

“IMPORTANT THINGS TO GIVE EACH OTHER”:
THE POLITICS OF THORNTON WILDER’S DRAMA

By

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ABSTRACT

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“Important Things to Give Each Other”: The Politics of Thornton Wilder’s Drama

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Oliver Gerland

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was one of the most celebrated U.S. authors of the 20th century. As a dramatist, he wrote one of the most frequently produced plays in American dramatic history, *Our Town*. Given his fame, it is surprising that very little has been written about Wilder’s dramatic works from a political perspective. My dissertation aims to address this oversight by unearthing a family-based social and political ethic in his dramatic works. Through close study of his plays, interviews, letters, influences, and other writings, I have found that he promotes a democratic ethic through his drama. He creates the utopia that he longed to see in our global political climate and imagines what the world would look like if we truly ascribed to democratic ideals. He promotes a dialogue that engages differing viewpoints without discounting someone else’s world view. He gives a road map towards an idyllic democracy through his theatre and through the theatrical event. In the divisive political reality that we live in today, it may be more important than ever to consider voices like Thornton Wilder. He lived in a time that was arguably the most volatile global climate we have ever known, yet he remained steadfast in his belief that humanity will continue to adapt, grow, and change for the better. He believed in listening to one another. He believed that we should challenge the assumptions of the things we think we know and the ways we treat others. Wilder felt his place was to write, create and promote democratic ideals through his writing and, in doing so, provides a blueprint for others to follow.

DEDICATION

To my family and friends whose love and support have made everything in life possible,
including this project. Thanks for carrying me, always.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“If the planet Earth begins to understand its basic unity, since we are probably the only inhabited star, it will be full of promises and wonders. East and West have so many very important things to give each other. If we could only be about twenty years older and were then able to acknowledge this essential unity, this would undoubtedly have become true.”

--Thornton Wilder¹

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) is one of the most celebrated U.S. authors of the 20th century. As a dramatist, he wrote one of the most frequently produced plays in the American dramatic canon, *Our Town*. Given his fame, it is surprising that very little has been written about Wilder’s dramatic works from a political perspective. My dissertation aims to address this oversight by unearthing a family-based social and political ethic in his dramatic works including *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and some of his shorter plays like *Pullman Car*, *Hiawatha* and *Bernice*.

Wilder’s work has been a formative part of my own theatrical journey. While many people have read *Our Town* in high school or seen a local or professional production of it, I had somehow not seen or read the play until I was well into my twenties. My first exposure to it was the highly regarded Barrow Street Theatre production of *Our Town*, directed by David Cromer. My experience seeing that production marked me; it is hard to describe how significant it was. I was inspired again by the power of the theatre, reminded of the significant live-ness of the theatrical event: live performers communicating a story to a captivated audience. It was an incredibly intimate setting, with actors mingling with audience members and the Stage

¹ Wilder expressed his views on the Cold War when prompted in an interview, elucidating his thoughts on the division between “east” and “west” (Wagner 57).

Manager having direct and close communication to audience members. I was captivated by the daily goings-on of Grover's Corners. I was intrigued by the play's representation of family, marriage, love, and the mundane. But most of all, I experienced the profound commentary on grief, loss, and death in Act III. I will more fully describe the action in the play later in this work, but the final act portrays Emily, one of its central characters, going back to re-live one of her days on earth after she has passed away. She joins the land of the dead only to wish to go back to the land of the living; in doing so, she recognizes the tragedy of never fully knowing how significant, how meaningful, and how powerful our everyday interactions with those around us can and should be. I continue to carry her final lines with me in my daily interactions, my own theatrical practice, and my philosophy of life itself:

Oh, earth, you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?

The production inspired me to jump headfirst back into the theatrical world. It moved me to try and appreciate how valuable our time here on earth can be. It forced me to appreciate the relationships we so often take for granted. It encouraged me to “realize life” more and more. And as I started to explore Wilder's background and the ideas and philosophies informing his dramatic writing, I found a writer who had a depth of understanding, an optimism towards humanity that was inspiring and worth further investigation.

When asked in 1953 by a German interviewer about his views on the Cold War, Wilder responded with the statement that serves as epigraph. Wilder places an emphasis on political unity rather than division: “planet Earth” has a “basic unity” that transcends the divisions between “East and West” (read “Soviets and Americans”). He employs the imagery of

reciprocity and exchange: “East and West” have “important things to give each other.” It is not a dissemination of material or ideological goods from West *to* East, or from East *to* West; it is a reciprocal exchange between the two. Finally, note Wilder’s optimism: if people could only acknowledge their “essential unity” at some point in the future (“twenty years”), the planet could be filled with “promises and wonders.” The perspective suggested by this remark is reminiscent of that pronounced by the residents of the cemetery in the third act of *Our Town*. Seen from beyond, the divisions and strife of daily life dissolve in awareness of an essential human one-ness.

The desire that Wilder has to see a basic human one-ness promoted and realized often made him a man ahead of his time. Much of his political ideology seems to come so naturally to him and he has an optimistic view of the human ability to eventually move past many of the societal ills, prejudices and harm that was happening during much of Wilder’s writing career. In his literature and later in his teaching and speaking engagements, Wilder adheres to a political ethic that, in many ways, was revolutionary for the time in which he wrote. His plays, in some ways without consciously recognizing the fact, argue for gender and racial equality, for recognition of the other in society, and ultimately for a system of social and political thought that values everyone’s voice as equal. He asks his reader to put aside old ways of thinking and adopt new realities, a reality where all humankind can pursue freedom, truth, relationship and love.

Wilder’s drama becomes a place where he begins exhibiting his political ideas, ideas that were second-nature to him. There is little evidence to suggest that Wilder was attempting to prove a political point through his drama; that was not his fundamental preoccupation.

However, through his examination of human nature and his optimistic belief in humanity, his plays exhibit a political sensibility that he starts to clarify for himself and his readers later in life. In teachings and letters, he communicates much about his social and political philosophies in the latter years of his life, and by using these discussions as a cornerstone and looking back at his dramatic work, it allows us deeper insight into the ideals he was *always* operating with.

Throughout this work, I shall argue that Wilder's emphasis on an essential human oneness is rooted in an idealized vision of the family unit and small-town community: parents living, working, and talking together with their children and communities that provide voice for every member of that community. The individual family in Wilder's plays serves as metaphor for the larger human family he feels we are all a part of, one where differences may be discussed through dialogue and this "basic unity" can be found. Wilder's plays are full of examples of family units of the kind he hoped for—the Webbs and Gibbs in *Our Town*, the Antrobus family in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, for example—yet Wilder himself never lived inside one. As a child, he spent time away from his family in a Christian boarding school in rural China, often writing to his family expressing a desire to have everyone back together again. As an adult, he never married but remained a single male writer, keeping his life and sexuality incredibly private. Wilder does not disregard the innate differences found between family members and members of his dramatic communities, but provides an idealized version of democracy through dialogue within the "family". Dialogue, in fact, becomes the road towards this ideal as he gives family and community members the opportunity to speak with one another and work towards the type of "exchange" he sees possible between disparate groups of people.

In his review of Wilder's 1967 novel *The Eighth Day*, Stanley Kauffman wonders why Wilder's career was somewhat puzzling, asking "Is it because he has remained aloof from 20th-century currents in sociology, politics, psychology?" I shall suggest that Wilder was less aloof from politics than Kauffman and many other critics think. I believe that Wilder allows his drama to do his political speaking for him. If looked at carefully, his plays bring a political ethic to the forefront, one that bases civic unity in an idealized family unit. Drama was the expressive medium he chose to communicate this message because of the way that theater speaks to groups: it brings together a specific audience through the process of shared viewing, producing what Wilder referred to as "group mind" ("Some Thoughts on Playwriting" 694). Wilder recognized the value in the theatrical community built through the process of theatre-making and theatre-viewing, and used his drama to demonstrate the potential for the idealized community he portrays in his dramatic work.

There is little hiding the fact that Wilder's work has become a significant inspiration and guide for my own artistic journey. While many critics have shied away from the "universal" claims about Wilder's work, I hope to unpack the reasons why Wilder's work has appealed to so many for so many years. What are the elements, the devices, the influences and affects of Wilder's work that have allowed it to cross cultural and political boundaries? What is the social and political ethic that Wilder ascribes to and how do we see it played out in his dramatic work? What does that ethic have to say to us today? I hope the following pages will provide new insight and inspiration for the generation of artists encountering Wilder's work again or those discovering his plays for the first time.

Thornton Wilder expressed his political ethic through his dramatic work in a way that can continue to speak to the world in which we live today. There is a sense of cooperation, of global-mindedness, of inclusiveness that is important for us to realize in our present political environment. One of the reasons Wilder's work continues to be produced on such a global scale is that many communities connect with this desire to strive towards a communal and democratic ideal. He rarely entered into the typical political conversations of the day, yet provides an ethic of global unity through his plays. It is an ethic that is subsumed into his drama and can be drawn out through close reading and investigation into his biography, his plays, and his personal political ideologies. It is not the blunt, agitprop political theatre of some of his contemporaries, but an ethic that is subtly woven throughout his plays. In the tumultuous time in which we live, his call for dialogue between opposing parties provides unique and significant insight into a roadmap towards peace and inclusivity. The ethic found throughout his plays argues that if we can simply find ways in which to converse and relate to one another, we will find the common bonds that will unite us, not divide us. His work is the work of imagination, where he imagines a community of inclusivity and connectedness and the family unit is the site where it all coheres.

I will conduct a close reading of the plays and letters of Thornton Wilder, with an emphasis on *Our Town* and *The Skin of our Teeth* because I want to discover the politics and ethics informing and exhibited in his dramatic work. My purpose in focusing on these two plays is two-fold. First, these are the two dramatic works to which he publicly became most intimately connected, winning a Pulitzer Prize for Drama for both. In examining these two plays, I hope to reveal a new political lens in which to view these productions that many feel they

know so well. I will also draw from some of his shorter dramatic works, such as *Pullman Car Hiawatha* and the little-known *Bernice*, in order to establish an ethical consistency found in his dramatic work. Throughout his playwriting, he weaves a subtle yet distinct community-based political ethic that provides a nuanced yet simple method towards political and social unity.

Through these dramatic works, there is a democratizing sensibility that merits their production and prompts intrigue across cultures, despite his plays often being considered quite “American” in nature. His letters, writings on theatre and lectures offer insight into the political, social, emotional and psychological forces that were at work on Wilder throughout his life. In studying his notes and letters as a firsthand resource, we gain much greater insight into his personal philosophies that he kept private. I want to examine these plays and letters in order to help my readers understand the broad, cross-cultural and “cosmopolitan” appeal that Wilder has continued to have globally. Wilder’s dramatic works have not yet sparked an extensive interest in his politics; in examining the political, democratic influences on and ideas behind Wilder’s work, this project will help the theatrical and literary community better understand a communal cosmopolitan political ethic that resides in his most well-known plays. This is why Wilder has remained incredibly popular on the international stage, as he scripts characters and scenarios that relate both to the particular moment in American identity but also a larger global community, all of which was carefully crafted by Wilder’s intent.

Dialogue—quite literally, conversation that provides for a respectful exchange of ideas and beliefs—holds utmost importance in Wilder’s conception of democracy in his plays. The best and most significant example of this again comes in Act III of *Our Town* where both Emily and Simon Stimson are provided a voice that they rarely experienced in life. In providing this

platform to these two characters in the final act, Wilder exhibits a cosmopolitan sensibility that provides an equality of voice in the play. Mrs. Antrobus's dialogue exhibits a feminist sensibility in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Also, the Porter in *Pullman Car Hiawatha* will be a significant centerpiece of my study of difference and dialogue, as he is granted the opportunity to speak to the audience, something that surprises him yet seems perfectly normal to the Stage Manager. The Stage Manager roles (and other roles, like Sabina in *Skin* who speak directly to the audience) provide a dialogue with the audience that was theatrically unique and provides another layer of communication. Wilder doesn't turn these works mentioned (and others that I will examine) into a Boal-esque prototype of forum theatre, but there is an invitation into a theatrical conversation that the plays continually reference in directly speaking to the audience.

