train's journey, continues as actors, now representing planets, establish the astronomical position of Pullman Car Hiawatha with no words, just sounds. Earth is represented by the passengers' "thinking" process and the mottoes from the actors playing the towns, workmen, and tramp. However, the earth becomes the most important planet as the insane woman "breaks into passionate weeping. She rises and stretches out her arms to the Stage Manager" (p. 64). Her plea, heard above the sounds of the earth, reveals one of man's most basic needs: "Use me. Give me something to do" (p. 64). The Stage Manager leads the insane woman back to her attendants. He then calls in the archangels and announces both the car's and man's most important position: "We have now reached the theological position of Pullman Car Hiawatha" (p. 64). At this point in the play two young men, the Archangels Gabriel and Michael, descend stairs, and as they pass each berth, the respective passenger talks out in his sleep. Gabriel and Michael pause to listen. Above the sighs and whispering sounds of those asleep, the audience hears:

LOWER FIVE [the amiable portly woman of fifty].  
You know best, of course. I'm ready whenever you  
are. One year's like another.

LOWER ONE [the maiden lady]. I can teach sewing.  
I can sew. (p. 65)

These young men remind the audience that both the car and man himself travel under the watchful eye of God.<sup>31</sup>

With the theological position established, Wilder carries his theme forward by presenting two basic ideas: man travels under God's watchful eye, and God's plan for a meaningful universe permits each individual to play his role within a specified time. These ideas are set forth with two of the characters--Harriet, who suffers physically from tuberculosis, and the insane woman who suffers mentally. Wilder establishes the woman's insanity through her rambling dialogue with her attendants; yet, he reveals her insight, which many sane persons lack, in her dialogue with the archangels.<sup>32</sup> The insane woman wants to go with the angels, for she explains the futility of her plight: "What possible use can there be in my simply waiting?" (p. 65). But she thoughtfully works out her problems in a rational way and accepts God's plan as she continues to say:

Well, I'm grateful for anything. I'm grateful for being so much better than I was. The old story, the terrible story, doesn't haunt me as it used to. A great load seems to have been taken off my mind.--But no one understands me any more. At last I understand myself perfectly, but no one else understands a thing I say.--So I must wait?  
(p. 65)

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<sup>31</sup>Goldstein, p. 80.

<sup>32</sup>Burbank, p. 71.

Now the insane woman, already reconciled to a longer stay on earth by her rationalization, adds: "Well, you know best. I'll do whatever is best; but everyone is so childish, so absurd. They have no logic. These people are all so mad. . . . These people are like children; they have never suffered" (p. 66). With her dialogue Wilder contrasts the insane woman's willing acceptance of God's plan with Harriet's inability to adjust to such an idea. For the chosen one, Harriet, who is already dead, protests; like other fallible creatures, she fears and dreads the unknown: "I wouldn't be happy there. Let me stay dead down here. I belong here. I shall be perfectly happy to roam about my house and be near Philip.--You know I wouldn't be happy there" (p. 66).

Indeed, Wilder's carpe diem theme is evident when Harriet begins to realize the blindness of human beings to the wonderful gift of life. Further, since she has not grasped the opportunity while it was at hand, having been unaware of this gift while alive,<sup>33</sup> Harriet now feels the need to prove herself: "I'm ashamed to come with you. I haven't done anything. I haven't done anything with my life. Worse than that: I was angry and sullen. I never realized anything" (p. 66). Her next remarks reveal her ignorance of a merciful God: "I don't dare to go a step in such a place" (p. 66). As the angels lead Harriet down the aisle of

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

the car, Wilder strikes a pathetic note, for Harriet makes one last effort to cling to the past: "Let's take the whole train. There are some lovely faces on this train. Can't we all come? You'll never find anyone better than Philip. Please, please, let's all go" (p. 67). Then as Harriet is forced to accept God's plan, she bids farewell to earth:

Goodbye, Philip.--I begged him not to marry me, but he would. He believed in me just as you do.--Goodbye, 1312 Ridgewood Avenue, Oaksbury, Illinois. I hope I remember all its steps and doors and wall-papers forever. Goodbye, Emerson Grammar School on the corner of Forbush Avenue and Wherry Street. Goodbye, Miss Walker and Miss Cramer who taught me English and Miss Matthewson who taught me Biology. Goodbye, First Congregational Church on the corner of Meyerson Avenue and 6th Street and Dr. McReady and Mrs. McReady and Julia. Goodbye, Papa and Mama. . . . (p. 68)

In particular, the attitudes of the insane woman and Harriet serve a two-fold function: they emphasize the ignorance of human beings concerning their place in a harmonious, meaningful universe, and they demonstrate the Old Testament (Job) and Greek (particularly Aeschylus') ideas of the purpose of suffering. Unlike the other characters, Harriet and the insane woman occupy compartments; this fact implies, perhaps, the special nature of persons who possess wisdom fostered by affliction.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

Yet as Harriet bids the earth goodbye, Wilder's theme of a meaningful cosmological whole emerges, for the Stage Manager says to the actors:

All right. All right.--Now we'll have the whole world together, please. The whole solar system, please.

The complete cast begins to appear at the edges of the stage. He claps his hands. (pp. 68-69)

At this point the human beings begin murmuring their thoughts; the hours speak; the planets begin a musical note. The Stage Manager then waves the actors away announcing that they are now arriving in South Chicago. Whereas at the beginning of the play everyone was busy getting settled for the night, now each player is in a flurry of excitement preparing to disembark. The Porter announces: "CHICAGO, CHICAGO. All out" (p. 70). And Wilder suggests that life goes on. Although Harriet is gone, the other passengers remain to continue their journey through life. Just as life goes on, so the train will embark on another journey later. For old women with mops and buckets enter to clean the train in readiness for another journey.

The trip is set against a background of history, time, and space--revealed by the short speeches of the hours suggesting the reality of beauty in this life together with the necessity of finding one's place in the universe according to God's plan, and the mottoes of the passengers recalling the

need for self-discipline as well as the realization of man's full potential. The journey scene--indeed the entire play--demonstrates man's place in the universe. Thus, the play suggests that man's knowledge and efforts are his responsibility through life.<sup>35</sup> Since life is transitory, one should hasten to make the most of it.

Although "Happy Journey" and "Pullman Car" are both concerned with journeys, they are also concerned with the continuation of life. This same concern is paramount in "The Long Christmas Dinner." Wilder's hopeful attitude about life also emerges here, for life is both permanent and temporary in this play. Life with its transitory nature is necessarily fleeting, but Wilder implies that permanence exists, for he presents man against a vast cosmological background of endless time and space in which one generation supplants another. In this play three generations of a family come and go on stage during a constant meal as the members of this midwestern family reflect the passing of time during table conversation.<sup>36</sup> Thus, "The Long Christmas Dinner" concerns not only transience, life and death, change and permanence, but also regeneration as well. Consequently, a cyclical structure emerges, for this holiday feast takes place uninterrupted over a period of ninety years from 1840 to 1930. The time is always Christmas Day; the various

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<sup>35</sup>Goldstein, p. 81.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., pp. 76-77.

generations enjoy this endless holiday feast, but life and death are juxtaposed as the members of the family change and leave through the doorway draped with black at the right as they die while the new generation emerges through the left doorway, which is trimmed with fruit and flowers signifying birth and new life. The stage directions to the play clarify the life-death juxtaposition:<sup>37</sup>

At the extreme left, by the proscenium pillar, is a strange portal trimmed with garlands of fruits and flowers. Directly opposite is another edged and hung with black velvet. The portals denote birth and death. . . . The actors are dressed in inconspicuous clothes and must indicate their gradual increase in years through their acting. Most of them carry wigs of white hair which they adjust upon their heads at the indicated moment, simply and without comment. . . . Throughout the play the characters continue eating imaginary food with imaginary knives and forks. There is no curtain. . . .<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, Wilder signifies transiency, which is a part of the carpe diem theme, within the conversations of his characters, such as in conversations concerned with the family and its ancestry, the past, the weather, and time. More importantly though, transience is indicated by the cycle of life: children are brought into life, they marry, and they die. At

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<sup>37</sup>Hermann Stresau, Thornton Wilder (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1971), p. 46.

<sup>38</sup>Thornton Wilder, "The Long Christmas Dinner," in 'The Long Christmas Dinner' & Other Plays in One Act (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1931), p. 1. Hereafter, material from this play will be cited in the text.

the beginning of the play, Lucia, the young wife, inspects the table while talking to a servant girl who is invisible to the audience. Roderick, her husband, enters pushing Mother Bayard in a wheel chair as they prepare to begin their first Christmas dinner in their new home. The past is always present as Mother Bayard says: "My dear Lucia, I can remember when there were still Indians on this very ground, and I wasn't a young girl either. I can remember when we had to cross the Mississippi on a new-made raft. I can remember when St. Louis and Kansas City were full of Indians" (pp. 2-3). The importance of ancestry to Mother Bayard becomes apparent when she tells Lucia to write down the names of the various ancestors: "I was Genevieve Wainright. My mother was Faith Morrison. She was the daughter of a farmer in New Hampshire who was something of a blacksmith too. And she married young John Wainwright--" (p. 3).

Furthermore, Wilder deftly weaves repetitions and variations into the dialogue of "The Long Christmas Dinner" to fashion a musical structure, which carries his theme swiftly forward. These repetitions and variations echo the motif of transience like a resounding refrain signifying its chord. In the characters' conversations the weather on Christmas Day becomes a minor motif<sup>39</sup> with reverberations of

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<sup>39</sup>Fred B. Millet, Reading Drama (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), p. 137.

the past as Lucia says: "What a wonderful day for our first Christmas dinner: a beautiful sunny morning, snow, a splendid sermon. Dr. McCarthy preaches a splendid sermon. I cried and cried. . . . Every least twig is wrapped around with ice. You almost never see that" (p. 3). Then the passing of time is signified through the characters' dialogue, for Cousin Brandon enters to enjoy this particular Christmas Day dinner:

COUSIN BRANDON (rubbing his hands). Well, well, I smell turkey. My dear cousins, I can't tell you how pleasant it is to be having Christmas dinner with you all. I've lived out there in Alaska so long without relatives. Let me see, how long have you had this new house, Roderick?

RODERICK. Why, it must be . . .

MOTHER BAYARD. Five years. It's five years, children. You should keep a diary. This is your sixth Christmas dinner here. (p. 4)

Yet Wilder's theme of transience, coupled with the elements of change contrasted with that which is left unchanged, presents another musical note with an elaborate counterpoint.<sup>40</sup> Transience causes death to appear and disappear, but birth reintroduces life, which continues with the recurrent generations. For during speeches concerning Mother Bayard's poor health, Wilder signifies her impending demise with stage directions: "Mother Bayard's chair, without any visible propulsion, starts to draw away from the

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

table, turns toward the right, and slowly goes toward the dark portal" (p. 4). Lucia shows her concern with the suggestion of a nap for her mother-in-law, but Mother Bayard says: "I'm all right. Just go on with your dinner. I was ten, and I said to my brother--She goes out. A very slight pause" (p. 5). Then Wilder's theme of transience is repeated on another plane as he weaves a variation of the weather into the dialogue; however, the day is quite different from the other bright sunny days of the past. This particular day seems symbolic of death as Cousin Brandon says: "It's too bad it's such a cold dark day today. We almost need the lamps" (p. 5). And the audience learns from Lucia both bad and good news with death and life juxtaposed:

LUCIA (dabbing her eyes). I know Mother Bayard wouldn't want us to grieve for her on Christmas day, but I can't forget her sitting in her wheel chair right beside us, only a year ago. And she would be so glad to know our good news. (p. 5)

The good news is revealed as a baby carriage is pushed by a nurse through the left entrance, which signifies new life.

Lucia says:

O my wonderful new baby, my darling baby! Who ever saw such a child! Quick, nurse, a boy or a girl? A boy! Roderick, what shall we call him? Really, nurse, you've never seen such a child!

RODERICK. We'll call him Charles after your father and grandfather. (p. 6)

When the nurse wheels out the baby the passing of time is noted as Cousin Brandon puts on his white wig. Another

Christmas dinner is in progress, and again Wilder weaves a repetition of the weather into the dialogue, for this day is also dreary. Both the wig and weather are commensurate with the aging of Cousin Brandon, who says: "Pity it's such an overcast day today. And no snow" (p. 7). And Wilder's repetition continues, for Lucia says: "But the sermon was lovely. I cried and cried. Dr. Spaulding does preach such a splendid sermon" (p. 7).

