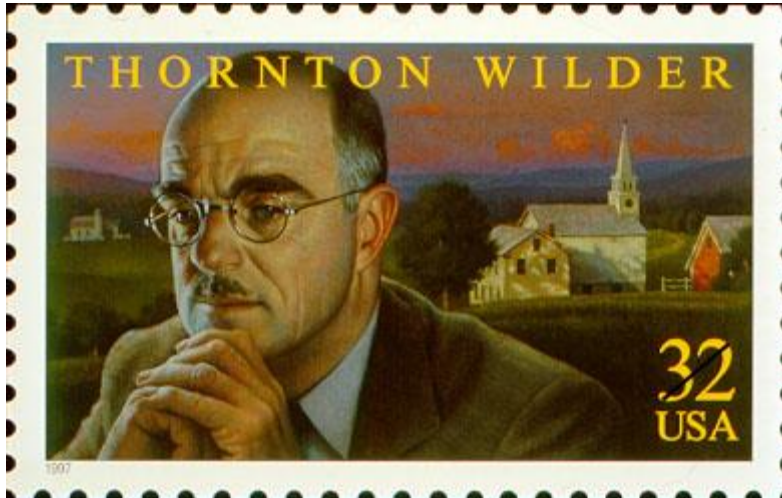


Thornton Wilder as a Dramatist with a Humanist Vision and Strong Religious Bent of Mind: An Appraisal

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A. Ph.D.



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Abstract

Thornton Wilder was one of the most famous dramatists of 20th century, primarily a humanist who was optimistic towards life than most of his contemporary writers. His works and plays comprised a curious combination of the traditional and innovative, provincial and urban and modern and classical. This paper throws light on his humanistic vision and strong religious bent of mind and also proves that he is a person who used traditional literary forms in new ways.

Key words: Thornton Wilder, dramatist, humanist vision, religious bent of mind

Humanists of the Renaissance

Thornton Wilder, one of the renowned dramatist of the 20th century, was primarily a humanist. Generally speaking, the humanists of the Renaissance asserted the intrinsic value of men's life before death and the greatness of his potentialities and the rise of humanism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was an attempt to project

the nature of man as a men, not the nature of men
as a soul weakly wandering between birth into sin
and death as a gateway to hell. Men as men, a being
in his own right, whatever one's religious view of him
might be (Niels 96)

Humanism

Humanism implies that every human being by the mere fact of his existence has dignity, that his dignity begins at birth and the possession of this dignity ought to be the continuum of his life and 'humanism' is a word connoting a concern for men and his earthly welfare. "After all, all things are men's" (Hartley 11). No doubt, humanist attitudes regarded man as the crown of creation Shakespeare marvelously expresses this point of view in Hamlet:

"---What a piece of work is man. How noble his reasons,
how infinite in faculty, --- how like an angel in apprehension,
how like a god". (P883)

Humanism aims at providing a coherent answer to the questions of human existence and assumes that human existence can be made worthwhile by realization of everyone's possibilities in devotion to a common humanity. A humanist is of the opinion that a man is enabled to select his made of life. Man, to be human, must live by values which are higher than anything deducible from nature. Man has intuitive glimpses on a higher reality behind the flux and flow of nature. Hartley Gratten writes:

"The man who denies a higher reality and derives his values from nature is naturalist. The man that identifies higher reality with God is a religiousist but there is a medial position where man formulates his values for a close study of the reality discernible in literature and from life scrutinized through literature. Such a man is a Humanist" (P16)

New Humanism

The 'new humanism' affirmed the dignity of man. It was believed that reason and passion, head and heart, must be held in balance and any improvement of the human lot would