Wilder's Biography

Wilder uses the family unit as the canvas on which to paint his democratic ideal. His drama expresses a desire for a cohesive family unit that provides equal voice to each member and where dialogue occurs between the various family members. It is also a family that can successfully adopt others in, such as the Antrobus family adopting Sabina in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. In providing multiple family members voice in his drama, he exercises the idea quoted in the epigraph. He encourages the east and west to dialogue with each other in order to find out the unity they have with one another and hints at an ethic in his drama where dialogue can occur between people of varying cultural and social backgrounds. Because, in the end, we are all part of a much larger global community, a truly global family. However, there is an incorporation of difference referred to throughout each play; the play is the very vehicle in which difference can be imagined and obtained. Cultural difference, economic differences,

political differences; all of these can be worked out in the dialogue of community provided by Wilder's drama. One wonders if Wilder ran up against the frustration of never seeing that ideal realized in the sociopolitical time in which he lived. However, his ethic—when thoroughly examined—will influence the way we view his theater, his politics and how we view our own system of political belief in light of his own.

Central to my argument will be Wilder's depiction of family, as it is born out through his biography and represented through his drama. We see a fairly "traditional" (at least for the time in which he was writing) representation of family in his plays: mother, father, and children. In his upbringing and as seen through the letters he wrote to various family members, Wilder held a deep desire to have his family reunited, living in the same place and operating as a cohesive family unit. But that desire is something he rarely experienced; his family was often spread around the globe because of his father's position as a diplomat in China. So, throughout his drama we see an idealized version of the family unit, one that can survive tumultuous times (*The Skin of Our Teeth*), changes and adapts throughout time (*The Long Christmas Dinner*) and that survives after our life on planet Earth ends (*Our Town*). The Wilder's geographical separation necessitated that their feelings, ideas, and struggles be communicated through writing. Thornton Wilder's letters become the primary avenue for expression and Wilder cultivates his writing skills from a very young age. He knew the importance of the written word and the ways that it can describe, create, and express reality. I will first provide a look at Wilder's family history and the way it affects his literary career.

Wilder's Feminism

Possibly my most controversial claim is that Thornton Wilder's drama exhibits a feminist sensibility that I will discuss in Chapter Three. Wilder had an unusually strong relationship with many women in his life, most notably his mother, sisters, and the famous writer Gertrude Stein. His mother, specifically, became a source of culture, learning, dialogue, and love for Thornton and he always held her in the highest regard. His extraordinarily close relationship with Gertrude Stein also made the idea of women's equality seem not revolutionary in Wilder's mind, but something that was obvious and necessary for the good of all humanity.

In dissecting certain moments in *The Skin of Our Teeth* and *The Matchmaker*, this feminist sensibility becomes clearer. Wilder provides strong, assertive language that argues against the common ways that an audience might think about women's roles in the family and society. Wilder always recognizes the current state of affairs and uses his plays to represent that reality, yet he both subtly and sometimes assertively—in the case of Mrs. Antrobus's monologue that I dissect here—starts to question the status quo. He presents female characters and dialogue that represent a new way of thinking about women's roles in American and global society. By conducting a close study of Mrs. Antrobus in *The Skin of Our Teeth* and Dolly in *The Matchmaker*, Wilder shows a willingness to approach a conversation about feminism that would continue to develop during his lifetime and long after it. In Jill Dolan's work, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, she outlines three different brands of feminism. Wilder's feminist sensibility most closely lines up with her definition of liberal feminism, where one might work within the existing societal structures in order to bring greater equality and representation among men and women. Rather than proposing a radical inversion of values,

substituting feminine attributes and concerns in place of male ones—which Dolan defines as radical or cultural feminism—Wilder instead scripts female characters that question the ways we have thought about feminine roles and suggests a reorienting of women in society.

In this realm, I specifically describe Wilder’s ideology as a feminist “sensitivity” as opposed to concluding that his literature was specifically “feminist” in nature. Wilder does not seem to write plays with a desire to directly affect social change, but he believed in the ability of theatre to affect the way we think about one another and improve our relationships with each other and the world. So, while he does not set out to make any of his dramatic work a specifically feminist work of literature, he naturally and effortlessly weaves certain feminist ideals into his plays. This line of thinking came naturally to Wilder so he puts it into his characters and dialogue in order to naturally affect change in thought rather than preaching to his audiences about a new way of social or political thinking.

Wilder’s Cosmopolitanism

In these plays, Wilder recognizes and points out the commonalities found in the human experience, providing a link between humans of different backgrounds that has always existed. His plays become distinctly cosmopolitan, a theory I will describe in detail in Chapter Four. Judith Butler’s work is central to my understanding of cosmopolitanism, and in *Precarious Life*, Butler discusses how basic corporeal human vulnerability becomes a unifying factor in the human experience. Wilder serves as a predecessor to this line of thinking. Trauma, pain, being loved, alienation...all of these things cross the border of human experience. Wilder, himself, once wrote:

All the languages in the world are but local differentiations of one planetary tongue.

These concepts are very full of something frightening, but they are also full of promise.

Oh, it is a lonely and alarming business to feel oneself one in the creation of billions and billions, and especially lonely if one's parents seem never to have felt that sensation at all, but it is exciting and inspiring to be among the first to hail and accept the only fraternal community that finally can be valid—that emerging, painfully emerging, unity of those who live on the one inhabited star. (Niven 614)

His specific use of the words “painfully emerging” seems especially significant in the time he was writing. He specifically catches himself, initially about to simply write the word “emerging”, but then adds the adjective “painfully” in front of it. In doing so, we see a recognition of the pain of human existence and the fight that must occur for unity in humankind. That unity is not a given and it has not been achieved yet; but it is *emerging*. It is on its way. And that will be a painful process, yet there is great potential for a unity to be achieved by “those who live on the one inhabited star”.

I specifically mention the word “cosmopolitan” here because cosmopolitan theory will be a vital lens through which I engage with his plays in Chapter Three. Cosmopolitanism provides a unique avenue into a piece of literature. It holds global implications for how we approach a piece of literature or art. In examining Wilder's plays through a cosmopolitan lens, we discover a new way of encountering these oft-produced play that breaks apart the boundaries we have used to approach them in the past. Wilder's dramatic work begs this type of examination—just as cosmopolitan theory teases out connections between seemingly disparate pieces of literature and art so, too, Wilder's plays are connected to other works and

have connected with seemingly disparate people groups across the globe. The nature of looking at literature through a cosmopolitan lens is also authentically democratic in nature--when you break down particular barriers we have put on a piece of literature or art, a truly democratic ethic comes through.

Cosmopolitanism is, at its heart, a political discourse. Various scholars hint towards an ethic associated with this discourse, one that looks at the world from a critical standpoint that is inclusive rather than exclusive. This cosmopolitan ethic has to do with two types of recognition—the recognition of, first, similarities already present between cultures and their literature and secondly, an expansion of the individuals we include in those groups. Often in discussions of the cosmopolitan, the conversation centers on groups of people, nation-states, and specific cultures. And rightfully so, for cosmopolitan discourse as a theoretical lens naturally involves issues on a global scale. But I want to discuss not only cosmopolitanism as it relates to the ways in which we interact globally but also the surprisingly particular nature of cosmopolitanism—not in regards to particularizing a certain nation-state or group of people, but discussing the minutely particular, the cosmopolitan, individual human subject as it is portrayed in Wilder's dramatic work. When we recognize the ways in which human beings are already connected and the ways Wilder promotes that connectedness through his plays, it opens up more avenues for cosmopolitan inclusivity.

Contemporary scholars advocate the idea that similarities between seemingly disparate people groups already exist and are innate part of global cultures. Judith Butler recognizes these similarities in our common experience with grief, something found in Act III of *Our Town*; Peng Chea recognizes these similarities through an utterly borderless system of being. The

process of recognizing individuals within compromised and voiceless populations remains paramount in cosmopolitanism and vital to the global political future, as is the process of recognizing the ways in which global cultures currently *already* cross over and reside as a part of one another. The defining characteristics of cosmopolitanism continue to change, something I will discuss in the following pages. But for my purposes here, it is a process of recognizing the collective similarities within global cultures and also continuing to bring to light the people that have never been a part of that global collective. The types of questions that continue to be asked through cosmopolitan thinking include: whom are we excluding and how do we continue to bring those voices into the picture? My argument centers around the fact that theatre serves as a vehicle for breaking down particular boundaries and establishing a sense of community, even if just for one night. Wilder recognizes the potential in addressing this theatrical community through his plays and covertly weaves an inclusive, democratic, cosmopolitan ethic into his plays.

Wilder's Democracy

Finally, Wilder also provides space for diversity and difference to be incorporated into the family unit through the renderings of community in his plays. In *The Skin of Our Teeth* and *The Matchmaker*, Wilder provides insight into how women and men should operate equally in our society. Also in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Sabina becomes as much a part of the family unit as the blood-related members of the Antrobus clan. She travels through each act, through time, with and as an equal part of the Antrobus family. In Act III of *Our Town*, we see difference incorporated into those families in the graveyard, as various members of the community are provided equal voice as they journey through the process of death. Simon Stimson, who had

been marginalized and disregarded in life, has the same opportunity for conversation as the “traditional” family unit we have seen throughout the play. And in *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, we see the Porter’s voice heard in a way that was unique given the time the play was written. In a scene where everyone in the train car are communicating their inner thoughts through dialogue, the Stage Manager tells the porter that he also can share his thoughts. I will investigate these plays and others of Wilder’s that express his desire for further inclusivity even in environments when it is not normally afforded.

Wilder begins to clearly voice his political views later in life. We see elements of his social and political thought in his dramatic writing, followed by a greater willingness to express his ideology as he gives various addresses all over the world in his later years. Using these talks and essays, I will expand on Wilder’s definition of democracy exhibited in his plays in the ways that he provides representation through dialogue and voice, two of the most important elements in his drama that exhibit his democratic sensibilities. Wilder believes that a truly democratic community is one where everyone’s voice can be heard, even and, at times, especially those that have not previously had one. He also portrays communities that can house tremendous difference yet still interact with and help those that are different than they are—he does not discount differences innate in families, but provides a sense of larger democratic community through dialogue.

Also important in Wilder’s democracy is the need to fight for democratic ideals when those values are challenged or in danger. Wilder served in both World Wars and maintained a distinct sense of patriotism as an American citizen. He recognizes the ways in which the United States fails to live up to his ideals, yet he knows that those ideals must continue to be pursued.

When those ideals are threatened, it is the responsibility to fight against the evil he saw in groups like Nazi Germany. He was not a pacifist and was often surprised when his dramatic work, specifically *The Skin of Our Teeth*, were taken as a work of pacifist literature. He strongly believed in standing up for the rights of all humanity written into the American democratic model: life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness for *all* humankind. If those rights are being denied, there is an opportunity and obligation to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves.

I will again return to the work of Jill Dolan. In Dolan's book, *Utopia in Performance*, she "argues that live performance provides a place where people come, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning-making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world" (164). She argues that performances can help invigorate us towards greater equality and social justice. She writes that her book, "investigates the potential of different kinds of performance to inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential" (164). Dolan manages to put a theoretical framework to what Wilder accomplishes through his drama. He doesn't simply describe what it is, but he creates what might be. He imagines a world that is "ours". He gives voice to those who have not been heard. He imagines women and men as equal contributors to society. He creates and promotes a dialogue between characters that might never encounter one another otherwise.