Wilder continues his theme as birth again reaffirms life, for a nurse arrives with a perambulator from the left. This time it is a girl, and she is named Genevieve, after Roderick's mother. As the play progresses, the audience learns that Charles has reached the age of twelve. Roderick, also advancing in age, suffers poor health; he moves slowly toward the dark portal but manages to totter back to the table. The audience learns through table conversation that Roderick has missed many Christmas dinners while he was incapacitated upstairs. But today he is well enough to appear at the table. However, Charles and his father change places at the table, for Charles takes over his father's duty of carving the turkey. Again the weather carries the theme forward as Charles says: "It's a great blowy morning, mother. The wind comes over the hill like a lot of cannon" (p. 10). Repetition occurs as Lucia speaks of the sermons

and of her tears. Uncle Brandon is getting older, for he hasn't eaten a thing. Then Wilder's weather motif enters again as Genevieve kisses her father and says: "It's glorious. Every least twig is wrapped around with ice. You almost never see that" (p. 10).

Indeed, Wilder sets forth his theme with both death and life omnipresent. For Roderick starts toward the dark portal. He seems dismayed as he says, "Yes, but . . . but . . . not yet! He goes out" (p. 11). Lucia dabs her eyes and reveals the increasing years as she raises her voice to Cousin Brandon, who is very deaf. The audience learns from Lucia that twenty-five years have passed since the first Christmas dinner. In the years to follow Charles marries Leonora, but their first child dies as the nurse wheels the baby in through the left portal only to cross the stage and go out the dark portal.

Wilder continues his theme of transience with change contrasted with that which is left unchanged. The family enjoys a continuous feast with a constant menu: turkey--the members are allowed their preferences for light or dark meat--stuffing, potatoes, gravy, jelly, cranberry sauce, and wine with annual toasts for pleasure and health. During the first Christmas Day dinner Roderick says, "Come, Lucia, just a little wine. Mother, a little red wine for Christmas day.

Full of iron" (pp. 3-4). The glasses are always being filled throughout the play. Again with another generation Charles says, "Come, a little wine, Lenora, Genevieve? Full of iron. Eduardo, fill the ladies' glasses" (p. 17). Although the fare and the celebration remain the same, the members change, for Death and Life are omnipresent. Transience, lurking in the background, brings death to all. Moreover, both grief and joy have places at this dining-room table. With the display of these emotions, Wilder bares the core of the play, for birth or death is to the Bayard family, as to any other family, the time when its members draw closely together and realize their mutual dependence. From the simple setting of the dining-room table comes the cry of Genevieve, a daughter of the middle generation of the family, as she grieves over the death of her mother: "I never told her how wonderful she was. We all treated her as though she were just a friend in the house. I thought she'd be here forever" (p. 16). Her grief becomes everyone's lament in a time of sorrow as the Bayard family becomes the symbol of all families everywhere.<sup>41</sup> But birth reaffirms life, and Charles and Lenora are blessed with twins--a boy, Samuel, and a girl, Lucia, who is named after her grandmother. Still later another boy is born, and he is named Roderick after his

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<sup>41</sup>Goldstein, p. 79.

grandfather. As the years pass, Cousin Ermengarde, a spinster, comes to live with the family. Through the ensuing years a war develops, and Samuel is called to duty. Death stalks the boy, however, for as he says goodbye, he tosses his unneeded white wig through the dark portal and then proceeds through the door himself. Thus, Sam's life ends during the war.

Still, Wilder works other evidences of transience into his narrative, for like all families everywhere, the Bayard family has certain manners and customs, which Wilder uses to show the passage of time.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the play, Lucia repeatedly mentions that she always cries during sermons. Later in the play Genevieve explains to Charles's wife, Leonora, that Lucia's generation always cried during sermons because "They had to go [to church] since they were children and I suppose sermons reminded them of their fathers and mothers, just as Christmas dinners do us. Especially in an old house like this" (p. 17).

Indeed, change versus permanence is also reflected in the mothers' reactions to specific events: they lament death but rejoice with birth; they want their children to stay as they are, but the fathers prefer the sons to grow up and join the family business. For a time, everyone grows up and remains in the same town, and the sons go into the family

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<sup>42</sup>Millet, p. 138.

business. But the characters' values change as the play progresses. In particular, Roderick, reflecting this change when he is admonished by his father for his behavior at a Christmas Eve dance, retorts: "Great God, you gotta get drunk in this town to forget how dull it is. Time passes so slowly here that it stands still, that's what's the trouble" (p. 23). Charles threatens to take his son from college and place him in the family business, but Roderick replies: "I have better things to do than to go into your old factory. I'm going somewhere where time passes, my God" (p. 23)! Consequently, the father and son never see each other again, for Roderick goes to China to sell aluminum.

Change continues as the third-generation Lucia marries and spends a Christmas abroad on her honeymoon. She does not come back to the same town to live; Leonora, her mother, informs the audience of coming events:

Oh, here's a telegram from them in Paris! "Love and Christmas greetings to all." I told them we'd be eating some of their wedding cake and thinking about them today. It seems to be all decided that they will settle down in the East, Ermengarde. I can't even have my daughter for a neighbor. They hope to build before long somewhere on the shore north of New York. (p. 24)

Furthermore, the struggle to cope with change and stability causes Genevieve to choose change. As Charles and Leonora lament the loss of children, Genevieve becomes overwhelmed by the past: "I can stand everything but this

terrible soot everywhere. We should have moved long ago. We're surrounded by factories. We have to change the window curtains every week" (p. 25). Leonora is shocked, but Genevieve explains:

I can't stand it. I can't stand it any more. I'm going abroad. It's not only the soot that comes through the very walls of this house; it's the thoughts, it's the thought of what has been and what might have been here. And the feeling about this house of the years grinding away. My mother died yesterday--not twenty-five years ago. Oh, I'm going to live and die abroad! Yes, I'm going to be the American old maid living and dying in a pension in Munich or Florence. (p. 25)

But the other old maid, Ermengarde, does not like change. She clings to the past; she continues to live and prefers to die in the same old house alone because Charles has died and Leonora has gone to New York to visit her daughter and son-in-law. Thus it is through Ermengarde that Wilder reveals the play's cyclical unity, for she reads a letter from Leonora which discloses the ongoing events.

Indeed, unity is paramount, for "The Long Christmas Dinner" closes as it opens. The play begins with a small family unit--the wife Lucia and her husband Roderick who pushes his mother to the table in a wheel chair. Incidentally, the mother is called Mother Bayard. These three enjoy their first Christmas dinner in a new home. Toward the end of the play, however, the audience learns from Ermengarde that Leonora has gone to live with her daughter, Lucia, named

after her grandmother, and Lucia's husband. Leonora is now called Mother Bayard, and she too, like the Mother Bayard of ninety years before, finds it more comfortable to come and go in a wheel chair. So it is ascertained that Lucia, her husband, and Mother Bayard are enjoying their first Christmas dinner in the couple's new home. In addition, life is beginning anew, for Lucia is expecting a child.

Again, Wilder repeats the note of transience in juxtaposing the image of the young, expectant mother against the aging Ermengarde. And so he implies time's toll as Ermengarde advances in age. With a sigh, she allows a book to fall from her hand. Finding her cane beside her, she totters through the dark portal, murmuring, "Dear little Roderick and little Lucia" (p. 27). Therefore, with the conclusion of this play, Wilder reaffirms life through birth. His evident truth and undeniable deduction reveal "things as they are."

Indeed, speaking through his characters, Wilder suggests that each age, including this age, has a value of its own.<sup>43</sup> Just as Vergil in Wilder's The Cabala advises the young American observer who is leaving Rome to find a city that is young since one should build a city, not rest there, Genevieve in leaving the town with its smoke and factories

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<sup>43</sup>Louis Broussard, American Drama (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 93.

wishes to lead her own life in the present. Consequently, Wilder does not want to smother life with the past. The past is entwined with the present, but it cannot and should not become the living present. Thus, in this play, as in "Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden" and "Pullman Car Hiawatha," Wilder shows an interest in the carpe diem theme and puts into practice his conception of drama, but he does not realize their potential in these one-act plays. That development finally occurs only when he fully exploits both the carpe diem theme and expressive stage techniques with overwhelming success in Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and The Matchmaker.

## CHAPTER III

### LATER DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

With a fully developed theory of the drama in hand, Wilder demonstrates a mystical identification of the American with human destiny in Our Town (1938) and The Skin of Our Teeth (1942). This view and Gertrude Stein's role in helping Wilder to formulate it can be seen in his conversations with Stein, which Wilder in part summarized in his introductions to her Four in America, Geographical History of America, and Narration: Four Lectures. She reaffirmed his humanistic convictions that everlasting human truths were to be found in literary masterpieces,<sup>1</sup> and she gave a significance to the ability of daily life to confirm truth. Wilder quotes:

What we know is formed in our head by thousands of small occasions in the daily life. By "what we know" I do not mean, of course, what we learn from books. . . . I mean what we really know . . . about the validity of the sentiments, and things like that. All the thousands of occasions in the daily life go into our head to form our ideas about these things. Now if we write . . . these things we know flow down our arm and come out on the page. The moment before we wrote them we did not really know we knew them, . . . but if we did not know we knew them until the moment of writing, then they come to

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<sup>1</sup>Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), pp. 82-83.

us with a shock of surprise. That is the Moment of Recognition.<sup>2</sup>

Stein hastens to add that this Moment of Recognition should not be mistaken for inspiration because the word inspiration implies that someone else supplies the aforementioned understanding. She says that this moment is "very much your own and was acquired by you in thousands of tiny occasions in your daily life." And of this moment "you are the first and last audience."<sup>3</sup> Other persons may buy the material and say that they understand the experience presented, but actually they do not. Stein adds:

. . . the things they know have been built up by thousands of small occasions which are different from yours. They say they agree with you; what they mean is that they are aware that your pages have the vitality of a thing which sounds to them like someone else's knowing; it is consistent to its own world of what one person has really known. That is a great pleasure and the highest compliment they can pay it is to say that they agree with it.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, this moment--someone else's written or spoken recognition--starts a chain reaction. It stirs feelings in others and awakens a moment of awareness in them. As Wilder writes, Stein considers all such revelations as common knowledge: "it lies sleeping within us; it is awakened in us when we hear it expressed by a person who is speaking or writing

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<sup>2</sup>Thornton Wilder, Introduction to Four in America, by Gertrude Stein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. xi.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. xi-xii.

in a state of recognition."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Emily's farewell to the world in Act III of Our Town is her moment of recognition, which in turn should prompt an awareness of the beauties of this life and hasten all to "seize the day" while it is at hand.

Furthermore, Stein distinguishes between human nature and human mind. Human nature, she maintains, attaches itself to identity in time and place, whereas human mind needs no such identification. She contends that the subjects of the literary masterpieces are about human nature but are of the human mind, for the human mind sets forth the unbiased knowledge contained therein. Further, through contemplation of the masterpiece one achieves existence to the extent that the human mind perceives the universal in the individual.<sup>6</sup> In a 1953 Time magazine lead story, Wilder carries Stein's assumption of the human mind a step further. According to Stein the human mind, divested of identity, "gazes at pure existing and pure creating" and knows all. Further, since the human mind can be found in literary masterpieces which reveal the ongoing boundless Now, it can also be found in America, which fosters boundlessness and whose very geography suggests "an invitation to wander."<sup>7</sup> In this sense, then, the human mind

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>"An Obliging Man," Time, 61 (January 12, 1953), 46.

moves beyond the limits of individual personality to embrace simultaneously all periods of time--past, present, and future.<sup>8</sup> This use of vertical time or psychological time is evident throughout Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth. Moreover, in Our Town human nature, or the concrete world, exists in each small event in turn-of-the-century New England. It also exists in The Skin of Our Teeth in the events with the Antrobus family, but Wilder's generalized presentation of abstract truth--the "pure existing and pure creating," the absence or the melding of time and place--results in an appeal to the human mind.<sup>9</sup>

In large part because of this balance between the concrete and the abstract, Wilder's dramatic fame rests on his one-act plays and his full-length plays Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and The Matchmaker. While this last found success on Broadway as a musical comedy entitled "Hello, Dolly!"<sup>10</sup> it is Our Town which has attained a classical position more secure than any other work in the American collection,

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<sup>8</sup>Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 99.

<sup>9</sup>Donald Haberman, The Plays of Thornton Wilder: A Critical Study (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 57.