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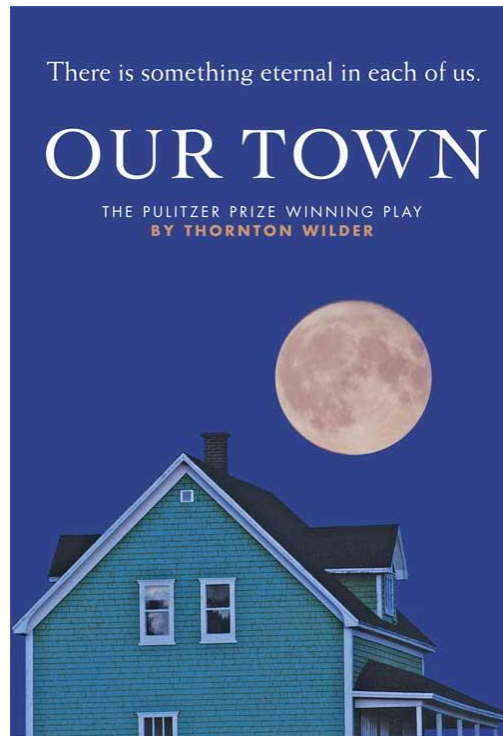
have to be accomplished from within morally, rather than from without, through changing the environment or reforming society. Thornton Wilder's humanism was akin to the New Humanism in its insistence upon the validity of human values inherited from the cultural past His humanism like Eliot's had a religious foundation. Born in Madison Wisconsin in 1897, Wilder became a school teacher and a professor. But above this, he was found to be renowned novelist and dramatist of his age. Besides, he was a literary artist of great range and sensibility. More than most of other novelists and playwrights of his generation, he was

“a product of the humanistic tradition promulgated by the art schools and colleges” (Rex 29).

Thornton Wilder's Humanism

His humanism lies in the basic belief concerning human nature and the value of the cultural past. To Wilder, anything that life was to have would have to come from the individuals themselves and that the first step in the creation is of a meaningful existence was commitment with love, to responsibility for others. Wilder responded affirmatively, to humanistic thought and vision in life and literature.

Wilder's primary concern is to celebrate humanity. Like Walt Whitman's Wilder's Christian humanism consisted of an attitude, a faith that life means something a conviction that all values must have the human individual at the centre if they are to be worth anything. Anything that bound the human spirit and prevented its freedom to love and create was the target of Wilder's critical humanism, Wilder's ethical convention that man is compelled to be free and that “Life has no meaning save that which we confer upon it” (Malcolm 79), derives from his metaphysical belief that which man is alone in a universe that does not know he exists.



Wilder's Plays *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*

Wilder's play *Our Town* has a positive optimistic attitude towards life while *The Skin of Our Teeth* conveys the message that man must never be discouraged in continuing the pursuit of intellectual development. Through the characters of Antrobus, Mrs. Antrobus and Henry, Wilder brings out the urge in man to strive and develop his intellect. In these plays, the 'nuclear' family is the family of the human race and its main purpose is to teach the lessons necessary for the human family. This means creative involvement with others in everyday life – not with the idea of reforming society but – with the - will a courage to help in making their way smoother:

“The moral choice of man is comparable to the construction of a work of art; for like the artist man is forced to create his own world” (Gilbert 302).

Thornton Wilder in *Our Town* shows an amazing step forward, embracing all creation by beginning with the small town in New England. It is man's belief that the cause of man's unhappiness is not his failure to achieve sustain greatness but his failure to delight in the beauty of ordinary human existence,

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“It is a little play with all the big subjects in it; and it is a big play with the little things of life lovingly impressed into it” (P177).

Wilder dramatizes the daily life of Grover’s corners, its living and dead, its birth and death statistics *Our Town* is nothing but a celebration of daily life in the knowledge of death’s inevitability, involving the ordinary events in the lives of ordinary people. Each act centres around the family life which is preceded by a street scene involving the casual conversation of such characters as the milkman, the constable and the paper boy – town folk in general. Act – I consists of scenes showing a complete day in the town and in the Webb’s and Gibbs’ households, where George and Emily are growing up. In Acts II and III, family scenes are shown again, but in relation to George and Emily’s Courtship and marriage and Emily’s death respectively.

Thornton Wilder portrays life on stage. The characters are not just actors enacting the role of someone. It is a true presentation of the lives of all people. In the play Our Town, Wilder presents two families - Webb and Gibbs and makes us feel the family atmosphere through their actions and conversations:

Rebecca : Ma: What dress shall I wear?
Mrs. Gibbs : Don’t make a noise. Your father’s been out all night and needs his sleep. I washed and ironed the blue gingham for you special.
Rebecca : Ma: I hate that dress” (P 14)

This dialogue shows an ordinary event which occurs in almost every household. Whatever happens in the play is an expression of the chief events in the lives of all people;

“It is life rather than the individual that is being enacted; that life is presented rather than represented, and that the people and the place and the time are the “All,

the everywhere and the Always” (Rex 76).