The basis for my argument rests on the fact that Wilder creates the space intentionally by imagining and creating these worlds through his theater. This democracy is specifically achieved in and through the theatrical event. The following chapters lay out the ways in which

his democracy develops through his drama, providing ways that his audiences might view, question, consider, and possibly alter their own views on how we are treating the global community in which we reside. The basic one-ness that he believes humanity possesses becomes another ideal to pursue, not something realized in his lifetime. It is something that some continue to search for; in investigating Wilder's social and political sensibilities, we may just discover ways that our larger human family might achieve movement towards the progress that he always felt was possible.

CHAPTER TWO

WILDER'S BIOGRAPHY

Any discussion of Thornton Wilder's work has to start with a discussion of his upbringing and relationship with family. His familial bonds, challenges, peaks and valleys are intricately connected to who he is as a writer and one of the driving forces behind his literary work. This chapter owes much to Penelope Niven, the biographer and writer of *Thornton Wilder: A Life*. Niven makes note of the deep connection between Wilder's writing and his personal life. When discussing the novel *Theophilus North*, his last completed work published in 1973 while he was still alive, Niven writes, "As the new book took deep root in his memory and imagination, Wilder explored the tapestry of his whole life, so seamlessly fusing memoir and fiction that it is difficult to discern where one leaves off and the other begins" (680). The deep, personal connection between his biography and his fiction is manifest in everything Wilder wrote, including his drama. Taking a look at his biography remains imperative when considering his work as a dramatist.

The family unit becomes a driving force behind his writing, and many of his theatrical works use the family unit as the basis for the action within them. In *Our Town*, the dramatic action centers on two neighboring families, the Gibbs and the Webbs; their relationship to one another; the relationships built and cultivated inside each family; and their relationship to the town in which they live. In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder writes about the Antrobus family and he traces their existence throughout most of human history, arguing for the ways in which humankind—using the family as the symbol of humankind—can adapt and change no matter the difficulties facing them. In his short play, *The Long Christmas Dinner*, he investigates the

cyclical nature of family by using the Christmas holidays as the site for generational coming and going, following a specific family through generations of celebrating the Christmas holidays. In *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, Wilder writes about a family visiting their eldest daughter in Camden, New Jersey, and the dynamics at play between family members and how their relationships affect one another. In all of these plays, Wilder recognizes the influence the family's presence—or lack thereof—has on an individual.

In *Thornton Wilder and His Public*, Amos Wilder, Thornton's older brother whom he shared a close relationship with until Thornton's death, says, "Assessment of my brother's contribution in the long run will need to take account of more than his few novels and plays. Their resonance can be trivialized if seen out of context. In this case the author's life and work were interwoven, and one illuminates the other" (33). One cannot consider the work of Thornton Wilder without considering his life alongside it. Doing so puts the reader at risk of failing to understand the context in which his work was born and the driving spiritual, philosophical and biographical forces at play within them. Amos also said, invoking a response from writer and noted literary critic Edmund Wilson, "With some authors, life is one thing and literature another. When this observation was made to Edmund Wilson he replied: 'But isn't literature simply a part of life as much as conversation?' In the case of my brother, at least, this is highly pertinent" (34). Thornton Wilder's work was a part of his life and his life was part of his work and these two things cannot and should not be separated.

What I've found when encountering Wilder's drama, and specifically his family plays, is a search for community through the family unit. Much of this search results from Wilder's upbringing and the ways in which his family was geographically separated through much of his

lifetime. He consistently portrays a trust in family as a means for the community he so longed for. Wilder allows for conversation to occur between family members in his drama that becomes the site and model for social and political discourse. His dialogue shows the importance of listening to one another—considering where someone might come from despite the ways in which we differ. In Wilder's families, not everyone need believe the exact same things or even look the same way, and he allows for the family unit to change shape, form, and ideologies. The family, in many ways, becomes *the* site for democracy in Wilder's work. He uses the family unit to demonstrate the ways we can and should converse with one another despite our differences in opinion or background. We can hold dialogue in the midst of difference because of our common family connections. His politics become clearer in dissecting his portrayal and use of family in his dramatic work. Rather than constructing the family as a private space separate from the public space, the family becomes a model *for* the public space. Despite the geographic separation from his family for much of his childhood, Wilder remained entirely devoted to his family members. Wilder believes that people should treat each other with the love and respect that he experienced in his birth family and with friends. This love and respect underpinned a social and political ethic of listening to someone with a divergent opinion, confident that—deep down—we are ultimately part of the same human family. The individual family unit in his dramatic work is always pointing to the larger human family we are all a part of. When someone exhibits unwillingness to operate based off of that democratic ethic, action can and should be taken in order to continue pursuing those ideals.

Three major themes become especially formative to Wilder's writing and life story: the importance of dialogue in life and through his work; the diversity of his geographical

upbringing, education, and work experience; and the nomadic nature of his living situation and cultural surroundings. In understanding these areas in Wilder's life, we can better understand the influences informing his social and political theories and how those systems of thought affect his dramatic writing.

Timeline

First, a general knowledge of the timeline of Wilder's upbringing is vital to understanding how his life affected his work so heavily. Wilder was greatly influenced by the diverse populations he was a part of as he grew up and he was able to adapt to multiple living situations as his "home" was often changing at a rapid pace. Because of the nomadic nature of his early years, he developed much more of an abstract idea of home and his sense of place. Home became an idea to go after, not necessarily a physical building to return to. Certainly, the home he eventually purchased for his mother and lived out of for years was important to Wilder; but home became a desire and hope more than it was a physical manifestation. M.C. Kuner writes, "At the age of eighteen he had seen more of the world than many people do at forty-eight and he had learned early that a home is based not on a physical location but on human relationships" (3).

Early Years:

- April 1897: Thornton is born in Madison, Wisconsin.
- May 1906: Wilder family moves to Hong Kong as their father, Amos, takes a position as American consul general until 1909.
- October 1906: Moves back to the United States with the rest of his family to Berkeley, California. His father stays in China.

- 1906-1910: Attends Emerson Public School in Berkeley.
- 1910-1911: Thornton and Charlotte move back to China where their father was serving in Shanghai. Attends China Inland Mission School in Chefoo, China. The rest of the family stays in California.
- 1912-1913: Moves back to California and attends the Thacher School in Ojai, California
- 1915: Graduates from Berkeley High School

Wilder's family consisted of five children and his parents, Amos Parker Wilder and Isabella Thornton Niven Wilder. His brother, Amos Niven Wilder was born in 1895. Thornton was born in 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin, and had a twin brother at birth. His brother, who according to "family memory" was to be named Theophilus (Niven 1), was stillborn. Because of this lost twin, Thornton Wilder's search for resolution, community and companionship started from the first day of his life as he often felt "a haunting legacy of loss and incompleteness" (1). His three sisters followed, with his sister Charlotte Elizabeth born in 1898, another sister Isabel born in 1900 and their youngest sister, Janet Frances, born in 1910.

In assessing Thornton's career, many have implied that the Wilder children were heavily influenced by fundamental religious practices that can be seen throughout his literature. But his brother Amos refutes that idea in *Thornton Wilder and His Public*. In the biography, he is critical of those who would easily associate his brother's writing with a "stifling" religious upbringing, making note of the fact that each of the Wilders was extraordinarily well read and spent much time experiencing different parts of various cultures throughout their childhood. "The cultural level of the home, suggested by our father's doctorate from Yale and our mother's participation in French and Italian literary circles at Madison and Berkeley, could hardly be viewed as stifling"

(Wilder 50). Despite the consistent presence of their father's Congregational Church background, the family was encouraged to pursue varied interests throughout their young lives. The Wilders often hosted university personalities, writers, politicians and others. Each of the Wilder children ended up well-educated and established in various academic, literary and cultural circles.

From an early age, Thornton Wilder stuck out as more emotional, and sometimes melancholy, than his peers and other family members. His family, and specifically his father, knew Wilder as an unusually sensitive boy. Thornton fell in love with libraries at a young age and his childhood was full of books that the family read together. Thornton's time at the China Inland Mission School was extremely lonely for him; even though Charlotte attended the same school, boys and girls were seldom allowed to see one another and the rest of the family was in the United States. After bouncing around continents, moving from Madison to China to California and back to China, his father decided that the best option was for Thornton to return to California and attend the private Thacher School. Thornton's father, when writing about Thornton to the Thacher School for admission, said, "He is 'the boy that is different'— Sensitive—Self conscious—radiantly happy when with those he likes who understand him— May develop 'moods'" (Niven 66). In his father's letter, we start to see evidence of Thornton's desire and search for understanding: Wilder was "radiantly happy" when around those who he felt understood him well. This desire to be understood and to understand others becomes a driving force throughout Wilder's work. He pursues and promotes dialogue between communities, people, differing populations, and family members. This dialogue that leads to

understanding was something he longed for at an early age and was an continuous attribute of his character.

College Years:

- 1915-1917: Attends Oberlin College
- 1920: Receives Bachelor of Arts from Yale College
- 1920: Teaches at Lawrenceville School in Lawrenceville, New Jersey
- 1924: First residency at MacDowell Colony
- 1926: Receives Master of Arts in French from Princeton University

Early Career:

- 1927: Second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is published
- 1928: First published collection of drama, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*
- 1930s: Part-time teacher at University of Chicago in comparative literature and composition.
- 1930: *The Woman of Andros*, play, published.
- 1931: *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays* published.
- 1935: *Heaven's My Destination*, novel, published.
- 1937: Adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, premieres on Broadway.
- 1938: *Our Town* opens on Broadway, wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama.
- 1942: *The Skin of Our Teeth* opens on Broadway, wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama.
- 1942-1945: Military service with Army Air Force Intelligence in North Africa and Italy.

Thornton spent much of his early writing years as a teacher at the Lawrenceville School from 1921-1928. Even though he sometimes felt overwhelmed with teaching, "he held a distinct

sense of responsibility to and for his family”. The financial burden he felt for his family often led him to make professional decisions with his family’s needs in mind. When considering leaving the school in 1927, “Thornton was first of all a brother, a son, and a friend. Therefore it was not only the financial and professional imperative but also his sense of responsibility to his parents and sisters, as well as to his Lawrenceville friends, that led him to return to the Lawrenceville School for the 1927 fall term” (Niven 297).

Wilder found a wealth of education and interests in his college years and early career. He followed in his older brother’s footsteps in attending Oberlin College and eventually received a Bachelor of Arts from Yale. His career teaching high school eventually developed into visiting positions at various universities and he also received a Master of Arts in French from Princeton University in 1926. His earliest works and the writing career he establishes travels seamlessly between novel and drama and the ease with which he intertwines various genres into his literary experience became a defining characteristic in his career.

While Thornton’s relationship with his father would always be complicated, he adored his mother, sisters and his brother while always still loving his father, despite their differences. Thornton often wrote incredibly strong leading female characters, from Emily in *Our Town* to Dolly in *The Matchmaker*. Quite possibly, it was because of his regard and rich relationship with his mother, Isabella. While teaching at Lawrenceville School, his mother and sisters lived for a time in England. When they moved back to the United States, “Thornton looked forward eagerly to his mother’s return and to the reunion with the sisters he longed to get to know again. He gave his mother constant praise: She was, he wrote her, the ‘most rare of ladies, none in all my roaming have been so bright, so individual, so stimulating as you’” (Niven 227). He

desired to be associated with his mother and family: “‘Aren’t I a lot like you? Claim it.’ He told a friend that the family was about to be reunited, and that each of the five Wilder children had ‘either beauty, brains or goodness; several have two of these attributes” (Niven 227).

Amos, his brother whom Thornton idolized more than almost any other person in his social or familial sphere, exhibited an incredible ability to see the good in people, even men like his father that he had an exceedingly complicated and nuanced relationship with. Amos always believed the best about his father.

Father’s influence on us was determined by his parents and so on back. He could not help it. And the good he did us was no doubt far greater than the other. Besides, we haven’t the whole story of the family yet. If our lives are not altogether normal, they are at least extraordinarily rich in content, spiritual tact, artistic apprehension, imagination, etc. We have great conflicts to resolve than most people but we develop thence unusually formidable personalities. (229)

The good that Amos saw in others would influence and shape Thornton’s own views of humanity and his positive take on the potential of humankind.