<sup>10</sup>Sister Mary Fabian, O. P., "The Contributions of Thornton Wilder to American Drama," Horizontes, 7 (April, 1964), 76.

including the international fame of Eugene O'Neill.<sup>11</sup> The one-act plays of 1931 forecast the form of Our Town, by which Wilder introduces a Stage Manager as arranger and interpreter, colloquial speech, and the name of Grover's Corners, a small American town where the action takes place. From "Pullman Car Hiawatha" comes the idea of revealing the historical and sociological background, an important technique to the expression of theme in both works, and from the same play comes the young heroine's farewell to remembered events of happiness at the time of her death. From "The Long Christmas Dinner" come overdue words of praise for the mother. The climax to the third act of Our Town--the heroine's return to earth for one day of her childhood--finds its source in The Woman of Andros.

Assuredly Wilder borrowed from his own writing to produce works of increasingly greater depth and perception. With each publication since The Cabala he reveals growth, but with Our Town he demonstrates an amazing leap forward.<sup>12</sup> Although Wilder's plays are uniquely his, he deals with each of them in a different manner. Our Town concerns regionalism but is universal; The Skin of Our Teeth sets forth a comedy in an expressionistic vein; The Matchmaker demonstrates a farce in the traditional style. With these plays Wilder

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<sup>11</sup>Goldstein, p. 97.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

abandons conventional staging in favor of an experiment in form. Yet he reveals in each play a respect for human life and the everyday events which are a part of that life; man's dignity is always prominent.

Moreover, Wilder's humanism is the motivation for all his work. For Wilder does not concern himself with class struggle or with social and economic problems. Rather, he prefers to depict life with its elements of love and joy versus death, laughter versus boredom, aspiration versus despair.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, he does not reflect the contemporary literary style. For his plays are fashioned on a sound moral foundation. Man's dignity and purpose in life is paramount in his plays, and he concentrates on the permanent rather than the temporary details of human life. In all his work he manifests an abiding faith. Consequently, he often presents a morality play of primary importance. Hence, the phrase: Our Town, the Everyman of our day.<sup>14</sup>

Undeniably, Everyman is a fitting example of the morality play. In the prologue to Everyman, the Messenger points out that the play concerns "our lives and endings"; in Act I of Our Town the Stage Manager tells the audience: "This is the way we were . . . in our living and in our

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<sup>13</sup>Fabian, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

dying."<sup>15</sup> The character Everyman represents mankind; although Emily and George have specific names, they represent, respectively, teen-age boys and girls in Act I, young boys and girls in love everywhere in Act II, and young married couples separated by death in Act III. Everyman presents man's life; similarly, Our Town presents life--from birth to death. There is a common denominator--one specific point of focus--in the plays: Everyman takes heed of the ending; Our Town focuses on the living. On reaching the grave Emily learns that men never fully recognize the beauty of life while they live it.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the setting of the morality play is abstract in order to convey the universal and the timeless; in Our Town the words hundreds, thousands, and millions denote the universality of the town itself. Although Our Town has a particular place and a particular time, it is a play about life in general. To reveal this life, Wilder has selected a small town divested of artificiality so that he can set forth the fundamentals of a good life. The time, 1901-1913, allows him to present the daily occurrences of a small time when life was less complicated than it is in the final quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Thornton Wilder, Our Town, in Three Plays, Bantam Books (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 21. Hereafter, material from this play will be cited in the text.

<sup>16</sup>A. R. Fulton, Drama and Theatre: Illustrated by Seven Modern Plays (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1946), p. 391.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

Moreover, like "Happy Journey" and "The Long Christmas Dinner," Our Town is a play which deals with family figures--father, mother, brother, and sister. At the same time, this family is a prism which reflects the author's basic idea and informing principle--the perpetuity of the family, its pattern of life, its place in the basically safe cosmos in spite of troubles and apparently disastrous but temporary dislocations.<sup>18</sup> For the play concerns two families, the Gibbs and Webb families, who live next door to each other. They lead ordinary lives; nothing happens to set them apart from others. Dr. Gibbs and Editor Webb are professional men, but their titles imply a knowledge of human difficulties. The unique hobbies of the two men are among the schemes Wilder employs to link Grover's Corners to the outside world: in his spare time Dr. Gibbs pursues his studies of the Civil War with zeal, while Editor Webb devotes his time to the life of Napoleon.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Wilder's theme--the significance beyond price of the smallest events inherent in everyday life--is a simple one. Further, he successfully reveals his theme within the three acts of Our Town. The beauty of ordinary life becomes apparent in Act I, entitled "The Daily Life,"

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<sup>18</sup>Arthur Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama," Atlantic Monthly, 197 (April, 1956), 38.

<sup>19</sup>Goldstein, p. 101.

as George Gibbs and Emily Webb discuss their homework on a moonlight night; with the second act, "Love and Marriage," they fall in love during adolescence and marry after graduating from high school. Yet, as George and Emily act out their joys and sorrows, they not only exhibit an abstract manifestation of these emotions, but they also present the entire passions of mankind. The third act concerns death: Emily dies after giving birth to their second child; she tries to recapture life for a day, and George grieves despairingly beside her grave. Yet, these experiences and emotions are fundamental to everyone; hence, the theatrical significance of these experiences becomes universally astounding.<sup>20</sup> This play has reached historical significance because it proves that with imaginative audience participation scenery and realistic equipment are unnecessary.<sup>21</sup> The audience arrives to see a bare, uncurtained stage in half-light. The Stage Manager, wearing a hat and smoking a pipe, enters and places a table and three chairs downstage to the left, and a table and three chairs downstage to the right. He also sets a low bench at the corner which represents the Webb house, left. The Stage Manager then leans against the right proscenium pillar to watch the late arrivals. When the auditorium lights are darkened, he speaks:

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>21</sup>Fabian, p. 77.

This play is called "Our Town". . . The name of the town is Grover's Corners, New Hampshire--just across the Massachusetts line: latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes; longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes. The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7, 1901. The time is just before dawn. (p. 5)

Then the audience hears a rooster crow, and this realistic sound effect, the blowing of factory and train whistles, the ringing of a school bell, the chiming of a clock, as well as effective costuming become Wilder's only concessions to realism.

Relying upon this expressionistic mode, the Stage Manager prepares the audience for the theme of Act I, "The Daily Life." In fact, the exploration and exhortation of this everyday life in Grover's Corners reflects existence in small towns everywhere. The Stage Manager reveals that Dr. Gibbs is returning from delivering a baby and that his wife is about to prepare breakfast: "Mrs. Gibbs, a plump, pleasant woman in the middle thirties, comes 'downstairs' right. She pulls up an imaginary window shade in her kitchen and starts to make a fire in her stove" (p. 7). While Mrs. Gibbs is preparing her imaginary breakfast in an imaginary kitchen at one side of the stage, Mrs. Webb is accomplishing the same task at the other side of the stage. Then a milkman appears to deliver imaginary milk. Says the Stage Manager: "Here comes Howie Newsome, deliverin' the milk. [HOWIE NEWSOME, about thirty, in overalls, comes along

Main Street from the left, walking beside an invisible horse and wagon and carrying an imaginary rack with milk bottles. The sound of clinking milk bottles is heard]" (p. 9). When breakfast is over the children from both households go off to school, and the ladies keep each other company as they shell peas for the noonday meal.<sup>22</sup>

Wilder presents his theme by instilling into the act moments of rare beauty and pathos.<sup>23</sup> In the first act the love of father for daughter becomes apparent as Mr. Webb teases Emily: "Walk simply. Who do you think you are today?" (p. 18). Emily replies: "Papa, you're terrible. One minute you tell me to stand up straight and the next minute you call me names. I just don't listen to you" (p. 18). She then bestows an abrupt kiss on Mr. Webb, who retaliates: "Golly, I never got a kiss from such a great lady before" (p. 18).

Then Wilder carries his theme of the daily life forward with Emily, who like all teen-agers is concerned with her appearance and is beset with frustration and doubts as to her ability to get someone interested in her:

EMILY: Mama, am I good looking?

MRS. WEBB: Yes, of course you are. All my children have got good features; I'd be ashamed if they hadn't.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>23</sup>Goldstein, p. 104.

EMILY: Oh, Mama, that's not what I mean. What I mean is: am I pretty?

MRS. WEBB: I've already told you, yes. Now that's enough of that. You have a nice young pretty face. I never heard such foolishness.

EMILY: Oh, Mama, you never tell us the truth about anything.

MRS. WEBB. I am telling you the truth.

EMILY: Mama, were you pretty?

MRS. WEBB: Yes, I was, if I do say it. I was the prettiest girl in town next to Mamie Cartwright.

EMILY: But, Mama, you've got to say something about me. Am I pretty enough . . . to get anybody . . . to get people interested in me? (p. 20)

Wilder infuses universality into his theme, for this quality is inherent throughout the play. At first the town seems an ordinary one as the Stage Manager introduces Professor Willard, who supplies the geographical location of the town:

Grover's Corners . . . let me see . . . Grover's Corners lies on the old Pleistocene granite of the Appalachian range. I may say it's some of the oldest land in the world. We're very proud of that. A shelf of Devonian basalt crosses it with vestiges of Mesozoic shale, and some sandstone outcroppings; but that's all more recent: two hundred, three hundred million years old. . . . (p. 15)

He then adds: "The population, at the moment, is 2,642. The Postal District brings in 507 more, making a total of 3,149.--Mortality and birth rates: constant.--By MacPherson's

gauge: 6.032" (p. 15). The Stage Manager then calls for Editor Webb to give the political and social report:

Well . . . I don't have to tell you that we're run here by a Board of Selectmen.--All males vote at the age of twenty-one. Women vote indirect. We're lower middle class: sprinkling of professional men . . . ten per cent illiterate laborers. Politically, we're eighty-six per cent Republicans; six per cent Democrats; four per cent Socialists; rest, indifferent. Religiously, we're eighty-five per cent Protestants; twelve per cent Catholics; rest, indifferent. . . . Very ordinary town if you ask me. (p. 16)

This information makes the town just another place on the map. But the ordinariness of this spot presents the town as the universe, and the events taking place here appear to be a general expression of the events in the lives of all people.<sup>24</sup> The universality is underscored when the Stage Manager tells the audience that in addition to the Bible and the Constitution of the United States, he is also placing a copy of William Shakespeare's plays, a copy of Our Town, and several local newspapers into the cornerstone of the bank.

Hence, the theme of man's place in the universe coupled with the significance of the daily life emerges:

Y'know--Babylon once had two million people in it, and all we know about 'em is the names of the kings and some copies of wheat contracts . . . and contracts for the sale of slaves. Yet every night all those families sat down to supper, and the father came home from his work, and the smoke went up the chimney,--same as here. And even in Greece and Rome, all we know about the real life of the people is what we can piece together out of the joking

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 101-102.

poems and the comedies they wrote for the theatre back then. (p. 21)

Wilder presents yet another theme concerning daily life through the character of George, who sometimes forgets to perform his part in helping the family at home. The dramatist captures a familiar moment filled with love and understanding as Dr. Gibbs scolds his son mildly:

Well George, while I was in my office today I heard a funny sound . . . and what do you think it was? It was your mother chopping wood. There you see your mother--getting up early; cooking meals all day long; washing and ironing;--and still she has to go out in the back yard and chop wood. I suppose she just got tired of asking you. She just gave up and decided it was easier to do it herself. And you eat her meals, and put on the clothes she keeps nice for you, and you run off and play baseball,--like she's some hired girl we keep around the house but that we don't like very much. Well, I knew all I had to do was call your attention to it. Here's a handkerchief, son. George, I've decided to raise your spending money twenty-five cents a week. Not, of course, for chopping wood for your mother, because that's a present you give her, but because you're getting older--and I imagine there are lots of things you must find to do with it. (pp. 23-24)

Then another picture of daily experience is seen as Mrs. Gibbs quiets the doctor's apparent loneliness while she was away at choir practice: "Now, Frank, don't be grouchy. Come out and smell the heliotrope in the moonlight" (p. 25). As they stroll out arm-in-arm along the footlights, she adds: "Isn't that wonderful? What did you do all the time I was away?" (p. 25). Mrs. Gibbs then tells her husband about Simon Stimson, the town's disappointed, drunken organist, who was

in worse shape at choir practice than ever before. Dr. Gibbs shows his sympathy and understanding: "I guess I know more about Simon Stimson's affairs than anybody in town. Some people ain't made for small-town life" (p. 26). Thus Wilder has omitted somewhat the ugly side of American small-town life, for Wilder keeps Stimson in the background because he did not intend to present a total revelation of small-town life. As Wilder states in his preface, Our Town "is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life."<sup>25</sup> The dramatist does this by presenting beauty in the ordinary affairs of daily living as well as in the momentous occasions of birth and marriage. But Wilder does not completely avoid human difficulties. Although Our Town is filled with the beauty and joy of life, it is also concerned with the frustrations of youth in the growing-up process as shown in Act I. With Act II Wilder reveals the last-minute doubts of youth before the important step of matrimony, and in Act III the dramatist imparts the despair and grief of George, who has lost his wife in death. So to have placed Simon Stimson in the foreground would have detracted from Wilder's entire purpose.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>25</sup>Thornton Wilder, Preface to Three Plays, Bantam Books (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. xi. Hereafter material from this source will be cited in the text.