Phases of Man’s Life

Wilder gives three acts “Daily Life’, ‘Love and Marriage’ and ‘Death’. In a nutshell, these three are the phases of man’s existence. Man goes through all activities as though he were created to perform them during his lifetime. *Our Town* is projected as a picture of priceless value even though it is the most common and routine events in life. Life is a ‘waste’ when man fails to realize the value of every moment. He is unaware of the ordinary wonders of day-to-day events but goes through the daily rituals of life such as sleeping, eating, going to school, falling in love, begetting children and finally accepting death as a part of life. The play takes place within a small English town – Grovers Corners. In all three acts, we come across the same people who do not venture beyond that town. There is nothing sensational or special in the lives of the families. They go through life as though every action of theirs is an essential part of human life. All the personal joys and emotions of the characters like Dr. Gibbs and Editor Webb do represent the complete sum of the human passions. Emily is presented as the one important character who throws light on the importance of human life. Emily’s is an urgent lament for the lost opportunity to enjoy simple pleasures. Wilder in his preface to the plays states:

“The play is an attempt to find a value a value above all price
for the smallest events in our Daily life” (Wilder X)

Wilder emphasizes the fact through three acts that every event is nothing but a complete circle of life. The town is a place where everyone knows everybody else. The people are only concerned about what happens within the town. The people do not show much interest in what happens around that little town. They waste their time talking about who is rich and who’s poor? (P25). But there is no remedy for this. The life that people lead in the town is mechanical as the stage manager says:

“Yet every night those families sit down to supper and the father
came home from his work and the smoke went up the chimney...
The children are at home doing their school work. The days running
down like a tired clock” (P32).

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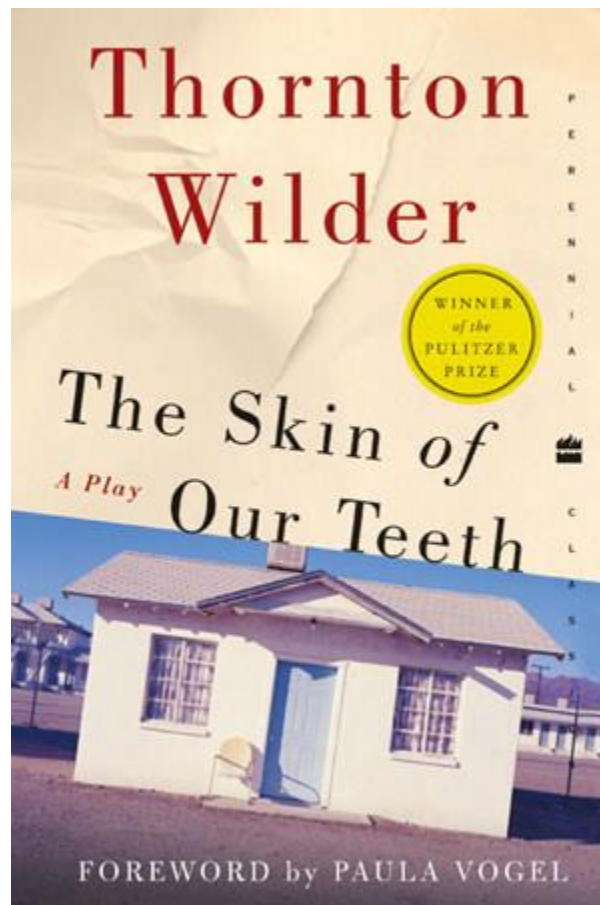
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Essentials of Human Existence

All these are ordinary events in our life. But man takes them to be the essentials of our human existence. He does not stop to realize that each moment that has gone by is precious and that he would never again retrieve it. Mrs. Gibbs, like all other housewives, gets up early, cooks meals all day, washes, irons and in addition goes and chops wood for fuel. The town is also not free of gossip. As typical of women folk, they find time for gossip. To Emily, being alive is just moving about in a cloud of ignorance; it is just a going up and down, unaware of trampling on the feelings of those around you. Ignorance and blindness is the happy existence led by us as living beings. Everyone should realize, as Emily does, that failure to realize the value of life is essentially a failure to live every moment.

The Skin of Our Teeth



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The Skin of Our Teeth is nothing but a comedy about George Antrobus, his wife and two children, Henry and their maid Sabina. The story of man's struggle for survival and his wonderment over why he so struggles is presented, with pathos and comedy and also with gentle irony.

“The under lying theme that of man's struggle, survival, Cimbing, falling destroying himself, being destroyed, surviving by the skin of the teeth but passionately and stubbornly and touching alive is an ancient theme” (P.203).