Even when Thornton was traveling, buoyed by his substantial financial success from *Bridge* sales, he missed his family. He was traveling with his mother, treating her to theatre and European cities abroad but often wondered what was happening back home. “But the two travelers missed the home folks, Wilder reported: ‘We pine after you often...and say what’s Pa doing? And what’s Isabel doing? And what’s Amos doing? And is Janet happy? We’re not perfect travelers because we adore the folks at home’” (Niven 332). Even though he was often separated from his family and held interesting and complex relationships with them, he never

lost his adoration of each family member, no matter where he was in his professional or personal work.

Middle Years:

- 1949: Major role in Goethe Convocation in Aspen; lectures abroad.
- 1952: Wins Gold Medal for Fiction from American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 1955: *The Matchmaker* opens on Broadway.
- 1957: Awarded German Booksellers Peace Prize, the first American to receive the award.

Later Years:

- 1962: *Plays for Bleeker Street* performed at Circle in the Square Theater.
- 1963: Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom.
- 1964: *Hello, Dolly!* (musical adaptation of *The Matchmaker*) opens on Broadway.
- 1967: *The Eight Day*, a novel, published and receives National Book Award for Fiction.
- 1975: Dies in sleep in Hamden, Connecticut on December 7.

Thornton Wilder eventually became the breadwinner for his mother and sisters when his father passed away. His upbringing shaped much of the material he would creatively write later. The geographic displacement of his family members for much of his childhood caused him to, at times, be melancholy, experience tremendous loneliness and also instilled an insatiable desire to have his family reunited. At times in his life, he felt like his family was the only resource for legitimate connection. Family was central to his understanding of self and to his ability to understand the world around him. “‘I am an unusually isolated personality,’ he wrote, and he felt he could reach out only to his family” (Niven 141).

In fact, Niven writes, he used the family to demonstrate a connection to a larger universal theme.

The family had become a powerful symbol in his plays and novels—not only the individual family unit by the vast human family interconnected in their local yet universal ‘villages.’ He peopled the stage with American families whose seemingly ordinary lives at once reflected and transcended the place and the era in which they lived. Simultaneously he contemplated the perennial dramas of ordinary life as they played out again and again on a cosmic stage, one person at a time, one place at a time, throughout the ages. (422)

While he recognized the significance of the individual family unit, he uses the family as a universal, connecting force that transcends time and space. And the family would be something that would continue to dominate his interests, through theatre and his novels. He explored not just the subject matter provided by family dynamics, but also the challenges associated with the family institution and of finding a sense of belonging and of home. Niven writes, “In *Heaven’s My Destination*, as in much of the work that lay ahead, Wilder the novelist, the dramatist, and the literary archaeologist would excavate and explore the felicities and challenges of family—of home” (381).

In *Heaven’s My Destination*, Wilder follows his protagonist through a journey of finding his home. The central character, George Brush, is a religious convert who “was searching for home and family in the fictional universe of *Heaven’s My Destination*...He says to an acquaintance, ‘You know what I think is the greatest thing in the world? It’s when a man, I mean an American, sits down to Sunday dinner with his wife and six children around him.’ He

aspires to ‘settle down and found an American home’” (380). The novel humorously considers the ways in which a religious fanatic might come into contact with a secular world and calls into question the dogmatic adherence to traditional religious principles. While it calls those things into question, it also provides a legitimacy of the search for truth, home and family and a distinct respect for the things, like family, George Brush is searching for.

Wilder provides further thoughts on the complex nature of family in his novel *The Eighth Day*. The family was not perfect and always had room to grow and change. He once wrote about his father and the fathers of two of his friends: “‘They had no insight into the lives of others—least of all their families. They had an Old Testament view (sentimentalized around the edges) of what a WIFE, DAUGHTER, SON, CITIZEN should be...And like so many he intermittently longed to be loved, enjoyed, laughed with. But he didn’t understand give-and-take’” (Niven 416). In this passage, Wilder refers to words spoken by the character John Ashley. Wilder then wonders, “Is that what family life is? The growing children are misshapen by those parents who were in various ways warped by the blindness, ignorance, and passions of their own parents; and one’s own errors impoverish and cripple one’s children? Such is the endless chain of the generations?” (416). He recognizes the ability of family to pass down negative consequences to their children and asked difficult questions of how families live, relate, and shape each other’s lives.

Despite the complications associated with family life, it was an institution that held tremendous power for the Wilder clan, even in times of illness. Charlotte, Thornton’s sister who was the middle of the five children, became mentally ill and was eventually institutionalized:

For decades the resilient, resourceful Wilders had survived any number of catastrophes. With imagination, fortitude, and devotion to each other, they had managed over many years to withstand extended separations, Dr. Wilder's illness and death, and the perennial anxiety about money. But Charlotte's illness was a crisis beyond their capacity to resolve...For the Wilders this was simply what family did—the eternal family, bound by blood and history, by love and pain. (525)

Niven writes, "In Wilder's daily life family was an anchor, usually a comfort and help, sometimes a nuisance, and always a responsibility, generously fulfilled" (695). And this resilience of the family and the ways humankind can adapt and grow and shift was constantly reflected in his writing. "*The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder continued, 'is another extension of my principal preoccupation. It is an attempt to set the situation of the family, that nexus of attraction and repulsion, that arena of dependence and independence, against the dimensions of ten thousand years of human history'" (641).

Major Themes

1. DIALOGUE

One of the driving forces behind Wilder's writing was a desire to keep the family together. The reason this desire pervades much of his dramatic work is because his family was often scattered around the world, literally living oceans apart for long stretches of his childhood. Writing became the central means of communication for the Wilder family. The dialogue between family members, if it was not to be achieved through the written word, was not to happen at all during certain stretches of Wilder's life. His brother Amos writes, "All through those earlier years, reflecting the literary interests of the family, including our sisters,

our correspondence testified to new reading discoveries and writing projects” (9). The passion the family had for reading and writing continued in their written correspondence to one another despite their geographic separation.

For a boy who felt incredibly close to his siblings and mother, this separation presented a significant emotional challenge evidenced in Wilder’s early letters. He writes, “How hard and callous the Wilder family will get through all the bi-monthly and even weekly leave-taking” (Niven 67). In one letter when Thornton was ill at his school, The Thacher School, he writes to his family, ‘Thacher. Sick room. Broken Heart. Sunday P.M.’”. Not only was he physically sick, but also his writing communicates the emotional toll that being away from his parents and siblings was having on the young Thornton. Niven says, “Thornton’s boyhood letters dramatically reveal the scope of his loneliness, and his longing for a normal family life” (71).

Thornton’s experience in primary school kept him going from place to place, longing for a connection to his family and for a true sense of home. Letters became invaluable in establishing love and human connection with his other family members. But the changes he experienced at an early age did not have completely negative ramifications. Wilder was well adept at adapting to different environments. “He had already learned, chameleonlike, to assume a definite persona for each recipient of a letter, changing colors as need be when he finished a letter to one person and began one to another, tailoring his voice and subject to the needs and interests of his correspondents” (Niven 67). Because of his experience moving from place to place, almost always without his family, he became well versed in changing, listening, and experiencing new people and places. But it caused Thornton to tailor “his voice and subject to the needs and interests of his correspondents”. Wilder became more interested in altering

his writing and communication for the good of others understanding, not expecting others to adapt to him with every new introduction. This attribute served him well throughout the course of his writing career as it shows an appreciation for appealing to a broad audience and relating to those from backgrounds that varied greatly from his own. "There seemed to be as many Thorntons as there were friends and relatives" (67-68)

Wilder used his letters home to dialogue with his father. In Thornton's letters, he reveals a deep desire and also an eloquent prosaic nature of saying that he longs for his father's time and attention. He ends one of his letters, writing, "So writes a distant son, doting for your least considered moments, the crumbs of your time" (124). He expresses both his pain in the absence of his father's presence and his longing for more of his father's time, a father that was consistently distant in time and emotion throughout Thornton's life. Thornton's complicated relationship with his father often vacillated between a desire to please him but also recognizing the inconsequential nature of some of the things Dr. Wilder required of his children. Certainly, love existed between father and son, as Dr. Wilder also used letters to express his feelings towards Thornton. In 1917 he writes,

...how you long to exchange communications with me on many lines with much sincerity and openness and how I barrier you with misgivings and rebukes. It seems to be life that thus we should dark-glass even those we best love and to who we would be useful, especially in this critical business of youth finding itself. Let it console to tell that as I looked you over from the train I thanked heaven for such a son; and that it pleasantly surprises me to find richer veins in my boy than even I dared to hope. (Niven 126)

Dr. Wilder recognized the challenging upbringing he sometimes exerted on his children and the ways he put barriers between Thornton and himself. Yet at times, like this letter to Thornton, he expressed his love and admiration for who Thornton was becoming. This relationship was one that would inform Thornton's drama throughout his career, as he demonstrates an appreciation for a father's role in the family but also the complicated ways in which one might relate to a father figure. But it also shows the magnitude behind each written word between father and son; love, feeling, concern were all communicated through these letters and it becomes the way Thornton knows and expresses his identity and feeling.

The search for unity and community within the family was not specific to his childhood. It was a search that continued into Thornton's adult life and the lives of his siblings. Much of the Wilder upbringing had involved a separation, geographically and relationally. Yet they continued to cultivate an intimacy between family members:

The seven Wilders were a remarkably close family, their relationships tightly interlaced despite—or even because of—years of geographical separation and the separate pathways the siblings traversed as adults. They had learned early how to rally around one another through letters, faithfully dispatched across oceans and continents. One's joy or achievement elated them all; one's illness or sorrow brought them all grief. In the 1930s, as the country and the world transformed around them, the members of the Wilder family were experiencing profound changes themselves, some perceptible, some too subtle for comprehension at the time. In one way or another, however, all five siblings were searching for home. (Niven 367)

Somehow the Wilders maintained an intimacy despite their often years-long geographic separations. One of the defining attributes of Wilders political philosophy becomes the ability to hold what seem to be binary opinions, characteristics, philosophies or politics in conversation with one another. The conversation that grows from letters and his writings to his family members, in many ways, becomes *the* source of connection and intimacy. Writing becomes lifeblood for his family; without it, they would have barely spoken or seen one another during most of their years growing up. Wilder exhibits this search for home in his drama but also shows how weighty the written conversation, written dialogue between his family members becomes.

Niven says, "In Wilder's experience as in his imagination, an endless pilgrimage of people traveling through life lodge briefly in boardinghouses and then move on, and most of these travelers are searching for home" (672). What Niven makes note of here and something that becomes significant to Wilder's drama is this search for home as well as a deep appreciation for the home one is searching for. He, at the same time, describes how important home is but also recognizes the need to attain a *greater* sense of it. There is a search for what might be as well as an appreciation for what is. In those rare moments when he felt like he experienced that sense of family and closeness, it allowed Wilder to cultivate love for family yet ability to adapt and grow and learn from a variety of surroundings. The Wilder family was rarely, if ever, allowed to parlay that sense of intimacy into an ability to be at a physical home with one another. However, this provided the ability for the Wilders to establish home through the written word. In continuing to correspond with one another through letters, they used the

written word to communicate larger ideas, themes, feelings, and ideologies that would eventually lead to careers in writing for most of the Wilder children.