<sup>26</sup>Barnard Hewitt, "Thornton Wilder Says 'Yes,'" The Tulane Drama Review, 4 (December, 1959), 114-115.

Wilder ends the Daily Life of Act I as the Stage Manager says: "That's the end of the First Act, friends. You can go and smoke now, those that smoke" (p. 29).

Act II begins with the Stage Manager announcing that three years have passed. He adds: "Yes, the sun's come up over a thousand times. Summers and winters have cracked the mountains a little bit more and the rains have brought down some of the dirt" (p. 30). Then Wilder's theme of the continuation of life juxtaposed against transiency emerges as the Stage Manager adds:

Some babies that weren't even born before have begun talking regular sentences already; and a number of people who thought they were right young and spry have noticed that they can't bound up a flight of stairs like they used to, without their heart fluttering a little.

All that can happen in a thousand days.  
Nature's been pushing and contriving in other ways, too; a number of young people fell in love and got married. . . . Almost everybody in the world gets married,--you know what I mean? In our town there aren't hardly any exceptions. (p. 30)

The Stage Manager now informs the audience that Act II is called "Love and Marriage" (p. 31). The time is July 7, just after high school graduation. It is raining, but this is no ordinary day. It is Emily and George's wedding day. Just as in Act I, the day begins with breakfast; then Wilder repeats his idea of love, that element which makes new life and shelters it with the Stage Manager's next remarks:

And there's Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb come down to make breakfast, just as though it were an ordinary

day. I don't have to point out to the women in my audience that those ladies they see before them, both of those ladies cooked three meals a day--one of 'em for twenty years, the other for forty--and no summer vacation. They brought up two children apiece, washed, cleaned the house,--and never a nervous breakdown. (p. 31)

At this point Wilder's theme of "seizing the day and life itself" emerges as the Stage Manager adds: "It's like what one of those Middle West poets said: 'You've got to love life to have life, and you've got to have life to love life. . . . It's what they call a vicious circle'" (p. 31).

Moreover, Wilder carries his theme of love and marriage forward with warmth and humor as Dr. Gibbs tells his wife: "The groom's up shaving himself--only there ain't an awful lot to shave. Whistling and singing, like he's glad to leave us.--Every now and then he says 'I do' to the mirror, but it don't sound convincing to me" (p. 33). Dr. Gibbs then tells his wife that this particular day recalls his own wedding day. Indeed, Wilder's perceptive dialogue for Dr. Gibbs reminds each individual of his own particular wedding:

I was the scaredest young fella in the State of New Hampshire. I thought I'd make a mistake for sure. And when I saw you coming' down that aisle I thought you were the prettiest girl I'd ever seen, but the only trouble was that I'd never seen you before. There I was in the Congregational Church marryin' a total stranger. (p. 34)

Dr. Gibbs tells his wife that he feared they would have conversation for only a few weeks. Both laugh reminiscently as Mrs. Gibbs reflects that she always had something to say.

In another instance of love, Wilder has George suddenly bolt from the house bent on seeing Emily only to be checked by Mrs. Webb, who tells him that he cannot see the bride on her wedding day until he sees her at church. George, disappointed, sits in embarrassed silence as he drinks coffee with Mr. Webb. Wilder embellishes his theme with humor as Mr. Webb abruptly says in a loud voice: "Well, George, how are you?" (p. 36). George, startled with coffee in his mouth, chokes and says: "Oh fine, I'm fine. . . . Mr. Webb, what sense could there be in a superstition like that?" (p. 36). Mr. Webb explains that a girl is most likely nervous with her mind filled with clothes and other things. Then Wilder again adds a note of humor as George voices his concern: "I wish a fellow could get married without all that marching up and down" (p. 37).

Then the Stage Manager takes the audience back into the past to let them discover the first time that George and Emily decided to spend a lifetime together. With this scene Wilder rings a universal note of young love everywhere, for the Stage Manager says to the audience:

I want you to try and remember what it was like to have been very young. And particularly the days when you were first in love; when you were like a person sleepwalking, and you didn't quite see the street you were in, and didn't quite hear everything that was said to you. (p. 39)

A drugstore soda fountain is represented by a board across the backs of two chairs, and George and Emily discover their true feelings for each other over ice cream sodas:

GEORGE: Emily, I'm glad you spoke to me about that . . . that fault in my character [the fact that he played baseball all the time, seemed conceited, and had time for no one but himself]. What you said was right; but there was one thing wrong in it, and that was when you said that for a year I wasn't noticing people, and . . . you, for instance. Why, you say you were watching me when I did everything. . . . I was doing the same about you all the time. Why, sure,--I always thought about you as one of the chief people I thought about. I always made sure where you were sitting on the bleachers, and who you were with, and for three days now I've been trying to walk home with you; but something's always got in the way. Yesterday I was standing over against the wall waiting for you, and you walked home with Miss Corcoran.

EMILY: George! . . . Life's awful funny! How could I have known that? Why, I thought--. (pp. 43-44)

George then tells Emily that he is not going to college, for he plans to run his uncle's farm. He awkwardly implies that he wants Emily to be his girl. Emily happily says: "I . . . I am now; I always have been" (p. 44).

The Stage Manager then assumes the role of the minister at the wedding. With this scene Wilder deftly carries his theme forward as the young people's moment of alarm immediately before the wedding brings both laughter and tears to the spectators as George comments: "Ma, I don't want to grow old. Why's everybody pushing me so? . . . Listen Ma,--for the last time I ask you . . . All I want to

do is to be a fella--" (p. 47). Mrs. Gibbs reassures her son, and Wilder turns to Emily's bridal fear: "But, Papa,--I don't want to get married. . . . Why can't I stay for a while just as I am? Let's go away. . . . Don't you remember that you used to say . . . all the time: that I was your girl! There must be lots of places we can go to" (pp. 47-48). Leading Emily toward George, Mr. Webb tells her reassuringly: "Why you're marrying the best young fellow in the world. George is a fine fellow" (p. 48). To George he says: "I'm giving away my daughter, George. Do you think you can take care of her?" (p. 48). Then with George's and Emily's dialogue Wilder appeals to the emotions of all viewers and readers:

GEORGE: Mr. Webb, I want to . . . I want to try.  
Emily, I'm going to do my best. I love you, Emily.  
I need you.

EMILY: Well, if you love me, help me. All I want  
is someone to love me.

GEORGE: I will, Emily. Emily, I'll try. (p. 48)

Indeed, with George and Emily, Wilder gives a sincere glimpse of humanity, of love and marriage, of hope and fear--those common experiences that give intensity and beauty to life.<sup>27</sup>

Following a ten-minute intermission announced by the Stage Manager, the third act develops the theme of life after death. At the beginning, three rows of people are seated in

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<sup>27</sup>Fabian, p. 79.

chairs facing the audience. These people represent the dead. The Stage Manager announces that nine years have gone by and that the cemetery is situated on a windy hilltop. The Stage Manager then sets the scene for the events to follow:

We all know that something is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars . . . 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. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being. (p. 52)

Moreover, the Stage Manager implied in Act II that the audience could surmise from the foregoing acts--"The Daily Life" and "Love and Marriage"--what the last act would concern. And so Wilder explores the question: what is important in man's life, and what is unimportant?<sup>28</sup> This exploration of the significant facts in man's life heralds the carpe diem theme, and this theme is underscored by the dead seated on-stage. The first row of chairs, which represent graves, is made up of three chairs--one empty, the other two occupied by Mrs. Gibbs and Simon Stimson. Other townspeople are seated in the second row. In the third row is Wally Webb, Emily's brother. The audience learns through the Stage Manager that he died when his appendix burst while he was on a Boy Scout trip. From Joe Stoddard, who is supervising the grave for

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<sup>28</sup>Fulton, p. 392.

Emily, the audience learns that Stimson in his anguish and frustration took his own life. Rain is falling as the funeral procession arrives, and Emily emerges from behind umbrellas. She takes her place in the vacant chair beside Mrs. Gibbs. The mourners leave; as Emily converses with Mrs. Gibbs about past events, a strong desire wells within her to revisit her home, if only for a day. But as she prepares to return to the world of the living, little does Emily realize the awful moment of awareness that lies ahead of her. The dead warn her not to return, and the Stage Manager admonishes Emily: "You not only live it; but you watch yourself living it. . . . And as you watch it, you see the thing that they--down there--never know. You see the future. You know what's going to happen afterwards" (p. 58). Emily, however, is persistent and wishes to choose a happy day, but Mrs. Gibbs tells her: "No--At least, choose an unimportant day. Choose the least important day in your life. It will be important enough" (p. 58). For Mrs. Gibbs already knows what Emily is to learn at this late date: the important things in life are considered trivial by the living.<sup>29</sup> But Emily is adamant and chooses her twelfth birthday, and this becomes one of the most sensitive scenes ever presented on an American stage. Emily, returning to Grover's Corners, says: "Oh, that's the

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

town I knew as a little girl. And, look, there's the old white fence that used to be around our house. Oh, I'd forgotten that! Oh, I love it so! Oh! how young Mama looks! I didn't know Mama was ever that young" (p. 59). Since it is Emily's birthday, Mr. Webb calls: "Yes, I've got something here. . . . Where's my girl? Where's my birthday girl?" (p. 61). As Emily tells her Mother good morning her [Emily's] voice sounds like that of a twelve-year-old. Her mother kisses her and says: "Well, now, dear, a very happy birthday to my girl. . . . There are some surprises waiting for you on the kitchen table. . . . I reckon you can guess who brought the post-card album. I found it on the doorstep when I brought in the milk--George Gibbs . . . must have come over in the cold pretty early . . . right nice of him" (p. 61). Emily opens her presents and is overwhelmed with the wonder of life. Mr. Webb is heard again off stage: "Where's my girl? Where's my birthday girl?" (p. 62). This touching scene allows Emily to become a girl of twelve as well as a mature woman who sees life which has been taken from her. When she speaks as a twelve-year-old her mother hears her, but when she speaks as the deceased woman from the grave, only the audience and the Stage Manager hear her.<sup>30</sup> She suddenly realizes that the minutes embodying a lifetime have

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<sup>30</sup>Fabian, pp. 80-81.

passed too quickly to be savored fully.<sup>31</sup> As Emily cries out to the Stage Manager, the urgency of the carpe diem theme becomes paramount:

I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. [She breaks down sobbing. The lights dim on the left half of the stage. Mrs. Webb disappears.] 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. Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners . . . Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking . . . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. [She looks toward the Stage Manager and asks abruptly, through her tears:] Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?--every, every minute?

STAGE MANAGER: No. [Pause.] The saints and poets, maybe--they do some. (p. 62)

With this scene the carpe diem theme manifests itself poignantly, and Wilder's insight into life's treasured moments calls to mind Blake's lines from Auguries of Innocence: "To see the world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower; / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour."<sup>32</sup> For like Blake's grain of sand, Emily sees the world in "Our Town"; her stolen glance at the old white fence, her wonder at the chime of a clock, and her memory of the savory taste of food are similar to Blake's

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<sup>31</sup>Goldstein, p. 105.

<sup>32</sup>William Blake, from Auguries of Innocence, The Pocket Book of Verse, ed. M. E. Speare (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1940), p. 86.

perception of heaven in a wild flower. Like the flower which lasts for an hour, Emily's stay on earth seemed but a day; consequently, Emily knew a little bit of heaven on earth without full realization of that fact. What was for Blake and Wilder foresight comes to Emily as hindsight.

But in any event, in this graveyard scene Wilder sets forth his belief that man's unhappiness stems not from his failure to achieve or sustain greatness, but from his inability to delight in the beauty and wonder of ordinary life.<sup>33</sup> Emily returns to the world of the dead when she ascertains that there is no longer a place for her on earth. In despair, George throws himself across her grave. But Wilder has compassion; he shows his respect and love for human existence, and he indirectly urges the audience to make the most of life's treasured moments, which they have heretofore overlooked.<sup>34</sup> He encourages them to experience beauty before it becomes an irretrievable moment.<sup>35</sup>

Our Town, Wilder's first full-length play to reach Broadway, won the Pulitzer Prize, for with this play Wilder offers something different, unusual, and inspiring. Abandoning realistic staging, Wilder reveals an American town and

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<sup>33</sup>Goldstein, p. 105.