The three acts of *The Skin of Our Teeth* involve the struggle of mankind to survive the periodic disasters that threaten it with extinction: Glacial invasion in the first act, flood in the second act and war in the third act. The three acts pit man against nature, man against moral order and man against himself. “The characters are all allegorical figures on three levels; as Americans, as biblical figures, and as universal types” (Simon 162). The very title of the play brings home the point that the human race has power to survive. The Antrobuses, as Americans, are shown by Wilder to manifest their relationship to human destiny in their everyday lives.

Sabina, the Maid

Sabina, the maid who is sharp-tongued, temperamental and very conscious of her feminine charms, is the one who introduces the human situation. George and Maggie Antrobuses represent Adam and Eve as the name Antrobus indicates “All mankind” yet because they stand for their entire race, they must have genuine human qualities as well. Man continues his pursuit of intellectual development, even it times of calamities Androbus here is always found working, trying to discover the alphabet and the anticipation table. Even while the earth is turning to ice, Antrobus is out inventing and making up new numbers. He sends a telegram home conveying the news that he has discovered the wheel and asks his wife to burn everything except Shakespeare in order to keep the children warm. On reading this, the telegraph boy presents us with an affirming statement, “a few discoveries like that and we'll be worth freezing” (P.125). Antrobus after recovering from his despair asks Mrs.Antrobus to teach Gladys the beginning of the Bible and he teaches Henry to recite the multiplication tables. Survival, here, is a matter of will and

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courage based upon faith in humanistic and religious values. Survival as pictured in the second act, depends also on the acceptance of moral responsibility. Sabina partially succeeds in seducing Antrobus and asking him to divorce his wife. Antrobus nearly fails but is saved only at the moment of the flood when he leaves Sabina-fair weather behind and accepts his responsibilities to his “family”- mankind. Man is torn between his responsibilities to his family and his desire for eht easier life of indulgence. He is not able to bear the sight of his daughter Gladys wearing red stockings. He knows at once that it is Sabina’s doing. It is Mrs. Antrobus, who draws his attention to Gladys saying:

“I married you because you gave me a promise.
And when our children were growing up, it wasn’t
a house that protected them; and it wasn’t our
love that protected them – it was that promise.
And when that promise is broken – this can happen” (P.201-202)

Mrs. Antrobus removes the raincoat with which she had covered Gladys’s stockings and Antrobus is stunned. He says’

“Gladys!! have you gone crazy? Has everyone gone
Crazy? Turning on Sabina. You did this. You gave
them to her’ (to Gladys) you go back to the hotel
and take those horrible things off (P 202)

But it was only after he hears that Henry hit a man with a stone that he fully recovers and tells Sabina ,”I have to go and see what I can do about this”(P 203). Antrobus waves at the beginning but redeems himself at the last movement. In Act III, Antrobus still has Sabina and Cain to contend with and is weary and disheartened but he again makes the decision to accept his responsibility to the human family. George, Sabina, Maggie and Henry, who as can represents the opposing self, Wilder spreads out his view of the human condition. Just as the various elements of personalities are frequently at war with one another within each human being these characters also quarrel and complain but only to discover that they cannot exist separately.

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Use of Ordinary Speech to Portray Characters and Their Intent

Wilder's humanity expresses itself in the play just as in all others through ordinary speech, through it does so in the midst of complex action. The skin of our teeth presents the theme in its most abstract, complex form, but presents it forcefully nevertheless. The bright and dark aspects are shown in the personality of Henry Cain, man against himself, is to be presented and tolerated because of the challenge it delivers which forces men for his own production to enlarge whatever is valuable in himself. This firm conviction that life is a process worthy of men's effort underlines the cycle of the play. This play, no doubt, speaks clearly about indestructibility of the human race and inspires hope and optimism for the future.

To Conclude

To conclude Wilder undertakes a more optimistic attitude towards life than most of his contemporary writer's. His intention is to show that it is within the power of every individual to rise above despair by exercising the great moral and ethical principles of love self-sacrifice, justice and mercy. He never portrays a situation as hopeless as long as there is a will to act. Wilder is both studious and convivial. His novels and plays comprised a curious combination of the traditional and innovative, provincial and urban, modern and classical. American and European timely and timeless. No doubt, Thornton Wilder was a humanist with a strong and a religious bent, a dramatist and a novelist who used traditional literary forms in new ways.

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