As Thornton achieved financial success through his writing, he was becoming more and more comfortable in his own skin and in his literary prowess. He held friendships with famous authors and athletes, extremely liked by those around him and able to connect to many. When he received acclaim from *The Bridge of the San Luis Rey*, including wide publication, sales and a Pulitzer Prize:

Some of those plans would change, but this was Wilder's tentative agenda as he looked ahead in that summer of the most dramatic, most successful year of his life thus far: Literary success beyond his dreams. Financial success beyond his imaginings. Friends who lived visible lives on the world stage—Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Tunney—and treated him as if he belonged there, too. Friendships that meant the world to the man who had been a shy, awkward boy—the man who had far more confidence in his work, as he had told Fitzgerald, than he had ever been able to extend to his person. (Niven 323)

The dialogue he was able to express through his writing brought him freedom, confidence, and a sense of expression that Wilder had not known previously. And his desire for familial relations started to expand towards the friends that surrounded him.

2. DIVERSITY

Thornton started to come into his own after graduating high school and his process of self-discovery continued during college. During these years he developed his interests in classical literature, including Greek and Roman theatre. His brother Amos describes how at home, "Walter Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray had been read aloud. As children we had taken

part in the mob scenes of the classic drama enacted in the Greek Theater at Berkley. In college we had heard Vachel Lindsay read 'The Congo' and seen the Abbey Theater do plays of Lady Gregory and Synge" (Wilder 9-10). This diversity of thought is central to Thornton Wilder's writing, as he is constantly informed by multiple styles of literature and performance.

Established thinkers mentored him during his time at Oberlin College and Yale University. While his father hoped that his time at Oberlin College would steer him away from pursuing a career in writing or the arts, "Dr. Wilder was about to be disappointed, however, for Thornton quickly discovered to his great delight that Oberlin was rife with opportunities for writing and acting, and he lost no time in taking advantage of these pleasures" (Niven 95).

Wilder had a fascination with theatre at an early age. In his senior year in high school, he spent many hours reading and researching theatre in multiple parts of the world. Niven writes:

When he wasn't writing his own plays or lurking around the Greek Theatre at the university of California nearby, he was reading European newspapers in the university library, avid for theatrical news, especially from Germany and Austria. He knew the names of prominent directors, producers, and playwrights at home and abroad, collecting information about them as other boys of his time fixed their attention on sports heroes or stamp collections. (86)

He believed that theatre communicated in a way that other forms of literature and writing could not and it was a fascination that would eventually work itself out through his dramatic writing. Wilder eventually considering himself a playwright first and foremost, despite his immense success in novels.

His depth of appreciation for music was paramount even as he continued to cultivate his writing while at Oberlin. The second semester of his freshman year was especially a “fertile” time for him, academically and creatively. Thornton became well known for the long walks he would go on when embarking on the creative process. While at Oberlin during that freshman year, he “discovered that he could ‘think out’ scenes for his plays and plots for his stories on long walks, and he established what would become a lifelong habit of walking for miles at a time, clearing his head, wrestling with ideas, composing passages of plays and stories—and sometimes, the musician taking over, even creating lyrics and melodies” (Niven 100). He established practices and habits he would carry throughout the course of his life while at Oberlin. Even though he knew his father hoped for Thornton to pursue more practical interests while at the university, he was faithful to continue to write his family and report of the various opportunities afforded him in developing these interests. Specifically, Oberlin’s religious background and numerous choral and instrumental performances provided a ripe field for Thornton to grow his inclination towards musical expression. “It may have been music more than theology that drew Thornton to Oberlin church services and vespers, but he went, reporting in letters to his family on lectures and sermons but most of all on music” (97).

The influence and cross-contamination of other writers was something that infiltrated Wilder’s work from the earliest stages of his writing career. During his time at Oberlin, “Thornton was reading insatiably, and he recognized that the pages he wrote were ‘full of allusions’ to the pages he read” (Niven 101). Wilder never shied away from the fact that his reading and other writers heavily influenced him and his writing. In fact, he embraced that reality. Wilder always recognized the interconnected nature of the writing process, giving credit

to the writers who inspired and contributed to his own process. Literature was a process of forms and genres always shifting and changing yet remaining connected to whatever came before. After *The Skin of Our Teeth* was initially produced, Wilder would famously be accused of plagiarizing from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. But this was an association that Wilder never denied and, in fact, he welcomed that connection. In his preface to the play, he writes, "The play 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" (687). His early days of constant reading, study and appreciation for multiple forms of literature and artistic expression shaped Wilder's belief that he was only accepting a torch from the writers that came before him. The allusions, metaphors, theory, devices, and style of other writers shows up in all of Thornton Wilder's work and he embraced their contributions throughout his career.

Thornton's literary background and interests were also greatly influenced by his teachers in college, specifically Dr. Charles Henry Adams Wager, whose "intellectual interests and expertise encompassed the classical world, the Italian Renaissance, and Elizabethan and Victorian England" (Niven 118). His brother Amos shared the experience of working with Wager, whom he refers to as "a great teacher of literature" (Wilder 9). Both Thornton and Amos held Wager in the incredibly high regard. Thornton wrote his mother, "Prof. Wager here is one of the greatest living authorities on St. Francis" and even going so far to say, "Prof. Wager is my great friend. Every time he opens his mouth I'm 'influenced' to the depths of my being. He's looking after my reading—irreproachable" (Niven 118). Because of the influence of Wager,

the Wilders continued to develop great interest in classical forms of literature, easily recognizable through plays like *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

In Amos Wilder's short biography of Thornton, his brother takes readers through a litany of his qualifications for being a global, well-informed writer. Greek classics were a part of his writing because of his time at the American Academy in Rome, his teaching classical epic and drama at University of Chicago, his relationship with director Karl Reinhardt, his Master of Arts from Princeton in French, Thornton's study and fascination with Spanish dramatist Lope de Vega, his years-long work and annotation to *Finnegans Wake*, as well as his acquaintance and fascination with Goethe and other German writers. Amos, who knew Thornton as well as anyone, recognizes the fact that these classical forms of literature cause an indelible imprint on his brother's work. Amos writes,

In categorizing his role as an American writer this broad literary culture should be kept in mind. It was this range of his literacy which explains the mutual cordiality and correspondence between him and Edmund Wilson. Both were 'men of letters' in the European sense. With this kind of tuition Thornton's art, however accessible to a wide public, could never be popular in a disparaging sense. Nor should his academic associations be viewed as suspect since his humanism was as deep as it was wide. (33)

Any consideration of his writing must consider the sources that were informing his writing and the broad reach that his writing holds because of the multitudinous nature of those influences.

Wilder's writing and career also stretched across genres, as he became equally successful in teaching, novel and playwriting. In 1927, when Wilder saw his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* published, he also had a collection of his three-minute sketches called *The Angel*

That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays published (Kuner 8). Wilder had been teaching at the Lawrenceville School since 1921, but resigned in 1928; the move “was more a shift in emphasis than a change in roles: whereas he had been a teacher who wrote in his spare time, he now became a writer who taught in his spare time” (8). Wilder continued to traverse between classroom and his writing, eventually having visiting teaching stints at Harvard University and the University of Chicago. Despite his success in novel and in the classroom, Wilder ended up focusing his energy in the theatre because he said it was “the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being” (18). The London *Times Literary Supplement* states it this way in their 1974 review of Wilder’s last novel:

In a literary career spanning half a century, Thornton Wilder has successfully resisted any kind of classification as novelist or playwright. We cannot pin him down, as we can Hemingway or Scott Fitzgerald, to background or subject matter (though both his first and his latest books are almost entirely autobiographical), and it is impossible to group him conveniently with any coterie of writers, whether prewar or postwar. (A. Wilder 28)

The elusive nature of Wilder’s work stems from the diversity of experience and literary influences he found throughout the course of his career.

Diversity of Class

Wilder also experienced diversity of class in his upbringing. Part of what took Thornton away from the homestead during his youth was the work his father would set up for him during the summer months, as Thornton certainly was no stranger to very hard, demanding work. The summer after his freshman year of high school he worked in the fields of Mount Hermon School for Boys, which was similar to the work his father found for him every summer, almost always

in the form of some sort of farm or ranch work with incredibly long hours and hot days.

Thornton's brother, Amos, said that what was most important during those formative years for both he and Thornton "was diversity of experience and initiation into varied aspects of the world's work and the common life" (52). At times Thornton would reveal his appreciation for the work at hand, noting how it helped him physically, often commenting on how good of shape the long physical hours provided him. But he always had literature close by. He would spend his spare time, the little that he had of it at night, reading and writing. "When he wasn't reading he was writing in snatches of time—letters, stories, playlets in which there is evidence of his wide, deep reading in the after hours, before he fell asleep from a surfeit of exercise" (Niven 107).

Thornton wasn't always a natural at farm life but worked hard during the summers to the best of his abilities. "Except for Sunday evening church services, when he wore a suit, Thornton lived in overalls, doing his best with the farm chores" (81). Thornton's father felt it was very important for his children to experience the life of the everyday worker, as it instilled an appreciation for work that was necessary no matter what career they eventually pursued. The ways in which he was exposed to the working class at an early age developed a deep sense of equanimity in his outlook on the world around him, something he would include in plays like *Pullman Car Hiawatha* and *Our Town*. This "diversity of experience" and integration into "common life" was intentional and valuable in shaping both Thornton's work ethic and his literary aspirations.

Thornton also became well practiced at communicating and entertaining multiple age groups as he worked at a camp during the summer as the entertainment director. He worked

hard to keep their attention, which—similar to how the work on farms and ranches had given him a challenging physical workout—daily provided an intensive creative workout. But he worked hard to provide the boys in the camp an effective and entertaining experience. He was a natural storyteller and often used that story telling ability to enrapture them through imagination and reality. “In return his usually obstreperous campers gave him their rapt attention—and invaluable practice in creating dynamic, enthralling stories, whatever the source or the genre” (226).

Despite his appreciation for what this work exposed him to, it still led to conflict between father and son. Thornton’s father’s practical mind often collided with the more creative, introspective and emotional Thornton. One of the areas in which they differed greatly was a perspective on money, as the family always held a challenging relationship to it. The Wilders never had an excess of financial means and his father Amos often worried about their financial future. In the same way that he found ways for his children to pursue hard work during their extra time, he also tediously monitored their finances. It became a crippling preoccupation that was often expressed in unhealthy ways towards his children. Thornton once wrote to his father, “Money and money-matters will be the last end of our family anyway...I hate to ask for money or talk about it and so I drag on for weeks without soap or equally absurd details because I feel that money is such an oppressive difficult thing” (119). His father was constantly worried about the financial security of his family and what his children would be doing for their careers, always making comments, sometimes demanding, that they should find occupational routes that would ensure a sense of financial security.

Diversity of Civic Duty

Another significantly formative force on Wilder's life and writing was his experience with war. In contemporary America, we often seem to disassociate art and civic duty like military service. Wilder, however, involved himself in both worlds. Wilder felt that writing could be an important avenue for advancing the cause of democracy throughout the world. Much of Wilder's writing came during or in between times of war and he used his drama as an avenue for contemplating the effect of war on the global community and the individual family unit. He never considered himself a pacifist. In fact, Thornton held a distinct sense of duty when it came to his role as a young American during wartime. He expresses surprise when others would consider *Skin* as a work of pacifist or defeatist literature. He writes:

"Lately, my eyes have been opened with a shock to one aspect of it.

It's struck some people as "defeatist." I have only read it to a few friends...One distinguished doctor said that it haunted him or days but that 'the government ought to prevent it's being shown'; others variously said it was 'anti-war' or 'pacifistic.' And I suddenly remember that Sibyl, who heard the first two acts in London, said that the Second Act was 'so cruel...It's that old thing again: that New England shame-facedness and shyness of the didactic, the dread of moralizing, the assumption that the aspirational side of life can be taken for granted" (Selected Letters 391-392).

Part of his cultural upbringing made Wilder shy about seeming too "didactic" in his writing and too forceful in his "moralizing". He was aware of coming across too strongly on those terms. Yet, as he expresses in this letter, his writing was never meant to communicate a defeatist way

of thinking. He believes in the ability of humanity to keep improving, keep moving forward, even when war is needed or required for those things to occur.