<sup>34</sup>Fabian, pp. 80-81.

<sup>35</sup>Henry Adler, "Thornton Wilder's Theatre," Horizon, 12 (August, 1945), 94.

displays his plot--human existence everywhere.<sup>36</sup> With his carpe diem theme expressed in a fresh theatrical mode, Wilder demonstrates a truth which is binding for men and women everywhere, in the large city as well as the small town, and throughout all time. Thornton Wilder said it another way in his preface:<sup>37</sup>

Emily's joys and grief, her algebra lessons, her birthday presents--what are they when we consider all the billions of girls who have lived, who are living, and who will live? Each individual's assertion to an absolute reality can only be inner, very inner. And here the method of staging finds its justification--in the first two acts there are at least a few chairs and tables; but when she [Emily] revisits the earth and the kitchen to which she descended on her twelfth birthday, the very chairs and table are gone. Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind--not in things, not in "scenery." . . . The climax of this play needs only five square feet of boarding and the passion to know what life means to us. (p. xi)

Wilder reveres human life no matter how trivial or how seemingly insignificant. He does not shut his eyes to change or death; rather, he reminds the audience that perhaps change is important to the realization of beauty and that death in a basic way gives meaning to life. Hewitt calls this view of the world affirmation.<sup>38</sup> Yet, Our Town is a tragedy. Since life is so short and because it is all they have, the

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<sup>36</sup>Fabian, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup>Hewitt, p. 116.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 116-117.

people of Grover's Corners should live every moment as intensely and consciously as their hearts will permit. A tragic vision assumes that man is a presumably noble being and that he lives in relation to some power or "fate" with which he is at odds.<sup>39</sup> In Our Town the characters are at odds with the power of Time; yet they acquire nobility, for the beauty of their ordinary lives is focused against their failure to grasp its true value.<sup>40</sup> Despite their fallibility, Wilder admires his people. In making this small town a mythical picture of human existence everywhere, he achieves what he and Gertrude Stein considered the main accomplishment of the literary masterpiece--the use of the elements of human nature to present the perpetual and the universal existing in the human mind. Wilder's technique of presentation is so closely entwined with the carpe diem theme that it becomes an expression of it. Consequently, Burbank says of Our Town what can be said of other great literary works: "Its effects could not have been achieved by any other means."<sup>41</sup>

Like Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth was a Pulitzer Prize winner. Yet Wilder has been attacked by critics who

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<sup>39</sup>Burbank, p. 95.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Burbank, p. 97.

say that if The Skin of Our Teeth shows genius it is that of Joyce. In his preface to Three Plays, Wilder states emphatically that The Skin of Our Teeth "is deeply indebted to James Joyce's Finnegans Wake. I should be very happy if, in the future, some author should feel similarly indebted to any work of mine. Literature has always more resembled a torch race than a furious dispute among heirs" (p. xii). However, Wilder's indebtedness lies in the scheme of the play only, because he instilled into the play an imaginative form all his own. The plot, characters, and modes of presentation bear Wilder's stamp. Unconventional in his stage arrangement, Wilder uses theatrical conventions and comic representations that bring forth laughter and an inevitable truth which lift the spirit. But Wilder does not claim originality.<sup>42</sup> Wilder modestly says: "My writing life is a series of infatuations for admired writers"; rather than "a maker of new modes," he claims to be a "renewer of old treasure." Similarly, he makes no claim to profundity, for he insists that all important truths slumber within everyone. A novel or play merely produces the key because he suggests: "Literature is the orchestration of platitudes."<sup>43</sup>

The themes in Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth are basically the same. "Our Town," says Wilder, "is the life

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<sup>42</sup>Fabian, p. 83.

<sup>43</sup>"An Obliging Man," p. 47.

of the family seen from a telescope five miles away. The Skin of Our Teeth is the destiny of the whole human group seen from a telescope 1,000 miles away."<sup>44</sup> Wilder clarified his idea when he told a correspondent for the Paris Review that The Skin of Our Teeth "is really a way of trying to make sense out of the human race and its affections."<sup>45</sup> Just as Our Town resembles Everyman, so The Skin of Our Teeth is described aptly as "a sort of Hellzapoppin with brains, the story of Everyman (Mr. Antrobus) and the whole human race."<sup>46</sup> The action, spread over five thousand years, includes the Ice Age, the Flood, and Armageddon. In Our Town the events of youth, marriage, and death are revealed through the lives of one family existing in the present time. Again in The Skin of Our Teeth Wilder reveals the lives of one family, but this time it is the entire human family, and the time embraces all time from mankind's beginning to the Ice Age, entailing three crucial moments in human history.<sup>47</sup> Wilder says yes to the value of the unchanging, the habitual, and the familiar in

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Richard H. Goldstone, "Thornton Wilder," in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 114.

<sup>46</sup>"An Obliging Man," p. 47.

<sup>47</sup>Adler, p. 95.

Our Town. But in The Skin of Our Teeth, his dramatic images embrace the common and the unusual, the world of the family and the world of politics, the individual and the masses, the insignificant and the important.

Constantly concerned with the destiny of mankind, Wilder develops his theme through the actions of the family figures in The Skin of Our Teeth. George Antrobus, native of Excelsior, New Jersey, becomes Everyman, eternal father of the human race, who invents the wheel and the alphabet, who travels to Atlantic City to be installed as president of the Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans. Mrs. Antrobus is the mother-Eve figure, ever watchful aide of the family who becomes president of the Excelsior Mothers' Club. Henry, their son, is identified with Cain, the constant enemy of liberty who confuses freedom with selfishness. Gladys, their daughter, is the life-force symbol; in wartime she brings forth a child to signify the stability of life despite the destruction of war. Sabina, maid of the household at times, temptress and camp follower at other times, provides comedy and commentary for the play.<sup>48</sup>

And through these characters Wilder pursues the carpe diem theme begun in other works. For in his novel

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<sup>48</sup>Louis Broussard, American Drama (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 100.

The Woman of Andros, Wilder raises the question: How does one live? If life's difficulty is the inability to communicate love, how does Everyman find meaning in his state of loneliness?<sup>49</sup> Then in Our Town this desire to communicate love is answered with the idea that the beauty of ordinary events offers man a more complete and meaningful existence. Again in The Skin of Our Teeth Wilder answers the same question. The play is a celebration of life and attests to the survival of the race. For in this play Wilder sets forth the story of civilization complete with the disasters of the Ice Age, the Flood, and a world war.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, in presenting a hopeful view of life with these three crises, Wilder rises above the specific and universalizes the play to represent human life in any place at any time. Wilder deals with man and his ambivalent nature, good and evil. His message concerns this age and the fact that it is no different from any other; problems will be always with man, but the race will work them out through change. His advice is that people continue to love one another. Wilder supports his hopeful outlook with this premise: hidden in everyday life are the faults that hinder and the moral and religious values that rescue and assure

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<sup>49</sup>Hermann Stresau, Thornton Wilder (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1971), p. 38.

<sup>50</sup>Broussard, p. 99.

man's survival. Man's faults, as well as his moral and religious values, have existed in the past; they exist now and will continue to do so in the future.

Each of the three acts of The Skin of Our Teeth deals with a crisis that has threatened human life, and the drama portrays one family's fate--the story of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus and their two children. The name "Antrobus" and the drama itself suggest the story of man (anthropos) and the tale of Adam and Eve and their son Cain. In the first act man has to cope with the Ice Age. During this crisis, Wilder places the family in a suburban home in Excelsior, New Jersey. A boisterous music-hall atmosphere fills the air and sets the mood of the play as gaudy lantern slides are projected on the screen in the middle of the curtain. At the beginning of the play the first slide shows a benevolent sun rising over the horizon as the announcer says:

The sun rose this morning at 6:23 a.m. This gratifying event was first reported by Mrs. Dorothy Stetson of Freeport, Long Island, who promptly telephoned the Mayor.

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.

All honor to Mrs. Stetson for her public spirit.<sup>51</sup>

A normal event such as the rising of the sun, which heretofore has been accepted as inevitable, has now become

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<sup>51</sup>Thornton Wilder, The Skin of Our Teeth, in Three Plays, Bantam Books (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 69. Hereafter, material from this play will be cited in the text.

irregular and unreliable. Hence, all the characters in the play are anxious to celebrate this unique occasion!<sup>52</sup> Sabina, the maid, exclaims: "Oh, oh, oh! Six o'clock and the master not home yet. Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River" (p. 71). With her dialogue, Wilder compels us to recall that before the advent of bridges or trains, a river-crossing was a hazardous event.<sup>53</sup> Prehistoric animals, a small dinosaur and a baby mammoth, are seen roaming the house because an ice movement in mid-August has dropped the temperature below freezing.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, Antrobus shows his love and concern for other persons by inviting refugees (Homer, Moses, and three of the nine Muses among others) from the storm in for coffee and sandwiches:

[The REFUGEES are typical elderly out-of-works from the streets of New York today. JUDGE MOSES wears a skull cap. HOMER is a blind beggar with a guitar. The seedy crowd shuffles in and waits humbly and expectantly. ANTROBUS introduces them to his wife who bows to each with a stately bend of her head.] Make yourself at home, Maggie, this the doctor . . . m . . . Coffee'll be here in a minute. . . . Professor, this is my wife. . . . And: . . . Judge . . . Maggie, you know the Judge. [An old blind man with a guitar.] Maggie, you know . . . you know Homer?--Come right in, Judge.--Miss Muse--are some of your sisters here? Come right in. . . . Miss E. Muse; Miss T. Muse, Miss M. Muse. (p. 87)

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<sup>52</sup>Adler, p. 95.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>54</sup>Stresau, p. 64.

But when survival seems doubtful, Mrs. Antrobus takes drastic measures: "Wait!!! The fire's going out. There isn't enough wood! Henry, go upstairs and bring down the chairs and start breaking up the beds" (p. 91). Thus she insures the safety of the human race for the moment. Food and warmth, however, are not enough for survival; Antrobus orders his wife: "Maggie, put something into Gladys' head on the chance she can use it" (p. 92). Mrs. Antrobus reads: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth; and the earth was waste and void; and the darkness was upon the face of the deep" (p. 93). Then Gladys recites: "And God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night" (p. 93). The first act ends with Sabina putting wood in the fireplace; she then approaches the footlights and says to the audience: "Will you please start handing up your chairs? We'll need everything for this fire. Save the human race.--Ushers, will you pass the chairs up here? Thank you" (p. 93). So Wilder's theme of the continuation of the human race is clear, for the family conquers the crisis. With ingenuity, love for others, courage, and a sense of moral and religious values, man overcomes a disaster of the natural world.<sup>55</sup>

Just as man has survived one disaster, in the second act he is suddenly confronted with a second, a flood. The act opens amid the carnival atmosphere of Atlantic City:

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<sup>55</sup>Goldstein, p. 125.

lantern slide projections appear on the curtain to reveal advertisements of bingo establishments and fortune tellers, and there is one projection of a postcard illustrating the waterfront with the words: "FUN AT THE BEACH" (p. 94). Here, the Antrobuses come to attend the convention of the "Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans" (p. 94). Mr. Antrobus has just been elected president of this great order of mammals. The convention is soon disrupted by a storm; it is the wrath of justice demanding retribution, for man is being punished for his sinful ways. None are without guilt. Henry, the son with the mark of Cain on his forehead, bears the blame for instigating racial prejudice. Mrs. Antrobus is guilty of pride. Filled with esteem for her husband as president at the convention of mammals, she derides the man who also ran against her husband for the same position. Mrs. Antrobus yells after the defeated man's parting figure: "After those lies you told about him [Antrobus] in your speeches! Lies, that's what they were" (p. 102). Then Mrs. Antrobus tells a lie of her own: "If you must know, my husband's a SAINT, a downright SAINT, and you're not fit to speak to him on the street" (p. 103). But Antrobus also has a sin--lust. He allows Sabina, now a beauty contest winner named Lily Fairweather, to lure him to her beach cabana in Atlantic City.<sup>56</sup> As

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 125-126.

Antrobus and Lily disappear into the cabana, thunder is heard, and a third black disk appears on the weather signal. Antrobus had earlier explained the weather signal to his family: "One of those black disks means bad weather; two means storm; three means hurricane; and four means the end of the world" (p. 105).

With the threatening storm, Wilder suggests that man has brought destruction upon himself, for man's inability to discipline himself and his world results in chaos.<sup>57</sup> Hence, Mrs. Antrobus shows her husband the results of his behavior: the destruction of the family unit. Gladys reflects her acceptance of inordinate behavior as she dons red stockings. Henry, who has hit a black man with a stone, is hiding from the police. The breakdown between husband and wife seems complete as Antrobus turns his back on his family and allows Sabina to detain him for a broadcast to the Order of Mammals.

Indeed, in the loss of family, the future of the civilized world is precarious. At this point the storm picks up momentum. The Fortune Teller says:

Antrobus, there's not a minute to be lost. Don't you see the four disks on the weather signal? Take your family into that boat at the end of the pier.

ANTROBUS: My family? I have no family. Maggie!  
Maggie! They won't come.

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<sup>57</sup>Hewitt, pp. 117-118.

FORTUNE TELLER: They'll come.--Antrobus! Take these animals into that boat with you. All of them,--two of each kind. (p. 116)

The family appears just in the nick of time, and they go aboard with Antrobus; Sabina follows, for she too has recovered from her wickedness; two animals of every kind of species also board the boat. This action recalls Noah and the Ark and signifies that moral responsibility is a necessary first step toward salvation.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, the last act also stresses the theme of survival. Rather than demonstrating the outbreak of war, the act begins with its ensuing peace. As the curtain rises, the stage is almost in complete darkness. The walls of the Antrobus' house lean precariously against each other. Sabina appears: "Mrs. Antrobus! Gladys! Where are you? The war's over. The war's over. You can come out. The peace treaty's been signed" (p. 119). Mrs. Antrobus appears from a trapdoor; she is followed by Gladys, who now has a baby. With this newborn infant Wilder signifies the continuation of life despite the destruction wrought by war.

Although the war is over, the enemy has not been vanquished. The enemy is not nature as symbolized by the Ice Age, or the flood; it is, as Goldstein perceives, "the self-destructive instinct within the human spirit, as represented by Henry--the deep-rooted, malign force that can

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<sup>58</sup> Burbank, p. 107.

measure its own growth only by killing."<sup>59</sup> To survive this enemy is man's gravest task, for Henry, as the boy who slew his brother, is the "representative of strong, unreconciled evil" (p. 130), or individuality brought to extremes. Henry confuses freedom and liberty with selfishness.<sup>60</sup> He says, "I haven't got anybody over me; and I never will have. I'm alone, and that's all I want to be: alone" (p. 130). The conflict between father and son continues as Antrobus replies: "The sight of you dries up all my plans and hopes. I wish I were back at war still, because it's easier to fight you than to live with you. War's a pleasure--do you hear me?--War's a pleasure compared to what faces us now: trying to build up a peace time with you in the middle of it" (p. 130). Then Henry replies: "I'm going a long way from here and make my own world that's fit for a man to live in. Where a man can be free, and have a chance, and do what he wants to do in his way" (p. 130). As Henry says that he wants a place "where a man can be free," his father hopes that he may be able to work with his son, but this hope is destroyed by Henry's retort: "Oh, no. I'll make a world, and I'll show you" (p. 130). Aware of his son's disregard for discipline, Antrobus makes a perceptive statement about order in one's self as the first priority for a good world:

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<sup>59</sup>Goldstein, p. 126.

<sup>60</sup>Broussard, p. 100.

How can you make a world for people to live in, unless you've first put order in yourself? Mark my words: I shall continue fighting you until my last breath as long as you mix up your idea of liberty with your idea of hogging everything for yourself. I shall have no pity on you. I shall pursue you to the far corners of the earth. You and I want the same thing; but until you think of it as something that everyone has a right to, you are my deadly enemy and I will destroy you. (pp. 130-131)

Although Antrobus regrets that the hostility between himself and his son cannot be resolved, he does not despair. His remarks echo the religious-ethical themes of the first two acts as he again decides to accept responsibility for mankind. Hope is his justification:<sup>61</sup>

Oh, I've never forgotten for long at a time that living is struggle. I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for--whether it's a field, or a home, or a country. All I ask is the chance to build new worlds and God has always given us that. And has given us [opening the book] voices to guide us; and the memory of our mistakes to warn us. Maggie, you and I will remember in peacetime all the resolves that were so clear to us in the days of war. . . . We're learning. And the steps of our journey are marked for us here. . . . (pp. 135-136)

He touches a book. At this point Wilder again leads the way for salvation and survival by turning not only to the philosophers--Spinoza, Plato, and Aristotle, but also to God. For Antrobus says that during the war at night he would try to remember some of the phrases from the great books, and that after a while he assigned names to the hours. He called

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<sup>61</sup>Burbank, p. 108.

nine o'clock Spinoza. The actor playing this role expresses the first step toward salvation--a concern for man:

After experience had taught me that the common occurrences of daily life are vain and futile; and I saw that all the objects of my desire and fear were in themselves nothing good nor bad save insofar as the mind was affected by them; I at length determined to search out whether there was something truly good and communicable to man. (p. 136)

Then the actor playing Plato stresses the necessity of discipline. He says that man should choose a ruler "who has first established order in himself, knowing that any decision that has its spring from anger or pride or vanity can be multiplied a thousand fold in its effects upon the citizens" (p. 136). Following Plato, the character portraying Aristotle says that the energy of the mind is divine; at times mortals possess this energy which is good. He continues: "But God has it always. It is wonderful in us; but in Him how much more wonderful" (p. 136). Finally, man must rely upon God, and an actor reads from Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth; and the Earth was waste and void; And the darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Lord said let there be light and there was light" (pp. 136-137). Thus, Wilder outlines a course for survival. After the philosophers' recitations the lights on stage go out for a moment; then all is light again. The same lines which opened the play are again repeated by

Sabina at its conclusion: "Oh, oh, oh. Six o'clock and the master not home yet. Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River" (p. 137). She then tells the audience: "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 as confident as the first day they began,--and they told me to tell you: good night" (p. 137). So Antrobus continues to learn; he cannot avoid natural disasters, and evil is a part of man's two-fold nature. He cannot evade it, but he can and must curb it, or it will destroy him. By ethical behavior he can avoid misfortune of his own making. With abiding faith, as set forth in the great books of the past, and a faith in God, he will triumph in the great adventure of life.<sup>62</sup>

Midst the capers and humor Wilder's philosophy threads its way throughout the various scenes: survival at any cost is the final aim; regardless of the obstacles, whether they be manmade or created by nature, man will continue to live. For Antrobus sets out to rebuild the world in tune not only to the persistence of truth, but also to man's resiliency in time of conflict; this resiliency in turn lends itself to progress attained through energy emanating from a life force.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., pp. 108-109.

<sup>63</sup>Broussard, p. 102.

Once again Wilder employs the double vision to enhance his theme. For the Antrobuses live before the dawn of history during the time of the dinosaur, but they also inhabit the world of today in the suburb of Excelsior, New Jersey. As in Our Town, Wilder again presents the events of everyday life against the vastness of time and space; but the present is not focused against the background of the past; rather it is woven into the whole history of mankind on this planet. The audience sees the Antrobus family, the human race, survive three catastrophes each time by "the skin of its teeth." Similarly, the audience sees that Mr. Antrobus' adventurous spirit together with Mrs. Antrobus' stay-at-home personality contributes to civilization's survival.<sup>64</sup> In addition, scenery is used more extensively in The Skin of Our Teeth than it is in Our Town, but there is no contrivance to convince the audience of its reality. Rather, scenery underscores dialogue as appropriately in this play as scenery underscores dialogue in a cartoon.<sup>65</sup> For in this Pulitzer Prize-winning play of 1943, Wilder reaffirms human values and stakes a claim in civilization despite natural disasters and human mistakes. The slanting, precariously arranged walls of the Antrobus house are pulled into an upright

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<sup>64</sup>Hewitt, p. 117.

<sup>65</sup>Adler, p. 98.

position as Antrobus becomes the man of the hour who pursues progress unswervingly.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, the device used in Our Town--stepping outside the assigned character role to speak directly to the audience--is also repeated in The Skin of Our Teeth. During the play the Stage Manager and the actors themselves depart from their roles to talk to the audience as regular people who are earning their livelihood in the theater. Rather than diminishing illusion, this device enforces it. Sabina confides to the audience that she does not understand the play at all. In this way she sides with the spectators who, sharing her confusion, are curious to ascertain what the play is about. This technique also forces the audience into thoughtful participation, for another episode concerns Henry (Cain) Antrobus who struggles dangerously with his father. Sabina steps out of role again to stop the scene because the actor playing Henry becomes too vehement: "Stop! Stop! Don't play this scene. You know what happened last night. Stop the play. . . . Last night you almost strangled him. You became a regular savage. Stop it!" (p. 131). The actor apologizes for his actions, not as son to father, but as actor to fellow-actor. In this manner Wilder underscores his point to actors and audience alike by marking the unlimited range of man's guilt.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Fabian, p. 82.

<sup>67</sup>Adler, p. 97.

Furthermore, the Stage Manager does not play the omniscient here as he did in Our Town. Rather he steps in on the occasions when Miss Somerset, the person playing Sabina, misses her cue or becomes obstinate. However, the announcer who introduces and explains the circumstances beginning the first and second acts also serves the purpose of replacing the sets of the play even though these sets resemble a haphazard house with leaning or flying walls. Indeed, the set might resemble a conventional stage were it not for the fact that reality is constantly shifting. As a matter of fact, levels of reality shift about to such an extent that it is not important to distinguish between them. For Wilder enhances his theme, the fate of a family, by utilizing two time levels--the audience in present time and the characters on stage in vertical time.<sup>68</sup> And the use of vertical time in relation to the Antrobus family forms a ring within a ring, for the play as it develops becomes a circle also. The first act concerns the past--the Ice Age and dinosaurs with the first inventions of man. The second act moves to the present with a convention of mammals, subdivision Humans, together with other delegates from the order of mammals--Wings, Fins, and Shells--in Atlantic City. The last act sets forth man's efforts to start anew after a momentous

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<sup>68</sup>Stresau, pp. 63-64.

calamity. Like a circle, it never ends, for the plot cycles back again to start anew.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, Wilder's technique constantly enhances his theme, for the dialogue and the scenery reveal the uncertainty but persistence of life. In Act I Sabina says melodramatically: "In the midst of life we are in the midst of death, a truer word was never said" (p. 71). At this point a piece of scenery takes refuge in the lofts as a signal of the uncertainty of existence. Then with Act III, in rebuilding the home torn by war, Sabina "pulls on a rope and a part of the wall moves into place" (p. 128). So Wilder's message is clear: the Antrobuses have come through life by a hairbreadth escape from calamity.<sup>70</sup> Thus the author commits his belief to life, to all human life, the usual and the unusual, the insignificant and the heroic, the despicable and the beautiful, the bad and the good. He says yes to this life through the use of pretense and make-believe. His theater survives because of its expressionistic mode. In this way Wilder forces the audience to take part in the theatrical creation; his technique brings the movement from the specific to the general. Pretense forces the ongoing effort of the stage to divulge generalized truth. Wilder's plays embrace

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<sup>69</sup>Fabian, p. 83.

<sup>70</sup>Adler, p. 98.

the spectator as an active participant in a dramatic experience. His theater commits itself to a world of vibrant actors rather than an imitation of real people and to active rather than passive spectators.<sup>71</sup> By forcing imagination in the theater, Wilder frees the drama from ongoing sequence and stationary scene and moves it full scope, as Adler perceives, "to a poetry that celebrates the miracle of life."<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, Wilder sets forth a vivid revelation of his carpe diem theme in Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth by imparting faith and beauty in the goodness of life.

Just as Wilder ascribes importance to the routine of living in Our Town, so in The Matchmaker he sets forth man's desire to transform that routine into the fanciful and the exhilarating, and he elicits smiles and laughter from the audience in the process. Further, the performance of the play is an open invitation for members of the audience to forget their troubles and travel to New York with his characters for a carefree time. But while the author captivates his audience with an amusing evening, he uses the theater to evoke life's meaning because the characters in his play depict humanity. Superficially, the play appears to be nonsense,<sup>73</sup> yet from behind the antics and laughter emerge not

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<sup>71</sup>Hewitt, pp. 118-119.

<sup>72</sup>Adler, p. 99.

<sup>73</sup>Fabian, p. 84.

only Wilder's carpe diem theme with a significant purport, but also his view of man's place in the community: life is for the living; therefore, man must seize the opportunity to enjoy the moment with his fellow man while that moment is at hand.