Affect of the two world wars were inescapable even for those who would try; Niven writes that it “was omnipresent in the life of his family and the nation”. Wilder’s sense of duty and national pride came first from his older brother, Amos. Amos joined the American Ambulance Field Service in France. “On November 6 Amos arrived in Paris to join hundreds of other American student volunteers who would serve as ambulance drivers in France” (116). His brother’s involvement in the war would serve as an inspiration for Thornton to eventually do the same. But even if he had wanted to escape the call to war in the United States, it was exceedingly difficult to do so. Much of his university experience was centered on the war, as Yale led the way in the fight to join the war effort. Wilder “was living and writing on a university campus that had become a virtual military installation, in a campus community whose professors and students had stood in the forefront of Americans challenging the country’s isolationist stance on World War I. In 1915 Yale had organized the first artillery battalion of any American university” (159).

During World War I, Thornton started to provide a glimpse into his own desire to be a part of the war and the oft-conflicting feelings he had about it. He believed in the war being fought and later would show resolve to more deeply involve himself in the Second World War but also knew that his art and his literature could be an important part of the process too. “I am a poet, a lover of the meek-eyed Peace and farthest Maine-coast solitude” (130). No matter what was going on in the world events of the day, he believed that his foremost contribution to society would be through his writing. Thornton had great hope that war would not snuff out

creativity's impulse. "Let you remember this when you regret the work that has been lost through this war that has been laid upon your treasurable young men. The work they might have done is still with you, and will yet find its way into your lives and into your children's lives" (162). He was a lover of peace, but believed he could contribute to the war effort and the fight for democracy through his writing.

For Wilder, It was not a question of whether or not he would have a role in the war, but what that role would be. "When Congress approved the declaration of war on April 6, 1917, Thornton wrote to his parents for guidance. He was almost twenty, and it was time to decide what part he would play in the war" (128). While he did not see duty overseas during the First World War, his sense of patriotism would be on greatest display during the Second World War as he willingly volunteered himself despite the fact that he was only weeks away from aging out of eligibility for active military duty. He was, at times, extremely emotional about his lack of involvement in the First World War. He wrote,

My only feeling about not being in the war myself is: the audacity of it! There is no earthly reason why I should not be there except I cannot bring myself to be vengeful and slaughter-breathing and helmet-proud about it for more than 24 hours at a time. Then I slip back into my native, bee-like preoccupation with the rarities and tender uniques of art and letters and let the trumpeting die away down the end of the street.

(145)

Wilder, as was his custom, is able to house multiple points-of-view in this statement. He felt it an audacious thing to not be involved in the war effort, yet he recognizes the consequences of

war at the same time, stating that it can lead to slaughter and vengeance. The horrific ramifications of war were always at odds with his more peaceful nature.

Wilder's writing was always an antidote to war, something that could silence the call and consequences of wartime America. Thornton, in his consideration of where he fit in the World War and how he related to America's role in the war shows a nuance and complicated consideration that would mark his life's journey of determining where democracy and politics fit into his own philosophy. Wilder "loved his country, but he had his doubts about the power of war to improve the human condition" (Niven 129). He dedicated himself to developing his literary talent and gift, always hoping to leave some literary gift of great consequence behind if he were to die in war. And Wilder "was not the only aspiring writer wrestling with the question of how to join in the war effort" (160). This was a question that would preoccupy many creative minds at the time.

As most people did, Wilder was not immune from feeling the inevitability of war. During World War II, he writes that he can feel "'the War coming nearer and nearer—a huge concrete thing that diminishes everything one has ever known except friendship, love of places, and the few occasions one has known of good hard work'" (Niven 539). He also remembered his upbringing with fondness, as war brought about an overwhelming sense of nostalgia and recollection, writing that "I dream beyond the plowed field and the dusty hay, to the moment when there is a rushing from the house to the Father returning and of the smell of Mother's risotto and the following of her about, talking to her as she works" (135). And Niven notes how troubling the state of global affairs was to Wilder. "Brought up to be a citizen of the world,

Wilder was increasingly disturbed in 1938 by what he called the 'new Ugliness abroad among the Children of Men who hate one another'" (467).

In July of 1942, "Thornton received the news that he had been drafted...despite his vision problems and the heart murmur discovered in his physical examination, he did not ask for an exemption and expected to be called into service" (Niven 164). This was the call of duty that he had long waited for and expected, and he had no expectation to exempt himself from serving in the war effort. The questions that had long plagued Wilder of how and when he would become involved were answered when he was drafted at the age of 45. "Wilder was eager to serve, and he would turn forty-five on April 17, 1942, ten days before his eligibility for active duty expired. He was determined to enlist before then, and he swore he would not be content to write propaganda or to sit in an office in some safe place. He wanted active overseas duty" (528)

While at war, Wilder seemed to thrive. He felt that he was in better physical shape than he had ever been and his sense of duty and purpose allowed him to remain surprisingly emotionally stable while at away. "He was excelling mentally and physically in his work, sleeping well, even enjoying reveille" (539). He was focused on his military work so intently that he wrote to his family, "My writing life has been set aside for the duration, and very willingly" (550). All of his time and energy centered on the war effort and he had little time for creative output. Wilder not only succeeded personally, he was succeeding militarily as he experienced multiple promotions during his time abroad. With promotion came more responsibility and more focused energy on the task at hand. He was promoted to lieutenant colonel on August 27, 1944, and was assigned to Caserta, Italy. During his time as an officer, Wilder was involved in

prisoners of war interrogation, intelligence preparation, pilot training, and helped coordinate air attacks in Romania, Germany, Austria, and Yugoslavia, and other strategic planning in Italy and France (559). His adeptness at the written word served him well in this time of war, as much of his involvement centered on interpreting information and intelligence, helping implement attack strategy throughout Europe during some of the most crucial years of World War II.

But theatre never fully left him during those war years, as he made “his own unique cultural contributions”, directing a military production of *Our Town* in Caserta in November 1944” (560). The play stirred up emotion and pathos for Americans who were longing for home. The Stage Manager in that production, Donald Hobart, wrote, “For exiled Americans overseas...*Our Town* inevitably stirred thoughts of home, and it also summoned a feeling of deep and honest pride. Grover’s Corners has never before seemed so wonderful a town or held so tangible a meaning” (Niven 560). But, this play that seemed so distinctly American to those American soldiers fighting overseas also found a home in international communities. He experienced the border-crossing nature of his dramatic work, as *Our Town* found a distinct appeal among not just Americans, but Europeans as well. He directed “a Serbo-Croatian production of *Our Town* in February 1945 in Belgrade, this one produced by Tito’s partisans, the guerrilla force commanded by Marshal Tito after Germany’s invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941” (560).

When his time in the war had come to an end, “Wilder had served in the war with distinction, confirmed by the award of the Bronze Star, the Legion of Merit, and the Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur” (564). He was now a decorated war veteran. Even in his distinct and

profound sense of duty in contributing to the effort in World War II, Wilder never lost the sense that war is a tragedy that wreaks tremendous havoc on the global community at large. When reflecting on war later in life, he wrote, “Tragically, it is also due to the fact that in our time we are accustomed to war, and custom is almost habit and habit is almost appetite” (Niven 608). War was so commonplace to United States citizens at the time of his upbringing and adulthood that it, at times, could turn to an appetite for war. He would later examine the ramifications of war on humanity and those urges and desire for war in his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Referencing his process of creating *Skin*, he writes, “Undergirding everything in the drama is the war itself” (504).

Thornton recognized the extent to which his newest play reflected the world around him. “He lost himself in his work, writing the last lines of a draft of the final act of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, believing his war play to be more relevant now than ever before” (528). The indomitable nature of the human spirit was incredibly important for Thornton to recognize and demonstrate through his drama. Wilder always considered himself an optimist even in the perilous times in which he wrote. As he received feedback and revised *Skin*, he realized that it was coming across as defeatist and anti-war, which he was surprised by. He felt that his optimism was implicit in the play, but he adjusted the work to more obviously reflect a belief in humanity’s movement towards a greater good. He stated that he wanted the sense that we are moving towards better things to become apparent in his play. “He recognized that he needed to weave in a scene of ‘conjugal love and trust between Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus,’ and to give ‘open voice’ to their ‘confidence, through discouragement, in the unshakable sense that work and home and society move on towards great good things’” (531).

One of the tragedies of war that the Wilder family experienced was through Amos, Thornton's older brother. While both Amos and Thornton returned home safely, Amos was likely experienced what would today be called post-traumatic stress disorder. "By late August, however, after nearly two years in the war zone, Cpl. Amos Wilder was suffering what he described as 'a chronic anguish'—'some kind of radical depletion, made up of battle fatigue, sleeplessness, and nervous strain'" (166). Amos, Thornton's brother, had served in the war for many years and Thornton had always looked up to him greatly. Amos's PTSD was a pointed reminder of the difficulties of war that humanity would continue to encounter years after the war ended.

3. TRAVEL

Wilder's Religion

Thornton, because of his upbringing and the wealth of influences he consumed as he grew up and started his literary career, became well acquainted with traversing boundaries. In his childhood, he crossed geographic and cultural boundaries. In his schooling, he crossed academic and creative boundaries, especially the ones that were laid out for him by his father. Thornton also became well versed at traversing the boundaries between denominational sects in the Christian church and using music and the arts as a part of that practice. He never found himself confined to the limits of his Congregational Church upbringing but used his prowess at music to cross into other denominational practice. "Thornton was a gifted musician, at home in the literature of classical music. He loved to sing in choirs and chorales, as he had done since his Berkeley days, when he was excused from the Congregational Sunday school five minutes early so he could run a couple of blocks over to Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, don a white surplice,

and join the processional” (Niven 97). What was most important for Thornton was the musical, creative expression he was able to experience as a part of multiple choirs. He was not concerned with the denomination of that choral practice, but rather the practice itself. Thornton also “played piano, organ, and violin skillfully” (97). His artistic output became an extension of his religious background and in certain ways superseded those interests.

He had many religious influences vying for his attention and allegiance during his boyhood years:

...his father’s staunch moral and philosophical convictions, first of all; his mother’s gentler, more open-minded idealism, and her wide reading, especially of William James; Thornton’s own chorister’s love for the liturgy and religious music of various faiths, especially the Catholic Church; his instinctive curiosity and stubborn need to question authority; his alternating interest in and resistance to the religious principles of the schools he attended...and his resulting skepticism about missionaries and evangelical movements; the ongoing tension between his sense of duty...and his innate need to question, to study, to read, to come to terms with his own spiritual identity in his own way. (108)

One of the central tenets of Wilder’s writing that is central to the analysis I provide throughout the rest of this work is his ability to question *and* maintain his belief system. He conducts a dialogical process throughout his writing that teases out ideas and questions the validity of who we are and what we may be about. In his religious practice, he simultaneously holds a belief system yet resists some of those principles. The push and pull that dialogue can create is something he became increasingly willing to address and include in his drama.

In a letter, he writes, “I have often been reproached for not having made a more explicit declaration of commitment to the Christian faith...the very thoroughness of my exposure to dogmatic Protestant positions made me aware that they were insufficient to encompass the vast picture of history and the burden of suffering in the world” (Selected Letters 700). Wilder, the man and the author, was interested in asking the right questions rather than providing all of the answers, for himself or for his readers. This is where his democratic way of thinking comes into clearer view—if we all think we already have all the answers, what is the point of conversation? But Wilder believed responsible individuals must continue to ask questions and hear from those around them, growing and evolving a personal philosophy and modes of living in order to truly move things forward. He is not interested in dogma; he is exceedingly willing to question the Christian principles he grew up with, yet holds on to a worldview that might often be described as Christian in nature.

Late in life, Wilder wrote to a friend, “My trials of body have not been as extensive or as racking as yours, but I have known them. Each person meets these demands in a different way. I am not a religious man in the conventional sense and cannot claim that consolation that is conveyed in the word ‘Trial’” (Niven 687). Even in his advanced years, Wilder did not consider himself conventionally religious. His religion was expansive, inclusive and more concerned with the good of humanity and the human ability to change and grow. He wrote that he was, indeed, happiest in the simplicity of human relationship and love. “I am happiest in loving and being loved by human people and next to that in writing words and being commended for them, and next to that in mysteries of the spirit, into which I penetrate I believe more every year, until perhaps God will be my whole life” (Selected Letters 106). His letter here shows an important

prioritization in Wilder's life and writing. He was, first, consumed and affirmed by the human ability to love and be loved. He was then attendant to the power of the written word and his adeptness at it. Finally, he was concerned with the "mysteries of the spirit", believing that, quite possibly, he would eventually be wholeheartedly consumed with "God". Yet his fascination with humanity—Wilder's brand of humanitarianism—remained paramount in his work throughout the course of his career. And Wilder was content with the process of self-discovery. In his final novel, *Theophilus North*, he writes, "It freed me from the oppression of vast numbers and vast distances and big philosophical questions beyond my grasp. I'm content to cultivate half an at a time" (373). Wilder did not need to understand everything about philosophy or religion. He was willing and able to understand the world around him bit by bit.

Just like the multiple ambiguous and complex influences on Wilder's writing, so his sexuality would remain ambiguous and undetermined by those around him. "For years there would be speculation about Thornton Wilder's sexuality and his sex life, but he left behind little evidence of that very private matter" (Niven 171). Penelope Niven questions the validity of reports from supposed ex-lovers of Thornton Wilder's. Even in Thornton's personal letters, he let on very little about his personal life. In 1925, he recounts an experience of unrequited love in a letter to a friend. "I loved with all the exaggeration one can imagine; but I was not only not loved so in return. I was laughed at" (Niven 257). But in this letter he provides no names or details of that encounter. Even to his trusted friends, he kept his private life incredibly private. "No trail of clues or facts leads to the identity of the person who failed to love Thornton in return, who 'cleverly' humiliated him in 1925, and who wounded him so deeply. The impact was profound and enduring, however, leaving him by his own admission extremely cautious

and doubtful about relationships” (257). Niven writes, “Other gay men who knew Wilder over the years agreed that whether they believed Wilder was homosexual or heterosexual or bisexual or asexual, his personal life was intensely private, seemingly impervious even to rumor” (438). In the same way that his writing can hardly be classified by typical generic means, so too does his personal life exist beyond the boundaries of sexuality.

Ultimately, his writing certainly portrays an ethic to it, what he believed to be the “main premise of Christianity”. He did not write to convince anyone of a certain dogma; he remained open and inconclusive in much of his religious belief. Yet the importance of loving and being loved remains paramount for Thornton Wilder. “He wrote in his journal that he was now ready to alter his views that ‘man, such as he is, has no choice but to believe, to insist on believing, that the world is grounded in love—love as affection. Which brings us back to the main premise of Christianity. The human soul must feel that it is loved” (633). This belief in human ability and desire to love and be loved would dominate much of Wilder’s humanism and his writing.

The global influences on Thornton Wilder

It is important to revisit Wilder’s own cosmopolitan, varied background. Wilder, at a very early age, was forced to become accustomed to change and movement to and from various global cultures. He was born in Madison, Wisconsin but moved to China briefly for his father’s work as American consul general (Kuner 3). During this time, he was influenced by the worlds of Europe and Asia, living in China but attending a German school. Both his living and scholastic environment were “equally alien to all he had previously known” (3). His family then moved back to the United States when Thornton was nine years old. The family again moved to China for a period of time before moving to California where Wilder graduated high school. He

went to Oberlin College then transferred to Yale, served in both World War I and II, studied at the American Academy in Rome, completed a Master of Arts in French at Princeton University and taught French for several years at the high school level (Kuner 5-7).

Thornton also experienced a wide cultural upbringing because of his father's line of work. While challenging for the young Wilders, their father's occupation as a diplomat provided an intercultural upbringing that paid dividends for Thornton by making the interplay between Western and Eastern cultures commonplace. The family spent years in China while Amos was a United States diplomat to the country. After his father's time in China, he eventually accepted a position in charge the Yale-in-China program. "Its mission was to work in the United States and in China to promote cross-cultural education, understanding, and communication, and to facilitate or establish school, college, medical, and cultural programs in China. Former consul general Wilder, with his ties to China and to New Haven, seemed a perfect match for this endeavor" (Niven 82). Almost everything in Thornton's upbringing and his father's occupation led to a intercultural, global understanding. Diplomacy and crossing cultural boundaries was part of the normal way of doing things in the Wilder household.

However, Amos's position in China took a toll on him and his family. His wife, Thornton's mother Isabella, eventually moved back to the United States while Amos, Thornton and Charlotte remained in China. But the diplomatic position was never the right fit, as Amos found it challenging to shoulder the workload required of a United States representative to China. It took several years for Thornton's father to recognize the fact that the family needed to stay together. With his new position secure as head of the Yale-in-China program Dr. Wilder finally insisted "they would set up housekeeping together in Connecticut because it was 'bad for a

family to learn to live apart; it is better to keep together despite the disadvantages” (83).

Several years of geographic separation led Amos to realize and act on that realization that the family needed to be together in order to survive. This began Thornton’s connection and habitation in New England for much of his life. He graduated from Yale University in 1920, received an MA in French from Princeton in 1926, and he taught at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey from 1921-1928. Despite a teaching position off and on at the University of Chicago, he built a home in Hamden, Connecticut for his family and himself in the 1930s, a home he would own and occupy until his death.

The Wilder family’s globe trotting tendencies would mark each of the Wilder children. “Dr. Wilder, still running Yale-in-China in New Haven, was very busy in the fall of 1916—as always, the ‘chess master’ moving his children from one place to another on a global chessboard” (Niven 116). Perhaps the most telling aspect of the nomadic nature of the Wilder family was when Isabelle, age 16, filled out an application to Northfield Seminary, “listing the patchwork of schools she had attended, from Shanghai to Berkeley to Florence, Italy, to Vevey, Switzerland, back to Berkeley, and now to New Haven” (117). With their father moving the family to New Jersey once Thornton graduated high school, the Wilders were reunited but only after Thornton had received his high school degree. Thornton was separated from many of his family members during that time, almost always living in a different location than his father.

Because of this international influence, Wilder's work often troubles the water of traditional "Western" drama, drawing influence from many different international sources in its construction. It easily travels from American to international dramatic forms, holding implications of both domestic theatre and global theatrical forms. I specifically say "western"

with extreme caution, because we have entered into a time where the boundaries between what has been known as "western" and "eastern" drama are continually coming down. Wilder contributes to the destruction of these boundaries as he complicates "the cause-effect narrative logic in naturalistic characterizations of western realist drama" (Mansbridge 211).

Joanna Mansbridge makes note of his connections with Japanese theatrical conventions, saying that "the complex intertextual connections among Wilder...and Japanese theater encourage a cross-cultural, multitemporal investigation of the way modernity's methods for organizing time are recorded in modernity's dramas" (211).

Wilder obviously and intentionally crosses the boundaries between what we have considered Eastern and Western dramatic forms in his association with Asian theatre, demonstrating the type of exchange between East and West that he desired for others. When writing *Our Town*, he readily admits to utilizing their technique of drama. Paul Lifton, in "Thornton Wilder's Minimalist Plays: Mingling Eastern and Western Traditions", details the specific and intentional (and sometimes unintentional) ways that Wilder draws from global influences in his drama. His use of the Stage Manager has often been compared to the Chinese property man (77). Wilder's pantomime was apparently influenced by a performance he saw by renowned Chinese opera artist Mei Lanfang in 1930. The minimalism Wilder employs in *Our Town* and several of his short plays is directly reminiscent of Asian theatre traditions. While most of his experience with Asian theatre was "secondhand"—Wilder never attended Chinese theatre when he lived there—Lifton notes, "Perhaps it was his very lack of firsthand knowledge that allowed him to borrow freely and imaginatively from the Asian traditions and to integrate his borrowings comfortably into his own unique dramatic style" (77).

In incorporating these multiple styles, he reveals “the fundamental bonds uniting Eastern and Western theatre” (78). While the elements of direct address, use of vehicles onstage to symbolize travel and a journey (common in Chinese theatre is a journey transported by a non-existent boat), and using “found” objects as pieces of scenery (a table serving as something else, like a cliff, common to Chinese theatre) are all evidence of the inspiration from Asian forms of theatre, possibly the most obvious connection is Wilder’s use of pantomime throughout his dramatic work. Suggesting stage props and action through pantomime is incredibly common in Chinese opera. The minimalism used in *Our Town* and many of his other dramatic works demonstrate that the exposure he received to Asian forms of theatre continued to influence him years after encountering it on the stage. In his “Preface to Three Plays”, Wilder expresses his appreciation for this simplicity and imaginative use of found objects: “In Chinese drama a character, by straddling a stick, conveys to us that he is on horseback. In almost every No play of the Japanese an actor makes a tour of the stage and we know that he is making a long journey” (686). Wilder was a globally conscious writer, grounded in his experiences growing up and early in his writing career. His international experiences help to develop “his dramatic aesthetic by drawing from German expressionism, Italian futurism, American emotional realism, and, less directly, Asian drama” (Mansbridge 214). It is exactly these influences that allow Wilder's drama, and specifically for my purposes, *Our Town*, to exhibit the borderless qualities inherent in cosmopolitan literature.

Thornton and Cosmopolitanism

Because of this wide range of cultural influences during his life, he was always intrigued with a larger global community, not just the people who populated wherever “home” might be

for the moment. Wilder once wrote, “the artist through his creation, has been in all times a force that draws men together and reminds them that things which men have in common are greater than the things that separate them; and that the work of the artist is the clearest example of the operation of freedom in the human spirit” (Niven 621). Wilder believed that art has the ability and responsibility to show people how their commonalities are great than their differences. He believed that artists have the power to bring people together. This was an idea that is manifest through his novels and his dramatic writing.

Another of the tenets of Thornton’s writing was a preoccupation with universal themes and ideas and the ways that the individual life fit into a larger universe. Wilder truly was at home all over the world. He could speak to people of multiple backgrounds, different generations, and men and women. This ability started at an early age, traveling back and forth from the United States to China. “As a boy Thornton had fallen in love with sea travel...He relished the freedom to choose company or solitude, work or play, and he craved the continual promise of new landscapes and new people to be discovered” (Niven 182). He spent time in Rome, studying archaeology and Italian at the American Academy in Rome during 1920 and 1921. Thornton used his experience in Italy to practice and refine a skill that would become singularly important in his writing and his philosophy: the art of listening. “Wherever Thornton went in Italy—restaurants, parties, on streetcars and trains—strangers as well as friends or acquaintances told him their life stories, often confiding their dreams or their woes. He was accustomed to that role in his family, and encouraged it” (Niven 189). He had a deep appreciation for the people and the culture of Italy, writing, ““There’s something in the air over here: everyone is unhappily in love every ten minutes of their lives, and only too glad to find a

sympathetic eye and ear” (189). For many of the people that he encountered on a daily basis, Thornton was that sympathetic eye and ear. He learned that art through his family relations and continued that during his education and writing career. Wilder found solace in listening to others’ stories and consuming whatever information they gave him about their lives.

His time in Rome also contributed to his later literature. “While Thornton thought originally and independently about his own fiction and plays, he also steeped himself in literary tradition, learning from an eclectic array of ‘teachers’ whose work spanned centuries and cultures. He was their apprentice, experimenting, testing, trying—not depending on anyone else for encouragement or practical help” (Niven 200). At the same time that he was consuming other cultures and people’s experiences, he was also informing his own craft and doing it in a particular way, specific to Thornton Wilder. “He would do whatever he would do in his own time, in his own way”.