However, if The Matchmaker is scrutinized, its source will probably bring attacks from those writers who have criticized Wilder in the past for borrowing from the works of other authors, but it is well to remember that most writers, including Shakespeare, have done so. In his preface to Three Plays Wilder says that The Matchmaker is a modified version of his own The Merchant of Yonkers, which in turn was based upon the Austrian play Winen Jux will er sich machen (1824) by Johann Nestroy. This play, however, found its beginnings in an English play, A Day Well Spent (1835) by John Oxenford.<sup>74</sup> Further, one scene recalls Moliere's The Miser. For it is in Act I that Dolly Levi, the matchmaker, reveals to Horace Vandergelder the wifely qualifications--the frugality, that is--of Ernestina Simple. But before one hastens to cite this fact as proof of Wilder's lack of creative ability, the critic should recall that Moliere's The Miser is heavily indebted to Plautus' Aulularia.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, although Wilder acknowledged the use of Nestroy's plot, the addition of

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<sup>74</sup>Stresau, p. 70.

<sup>75</sup>Hewitt, p. 11.

Dolly Levi's role gives The Matchmaker a new twist. Wilder states in his preface:

My play is about the aspirations of the young (and not only of the young) for a fuller, freer participation in life. Imagine an Austrian pharmacist going to the shelf to draw from a bottle which he knows to contain a stinging corrosive liquid guaranteed to remove warts and wens; and imagine his surprise when he discovers that it has been filled overnight with very American birch-bark beer.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, Wilder's theme, the desire of all human beings for "fuller, freer participation in life," fills The Matchmaker with action, but it is not destructive activity. By indulging in wildly nonsensical behavior, the characters attempt to lead fuller, freer lives than they have led in the past. Horace Vandergelder reflects everything the other persons in the play revolt against--a prudent, guarded, safe existence. Further, he takes pride in his common sense. He thinks everyone else is foolhardy. To him the ordinary pleasures of life are foolish. According to Vandergelder, one should work industriously from morning until night, accumulate much wealth, and spend money only for necessity's sake.<sup>77</sup>

Vandergelder's frugality is readily discernible, for his house in Yonkers is situated over his hay and feed store.

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<sup>76</sup>Thornton Wilder, Preface to Three Plays, Bantam Books (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. xii. Hereafter, material from this source will be cited in the text.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., pp. 112-113.

Merchandise from the store has found its way into his cluttered living room, which has not been straightened for some time. The room has three doors which lead to the various parts of the house, and in the center of the room is a trapdoor; below this device is a ladder which leads to the store on the first floor. Further, the scene includes an accountant's desk; to one side of this is an old-fashioned stove with its pipe reaching to the ceiling. As the play opens, Joe Scanlon, with some difficulty, is trying to shave Vandergelder, who is engaged in a vehement argument with Ambrose Kemper. Now Wilder's quest for a freer life begins with Kemper, who wishes to marry Ermengarde, Vandergelder's niece. Although Ermengarde is of age and wishes to marry Kemper, Vandergelder objects because the young man is an artist instead of a merchant. Through his dialogue Vandergelder reveals his ideas concerning security and the importance of making money:

No, sir! A living is made, Mr. Kemper, by selling something that everybody needs at least once a year. Yes, sir! And a million is made by producing something that everybody needs every day. You artists produce something that nobody needs at any time. You may sell a picture once in a while, but you'll make no living.<sup>78</sup>

As Ambrose Kemper persists in the argument by suggesting that there is no law which can keep him from marrying Ermengarde,

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<sup>78</sup>Thornton Wilder, The Matchmaker, in Three Plays, Bantam Books (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 144. Hereafter, material from this play will be cited in the text.

Vandergelder discloses his ideas of the law and people in general: "Law? Let me tell you something. Mr. Kemper: most of the people in the world are fools. The law is there to prevent crime; we men of sense are there to prevent foolishness" (p. 145). Vandergelder adds that he has already sent his niece away. But the uncle's attempts to keep his niece's whereabouts a secret are foiled, for Gertrude, the housekeeper, who is eighty and suffers from bad eyesight as well as bad hearing, enters and blurts out: "Yes, Mr. Vandergelder, Ermengarde's ready to leave. Her trunk's all marked. Care Miss Van Huysen, 8 Jackson Street, New York" (p. 145). Ambrose is delighted with this information; Vandergelder loses his temper with Gertrude, and Cornelius appears from the trapdoor to carry Ermengarde's trunk to the station. Cornelius, age thirty-three, is promoted to chief clerk; Malachi applies for the job of apprentice, and Vandergelder hires him, for Malachi seems to be a man of experience; he is to accompany Vandergelder to New York.

Then Wilder carries the theme forward as Vandergelder reveals his philosophy of life to Malachi, for it is just this philosophy put into action which the other characters rebel against:

Ninety-nine per cent of the people in the world are fools and the rest of us are in great danger of contagion. But I wasn't always free of foolishness as

I am now. I was once young, which was foolish; I fell in love, which was foolish; and I got married, which was foolish; and for a while I was poor, which was more foolish than all the other things put together. Then my wife died, which was foolish of her; I grew older, which was sensible of me; then I became a rich man which is as sensible as it is rare. (p. 151)

But the spectators realize that Horace, in spite of his philosophy, is somehow human just as the other characters. For behind Vandergelder's miserly mask is an individual who desires a little adventure himself. Just after his discourse, Vandergelder not only states that he wants his house run with more order, comfort, and economy but also asserts:

There's nothing like mixing with women to bring out all the foolishness in a man of sense. And that's a risk I'm willing to take. I've just turned sixty, and I've just laid side by side the last dollar of my first half million. So if I should lose my head a little, I still have enough money to buy it back. After many years' caution and hard work, I have earned a right to a little risk and adventure, and I'm thinking of getting married. Yes, like all you other fools, I'm willing to risk a little security for a certain amount of adventure. (p. 151)

Thus, Vandergelder appears to be symbolic of the prudent side of life against which everyone else is revolting. But in reality, he yearns to loosen the ties of security and good sense. Once the tie binding the exterior of good sense is out, it rapidly unravels.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Hewitt, p. 113.

On the other hand, Ambrose remains steadfast in his desire for a fuller life, and he advocates Wilder's carpe diem theme, for he wishes to "seize the day" by eloping with Ermengarde. Dolly Levi, however, intervenes. With her ingenuity, vivid imagination, and vitality, she bestows life on the other characters, and her energetic persistence forces others to enjoy life. She even arranges lives. In so doing, she raises both the play and the characters from the ordinary level of generalization.<sup>80</sup> Now Dolly begins this arranging of lives when she sends Ermengarde off to talk to her uncle; Mrs. Levi then converses with Kemper. Through their dialogue the audience learns that Dolly Levi is a poet, who glimpses at times the wonder of life. She tells Kemper:<sup>81</sup>

Mr. Kemper, when you artists paint a hillside or a river you change everything a little, you make thousands of little changes, don't you? Nature is never completely satisfactory and must be corrected. Well, I'm like you artists. 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. (p. 155)

Moreover, Wilder might have patterned Dolly's energetic vitality after himself, for he told Goldstone in an interview that as a child he was not a dreamer, but a thinker and a self-amuser. He always had engrossing hobbies, "curiosities,

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<sup>80</sup>Haberman, p. 19.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

inquiries, interests."<sup>82</sup> To Wilder, his head seemed to resemble "a brightly lighted room . . . filled with tables [displaying] the most engrossing games."<sup>83</sup> Dolly is like Wilder, for she is curious and muses about life; she, too, is constantly occupied. As she talks with Kemper, giving him her various cards, the audience learns that she is a therapist for varicose veins, a hoisery saleslady, an instructor in the guitar and mandolin, and "a woman who arranges things" (p. 155). Like Wilder, she recognizes the marvel of life. She senses beauty in the ordinary, and just as Wilder forces life to reveal its beauty and wonder with his engrossing games, so Mrs. Levi follows suit with her games, especially her game of matchmaking. Dolly arranges for Kemper and Ermengarde to meet at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant in New York, and she pretends to arrange a match between Vandergelder and Mrs. Molloy, a widow. Before Vandergelder becomes too interested in Mrs. Molloy though, Dolly diverts his attention by mentioning a mysterious friend, Ernestina Simple. But Miss Simple is a fictitious being, for in reality Dolly is saving Vandergelder for herself. So Dolly arranges to bring Miss Simple to the Harmonia Gardens where Vandergelder is to entertain them at dinner.

Not everyone, however, is free to experience Dolly's enthusiasm for life. Some, like Cornelius Hackl, Vandergelder's

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<sup>82</sup>Goldstone, p. 106.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., pp. 106-107.

chief clerk, are bound by long working hours which Vandergelder has imposed upon his employees. Finally, at the age of thirty-three, Cornelius and his young assistant, Barnaby Tucker, decide to revolt against the dull and uninteresting life of Yonkers. While Vandergelder is away, they seek adventure in New York, and Cornelius adamantly refuses to return to Yonkers until he has his "day." But to get an adventurous evening away from the store he has to find a reason for closing the store. He lights a match under cans of rotten tomatoes. There is a loud explosion; tomato cans burst through the trap door. With this staged disaster, Cornelius locks up and sets out for the city in search of life.

The second act begins in Mrs. Molloy's millinery shop in New York City. Mrs. Molloy, too, yearns for adventure. Tired of the narrow limits which widowhood, a millinery business, and the standards of propriety have imposed upon her,<sup>84</sup> she declares to Minnie, one of her employees:

MRS. MOLLOY: In the first place I shall marry Mr. Vandergelder to get away from the millinery business. I've hated it from the first day I had anything to do with it. Minnie, I hate hats.

MINNIE: What, what's the matter with the millinery business?

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<sup>84</sup>Hewitt, p. 112.

MRS. MOLLOY [crossing to window with two hats]: I can no longer stand being suspected of being a wicked woman, while I have nothing to show for it. I can't stand it.

MINNIE: Why, no one would dream of suspecting you--

MRS. MOLLOY [on her knees, she looks over the rail]: Minnie, you're a fool. All millineresses are suspected of being wicked women. Why, half the time all those women come into the shop merely to look at me. (p. 167)

Outside, Cornelius and Barnaby are loitering because they are trying to determine the identity of an approaching man, but Mrs. Molloy observes them. Eager for adventure, she tells Minnie:

Well now, it's time some men came into this place. . . . Wait till I get my hands on that older one! Mark my words, Minnie, we'll get an adventure out of this yet. Adventure, adventure! Why does everybody have adventure except me, Minnie? Because I have no spirit, I have no gumption. Minnie, they're coming in here. Let's go into the workroom and make them wait for us for a minute. (p. 169)

Suddenly, Cornelius and Barnaby recognize Vandergelder coming down the street; they rush into the hat shop. The two then pretend to be wealthy fellows from Yonkers in the market for a lady's hat. As Mrs. Molloy shows the merchandise, Cornelius is at once attracted to her. At that moment the two fellows dash for cover--Cornelius into the cupboard and Barnaby under a table covered with a cloth which reaches to the floor. Dolly and Vandergelder enter. Now Wilder's desire for a fuller participation in life is realized with

Dolly's intercession. The astute matchmaker learns that Cornelius is fond of Mrs. Molloy. At the most opportune moment, Dolly turns the conversation to Hackl when Mrs. Molloy admits knowing him. Then Dolly invents an entirely new identity for Cornelius by confiding that he is an adventurous fellow from a wealthy family who visits New York at least three times a week. Vandergelder is skeptical; he insists that Hackl sleeps in the bran room of his store. But Dolly ignores the remark and slyly plants the idea of marriage in Irene Molloy's mind: "Now don't you be thinking of marrying him [Cornelius Hackl]! . . . He breaks hearts like hickory nuts" (p. 181). Dolly has begun to arrange matters. Mrs. Molloy, believing Hackl to be a wealthy adventurer, insists that they all go to dinner. The curtail falls as the four--Irene Molloy and Cornelius Hackl, Minnie and Barnaby--set out for the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant.

The third act continues the focus on the carpe diem theme. All the characters are assembled at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant. Ermengarde and Kemper are upstairs having dinner in a private room; Mrs. Molloy, Cornelius, Minnie, and Barnaby are having dinner in the same room with Vandergelder and Dolly, but screens hide them from each other. Dolly hastily explains to Vandergelder that Ernestina Simple suddenly decided to marry someone else; consequently, they

must enjoy each other's company and dinner without her. While they are eating, however, Dolly proceeds to tell Vandergelder about his faults. She implies that under no circumstances could she be persuaded to marry him; he is without friends. She adds that he could probably find a housekeeper to clean his house and serve cold beans for dinner at a nominal fee of possibly one dollar a day. Then Wilder's carpe diem theme again emerges as Dolly reminds Vandergelder of the dances they used to enjoy in the firehouse at Yonkers on Saturday nights. She persuades Vandergelder to dance, but Cornelius and Mrs. Molloy also decide to dance. As Vandergelder recognizes Hackl he roars: "You're discharged! Not a word! You're fired! Where's that idiot, Barnaby Tucker? He's fired, too" (p. 209). As Ermengarde and Kemper descend the stairs, Vandergelder says to his niece: "I'll lock you up for the rest of your life, young lady" (p. 209). To Kemper he adds: "I'll have you arrested. Get out of my sight. I never want to see you again" (p. 209). Then Dolly laughs and says to Vandergelder: "Well, there's your life, Mr. Vandergelder! Without niece--without clerks--without bride--and without your purse. Will you marry me now?" (p. 209). Vandergelder refuses, and the curtain falls, Dolly laughing.

Act IV begins with a statement in favor of a fuller participation in life. All the characters gather at Flora

Van Huysen's house. At first confusion is paramount, but Dolly arrives to establish order in the midst of pandemonium. When Vandergelder enters and admonishes his employees, Miss Van Huysen tells Vandergelder emphatically: "Now then you. Stop ordering people out of my house. You can shout and carry on in Yonkers, but when you're in my house you'll behave yourself" (p. 220). But Vandergelder is not to be reconciled so readily. Yet Flora Van Huysen is just as persistent: "You shake hands with them both, or out you go" (p. 220). Then Dolly comes to the rescue: "Mr. Vandergelder, you've had a hard day. You don't want to go out in the rain now. Just for form's sake, you shake hands with them. You can start quarreling with them tomorrow" (p. 220). The three men shake hands, and all enter the kitchen for coffee except Dolly, who approaches the audience. She knows how simple it is not to be alive,<sup>85</sup> and Wilder's view of man's place in the community is evident in Dolly's apostrophe:

After my husband's death I retired into myself. Yes, in the evenings, I'd put out the cat, and I'd lock the door, and I'd make myself a little rum toddy; and before I went to bed I'd say a little prayer, thanking God that I was independent--that no one else's life was mixed up with mine. And when ten o'clock sounded from Trinity Church tower, I fell off to sleep and I was a perfectly contented woman. 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 color and without life.

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<sup>85</sup>Haberman, p. 20.

And suddenly I realized that for a long time I had not shed one tear; nor had I been filled with the wonderful hope that something or other would turn out well. I saw that I was like that oak leaf, and on that night I decided to rejoin the human race. (p. 221)

With a call to life's pleasures, Dolly urges the adoption of a new attitude toward life, but she also concedes that money is essential:

Yes, we're all fools and we're all in danger of destroying the world with our folly. But the surest way to keep us out of harm is to give us the four or five human pleasures that are our right in the world,--and that takes a little money! The difference between a little money and no money at all is enormous--and can shatter the world. And the difference between a little money and an enormous amount of money is very slight--and that, also, can shatter the world. Money, I've always felt, money--pardon my expression--is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread about encouraging young things to grow. (pp. 221-222)

Indeed, behind Dolly's attitude lies Wilder's zest for living and his lighthearted carpe diem theme. Moreover, the characters' revolt against Horace's prudent life is without vengeance, and he is not harmed in any way by their willfulness. Further, after the first guarded step from his safe but lonely world, Vandergelder invariably moves into the amiable world of adventure. In effect, he rejoins mankind.<sup>86</sup> As a result, rather than being tricked into his niece's marriage with Ambrose Kemper, Horace agrees to it of his own accord, for he is led by Dolly Levi and others to

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<sup>86</sup>Hewitt, p. 113.

see his futile ways. Dolly Levi is also successful in her matrimonial attempts with Horace, for he admits: "I know I've been a fool about Mrs. Molloy, and that other woman. But, Dolly, forgive me and marry me" (pp. 222-223). At the same time he realizes that she is going to put his hard-earned money into circulation.<sup>87</sup> Dolly says:

You know as well as I do that you're the first citizen of Yonkers. Naturally, you'd expect your wife to keep open house, to have scores of friends in and out all the time. Any wife of yours should be used to that kind of thing.

VANDERGELDER [after a brief struggle with himself]:  
Dolly, you can live any way you like.

MRS. LEVI: Horace, you can't deny it, your wife would have to be a somebody. Answer me: am I a somebody?

VANDERGELDER: You are . . . you are. Wonderful woman.

MRS. LEVI: Oh, you're partial. [She crosses, giving a big wink at the audience, and sits on sofa right. VANDERGELDER follows her on his knees.] Horace, it won't be enough for you to load your wife with money and jewels; to insist that she be a benefactress to half the town. [He rises and, still struggling with himself, coughs so as not to hear this.] No, she must be a somebody. Do you really think I have it in me to be a credit to you? (p. 223)

Still, Vandergelder wants to "seize the day." He wants to marry Dolly even though she plans to spend his money. Even as Dolly hands Vandergelder his purse, telling him she found it, he says: "Keep it. Keep it" (p. 223). Thus, Dolly saves Vandergelder from his money.

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<sup>87</sup>  
Ibid.

Furthermore, all the characters are "saved" by Dolly because they are worthy of the rescue. She is the motivating force which enables Cornelius and Mrs. Molloy to realize a fuller life; she forces them, for one evening, to assume the individuality which she provokes, thereby making them adequate for living. But Dolly also saves herself; in so doing, she reveals the moral of the play and Wilder's view concerning man's place in the community. She says: "There comes a moment in everybody's life when he must decide whether he'll live among human beings or not--a fool among fools or a fool alone. As for me, I've decided to live among them" (p. 221). Consequently, as Dolly rejoins the human race, she also sees to it that Vandergelder does the same.

Hence, by revealing to the characters of the play the rare gift and beauty of this life despite its difficulties, Wilder also hopes that he has demonstrated that view to the audience. Whether they cry with Emily or laugh with Dolly makes little difference after the plays are finished.<sup>88</sup> They will have learned the important lesson of seizing life while it is at hand.

Although the themes in Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and The Matchmaker are the same, the staging of the last play is quite different from the staging of the other two dramas. In his preface to Three Plays Wilder says of

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<sup>88</sup>Haberman, p. 22.

The Matchmaker: "One way to shake off the nonsense of the nineteenth-century staging is to make fun of it" (p. xi). Consequently, the sets for this play contain scenery and furniture reminiscent of the conventional stage. Further, The Matchmaker is often referred to as a farce; Eric Bentley finds the farce a useful type of drama having therapeutic value. Its amusing and harmless fantasizing provides an alternative for more belligerent thoughts to which all are prone at times. In this light, then, farce becomes a tranquilizer, for an evening at a good farce is as beneficial as an hour spent with a psychologist<sup>89</sup>--and perhaps much more rewarding. Actually, in The Matchmaker, Wilder uses farce to celebrate the unique, adventurous, and daring spirit in man. Gay and exhilarating are fitting words to describe it. Rather than a tranquilizer, the play is a stimulant, for Wilder fashioned his play with lively action, high spirits, and lighthearted sense of rebellion.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Hewitt, p. 112.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

In all his plays Wilder pays tribute to the powers of mankind. Although Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth are Pulitzer Prize winners, The Matchmaker has a place all its own; The Matchmaker is Our Town with its shadows brightened with sunshine. In Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth Wilder reveals man's buoyant powers to endure through the community and the family. In The Matchmaker he presents man's ability to enjoy life through a lighthearted comic spirit.<sup>1</sup> Further, Wilder says of his humorous writing that "we have to use the comic spirit. No statement of gravity can be adequate to the gravity of the age in which we live."<sup>2</sup>

Besides focusing on the powers of mankind, Wilder has made meaningful an eclectic and singular view of life and drama. Combining the elements of aesthetics and metaphysics, history and ethics, psychology and theology, he has sketched a portrait of man in the veritable likeness of a Renaissance Humanist.<sup>3</sup> And he has produced plays throughout the world

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<sup>1</sup>Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd, eds., Masters of Modern Drama (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 960.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in The Dallas Times Herald, Jan. 11, 1976, sec. C, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Block and Shedd, p. 959.

at the most opportune moment in history: Our Town with its peculiarly American atmosphere and gentle mood comforted theatergoers and gave them something they needed at a time when Europe was agitated with rearmament;<sup>4</sup> The Skin of Our Teeth with its tribute to man's endurance opened in 1942 as Americans met the crisis of World War II, and it was playing in Germany and London at the conclusion of the war. In his drama, then, Wilder not only presented a picture of American life but also probed man's place in the universe and made meaningful the significance of eternity in the ordinary events of daily life. Consequently, Wilder and his characters represent the "Universal Man."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Wilder looked at life and saw with the wonder of a child, with the skill and beauty of an artist-poet, and with the knowledge and foresight of a philosopher. He possessed a hopeful spirit and a zest for living. Paradoxically, Wilder's most definite statement of the joy of living appears in Emily's lament in the last act of Our Town. It is presented again in The Skin of Our Teeth in its most intricate and abstract form. Here, both the good and evil aspects of life are revealed; the evil is revealed in Henry-Cain, man opposed to himself. He is tolerated for the

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<sup>4</sup>Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Block and Shedd, p. 959.

challenge he represents. This challenge forces man, for his own protection, to guard and enlarge whatever is worthwhile in himself. Thus, life becomes a process worthy of man's endeavors. And the theme is again admirably presented in The Matchmaker. With the marked contrast between Dolly Levi and Horace Vandergelder, the audience perceives the cheerless aspect of the narrow personality; with the capers and adventures of the clerks, they see the sprightly release of the spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Although Wilder knows the joy of life, he steps back to view that life as a unified whole, not with unabated optimism or utter despair, but with the courage to face unalterable circumstances of existence and with the responsibility for relieving the suffering of mankind. These are the moral refrains found in his works, and they are the important characteristics necessary for a full, happy life. It is for a meaningful, free participation in, and understanding of, life that Wilder asks above all else.<sup>7</sup>

Wilder incessantly contends that no attitude which debases man by pointing to his depravity can lead others to salvation. Some men are mean, insensitive, and prone to despair; it is the duty of persons who possess refined

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<sup>6</sup>Goldstein, p. 162.

<sup>7</sup>Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 137.

sensibility and intelligence to lead the way. Not much can be done to shut out evil and chance; Antrobus in The Skin of Our Teeth overcomes neither Cain nor the natural causes which stalk mankind; these forces, however, can be lightened with fortitude, courage, and faith. Humanity can be nurtured. Despite evil and difficult circumstances, man can achieve a meaningful existence through his faith.

Wilder's own comments support this contention. In an article on James Joyce in Poetry (March, 1941), he writes: "The price that must be paid for a love that cannot integrate its hate is sentimentality; the price that must be paid for a hate that cannot integrate its love is variously, empty rhetoric, insecurity of taste, and the sterile refinements of an intellect bent on destruction."<sup>8</sup> At times Wilder has risked sentimentality. But he has never toyed with empty rhetoric, shockingly poor taste, or thoughtless destructiveness. This accomplishment is as infrequent as it is praiseworthy in an age in which it is stylish to sneer at traditional values or institutions, in which a dark view of humanity is an accepted tenet of the majority, and in which one seemingly lacks depth, skill, and foresight as a writer unless he writes from the pit of despair.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

Both Fuller and Burbank agree that Wilder's view of life is a mature one because love and hate are well integrated. His ethical responsibilities are those of a humanist; he adamantly asserts the dignity of man and of American democracy. MacLeish finds Wilder to be one of the most influential American spokesmen for the humanistic values this country was based upon. To acknowledge that America at times has forgotten these principles does not deny the justification of them or the worth of reinstating them as national traditions in the minds and hearts of all men.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, James Joyce as well as T. S. Eliot, Wilder has written about and for the thousands; while at times he may be didactic, he has given voice in an ever creative mode to the durable values of man. It is probable that although his works are less abstruse than some readers would like, they will continue to bring pleasure and intellectual stimulation to many long after some of the more recondite of contemporary novels and plays have died a natural death on the library shelves.<sup>10</sup> That Wilder is a versatile man is indisputable. Although other authors have written in two fields--the novel and the play--, none have done so with such universality, excellence, and variety of style as Wilder manifests in his stories and drama, for his

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

novel The Bridge of San Luis Rey and his play Our Town are considered two of the great works in twentieth-century American writing.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Edmund Fuller, "Reappraisals: Thornton Wilder: 'The Notation of the Heart,'" The American Scholar, 28 (Spring, 1959), 210-11.

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