At times, his wide array of interests, influences, and reading would find their ways into his work. His first writings were “glutted with his intense imaginings, his ambitious artistic impulses, his endless curiosity and prodigious memory, his fascination with history, philosophy, religion, languages, people, and every book he’d ever read” (210). He had the ability to draw one a tremendously diverse library of inspirations when creating his own work. From an early age, he read everything he could get his hands on. Those habits only continued, as he got older. The playwright John Guare says of Wilder and the extensive catalogue of interests and reading he possessed, “What do we do with this man who was a playwright, novelist, actor, teacher, musician, essayist, translator, adaptor, opera librettist and screenwriter...This was a man who

as a hobby—it had to be an act of love—spent years dating the four hundred extant plays of Lope de Vega. This was a man whose nickname was The Library” (Guare xvi).

Wilder’s interests were always cosmopolitan in nature, never interested in only English-speaking playwrights and novelists. “He went to the theater in New York and read plays in his spare time, often daydreaming about translating and adapting work by others—such as Pirandello” (Niven 214). Here, Niven is talking about the famous Italian writer and Nobel Prize winning Luigi Pirandello whose play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, among his other works, had a tremendous influence on Thornton Wilder. While at university, he made a habit of reading the current events of foreign countries. He wrote to his family, “I can hardly wait until the Univ. Library receives its weekly batch of foreign newspapers” (254). As distinctly American as Thornton was, his interests never stayed within the boundaries of American borders.

Thornton was constantly learning from his predecessors, devouring each and every bit of writing he could spare. And he made a point to examine past writers with the intensity of a scholar, not just a casual reader. “Once Thornton was drawn to a writer, his habit was to saturate himself in that writer’s work, reading analytically, rereading a play or novel two or three times, taking notes along the way from the vantage point of the critic as well as the writer. He would dissect a work and then retrieve from its remains the techniques or themes he wanted to try with his own hand” (Niven 213-214). He was so well versed in so many areas that “Ruth Gordon, his great Dolly Levi, said in her tribute: ‘Somebody asked (my husband) Garson Kanin where he went to college. He said he never did. He went to Thornton Wilder” (Guare xvi). Wilder insisted on remaining unclassifiable as an author, as “he sometimes had little patience when readers quizzed him about the how and why of his work” (426). Wilder believed that it

was an impossible task to determine the influences on one's own work, as those influences are so varied and numerous. As well read as Wilder was, one could spend years attempting to trace the exact influence on every word, every phrase or act in his novels or drama.

He was always observing the world around him, never discriminating based on race and class but allowing it to inform his writing. "One by-product of the experience was the promise of gleaning rich material with every mile he traveled...every person he met along the way, every conversation he shared or overheard in diners and bars and hotels and railroad cars" (352).

Thornton was much more at home with other artists and those in a similar station of life, exhibiting an ability to connect and befriend multiple types of people. During his twenties he spent time in France, living in the least expensive parts of Paris. "He was making friends with his 'motley crowd' of neighbors in the 'dreadful pension'—impoverished Polish musicians, one 'rich and famous and charming' Polish pianist who was hiding from a princess, 'impecunious Russian composers and painters...a thickness of local color that would stagger Balzac'. Thornton loved it" (Niven 284).

Wilder's work reflects this consideration of the universal again and again. His early novels, like *The Bridge of the San Luis Rey*, "confronts the reader with universal questions" (305). Wilder once said, "In my plays I attempted to raise ordinary daily conversation between ordinary people to the level of the universal human experience" (350). It is easy to dismiss this pursuit from a contemporary academic mindset. Many scholars often run away from the term "universal" and for good reason; we often now recognize the fact that what was once termed "universal" is often directly representative of the dominant ideology of a given time. Yet Wilder, in his dramatic writing specifically, seems to willingly take steps towards including others in the

process of whom we are listening to and what we consider to be “universal”. He believes that there is a simple human connection between all people, simply because we are the ones inhabiting the earth and can connect on that level if nothing else. Niven writes:

The human personality and behavior, human conflicts, the plight of the human condition forms the crux of his work; these universals defy time and place. The personalities, questions, and issues in each of his first four novels could be readily transported to other times and places. People can be lost, dysfunctional, suffering, struggling with how to live in any city, town, village, or countryside—anywhere, anytime. People can die unexpectedly and catastrophically anywhere, anytime. People can test the boundaries of society; can be outcast, alienated, isolated; can love and not be loved in return anywhere, anytime (358).

It was this vast understanding of the “anywhere, anytime” that significantly informed all of Wilder’s work and has made it so popular in places all across the globe.

His varied experience consistently informed his theatrical writings and philosophies. “He had a near-photographic memory where theater was concerned. His wide-ranging knowledge of dramaturgy and his years of sitting attentively in theater audiences equipped him to roam a spacious landscape, from classics to contemporary plays, and to offer informed views of the success or failure of the writing, the acting, the scenery, the direction, even the adaptations or translations” (241). But as “universal” as Wilder’s work became, he still maintained a love for his home country. He once wrote to a friend, “‘I’m a citizen by God’s inscrutable grace of the greatest country in the world...and I don’t like to be out of it for long at

a time” (410). He also wrote to his close friend and fellow writer Gertrude Stein, ‘The trouble with me is that I can’t be soul-happy outside of my beloved U.S.A and that’s a fact’” (410).

But even in *Our Town*, what some might consider his most distinctly and uniquely “American” play—after all, it focuses on a small New England town that many believe was based on his own American upbringing—holds questions and themes that can relate to populations around the globe. This focus on a unique, particular experience yet relating it to the larger global community is something Wilder intentionally includes in much of his drama. “*Our Town* was years in the making, and he wrote much of it in transit, in American and European towns. He was a perpetual traveler, habitually living ‘in two suitcases and a briefcase,’ a mark of his transient lifestyle as well as the relative ease with which he could transplant himself from one place to another” (402). Just like Thornton was able to transplant himself from one place to another, so could his drama reach beyond social, geographic, and political boundaries. Paul Lifton puts it this way: “In fact, perhaps Wilder’s real importance lies in his creation of an unparalleled point of intersection for Western and Eastern theatre (77).

Thornton was at home wherever he was. He had an ability to forge familial relationships with others through letters, across oceans and despite large spans of time that might exist between face-to-face encounters with the people with whom he was in relationship. His upbringing, separated from family and splintered across the globe, gave way to an ability to establish strong bonds between himself and those who were not of blood relationship. He knew that family was not solely based on the family you were born to, but the family you established throughout the course of one’s life. Niven’s *Thornton Wilder: A Life* concludes, “This quintessential American writer had lived, worked, and traveled as a citizen of the world,

connecting globally with his era. He captured the spirit and the promise of his own country, and his planetary themes and questions touched a global audience as well, transcending time and place” (702). Wilder’s ability to stretch across political, cultural, social, and familial boundaries dominated his writing career, and this transcendence is paramount to the following investigation into his ethical, social and political ideologies and where we see those ideals in his dramatic writing.

CHAPTER THREE

WILDER'S FEMINIST SENSIBILITY

In his dramatic works, Thornton Wilder shows the ability to hold seemingly opposing views as parts of a whole. Rather than dismissing a certain viewpoint as wrong or irreconcilable, he promotes dialogue between it and opposing views. In other words, he opens a dramatic space for differing views to hold conversation with each other. In this chapter, I want to look at the way his commitment to dialogue and diversity of opinion factors into his portrayal and depiction of women in his plays. As I shall show, he demonstrates a willingness to push the boundaries of conventional female representation and voice. Wilder challenges views on women and encourages a discussion of how women are considered in literature, theatre, and society at the time of his writing.

Wilder is one of the few writers to have received the Pulitzer Prize for multiple genres of literature, in both Drama and Fiction. He won it twice for Drama, for *Our Town* in 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1943. His second Pulitzer Prize for Drama (and third overall) involves a play that is unique, challenging in its dramatic structure and surprisingly unconventional take on the American family. As I shall show, *The Skin of Our Teeth* serves as a stage for some of Wilder's more potent political thought. I want to specifically acknowledge the intentional politics of *Skin*, grounding it in the historical moment in which it was born and portraying the ways in which Wilder was ahead of his time in his political thinking. When examining the play through this political lens, we can see emerge a unique and somewhat revolutionary take on female representation, allowing for a discussion of Wilder's brand of "feminist" thinking in his drama. I specifically put feminist in quotes because Wilder really demonstrates more of a feminist

sensibility without intentionally framing it with a theoretical or political lens. So, it is important to recognize how his representations of women pushes for a new understanding of female roles in twentieth century American theatre without those intentions being explicitly set forth.

Paula Vogel, in her introduction to *The Skin of Our Teeth*, says, “We forget Wilder’s vision and voice; in our memory we assign his works to a nostalgic theater of our youth...And then we encounter him on stage as he is and will remain through the ages: tough-minded, exacting, facing the darkness in human existence without apology” (viii). Wilder has always provided a look into the darker nature of humanity, but his vision is subtle, nuanced and poignant in its “exacting” force. He was never afraid to confront and comment on the problems facing our global community, but it takes an intentional desire to see it at times. Perhaps that was a fault or, perhaps, it was a specific narrative method and continues to serve the purpose of stimulating dialogue rather than prescribing moral platitudes. He is interested in providing a staging ground for conversation, not overtly exerting his influence over the answers needed in facing human problems. Vogel continues:

Wilder has indeed led the torch race, and we remember the recent runner but forget the lead athlete who started the race. There, in *Our Town*, is the bold audience address that I attributed to Tennessee Williams. There, in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, is the collapsing fragile box set exposing the family to the world that I remember in *Death of a Salesman*. There, also in *Skin*, is the nuclear family leaping across centuries and eras that I remember vividly in Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine*” (v).

Wilder uses the family unit as the center for humanity and the way he expresses his hope for humanity and humankind's ability to progress toward more equitable modes of belonging. He argues for equality, for dialogue, for discussion and empathy and understanding in the social and political world in which we live. This requires a level of empathy that seems vitally important to Wilder in all of his work along with the willingness to listen to and attempt to understand someone else's experience.

Vogel specifically relates *The Skin of Our Teeth* to Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, and it is important to make note of this comparison because of the ways *Cloud Nine* specifically and pointedly challenges traditional views and representations of gender. Vogel, who has long been considered a feminist and queer writer willing to challenge patriarchal assumptions, does not qualify her comparison between Wilder's work and Churchill's play. She assuredly relates the two dramatists, which suggests that quite possibly Wilder's plays, like Churchill's, do not fit into the traditional patriarchal viewpoints found during the time he was writing. In *Cloud Nine*, Churchill portrays characters that transcend eras, jumping from colonial British imperialism in Act I to the 1970s in Act II. She also has male actors playing female roles, female actors playing male roles, and a representation of gay relationships in both time periods. In doing so, she fiercely challenges the way that gender is portrayed and considers questions of how gender is prescribed and performed throughout eras. Vogel's statement comparing Wilder's *Skin* and Churchill's *Cloud Nine* hints that there might be a discernible correlation between the two plays when considering them together. While Wilder does not go as far in his dramatic conversation about female representation, he introduces the topic in *Skin* and formulates certain questions

about our ideologies surrounding women's roles that plays like *Cloud Nine* will dig into decades later.

The Skin of Our Teeth

The Skin of Our Teeth follows the Antrobus family through thousands of years of global calamity. Wilder portrays a "typical" American family (I put typical in quotes for reasons to be discussed later) as a symbol of survival and the ability of humankind to endure, despite the natural, mythical and familial struggles that humanity has endured throughout all of time. The play takes us through three historical time periods, all of which have the same Antrobus family planted squarely in the middle of the action: the Ice Age, the time of the Great Flood, and the latter years of a world war, representative of World War II. The Antrobus family is thousands of years old and the parents serve as a stand-in for Adam and Eve, the first humans on the planet. They have two children, although they tell us that these two children have not always been the same two. They also have a maid, Sabina, who endures through the various time periods as well.

Wilder takes us through these various epochs, showing the ways that the Antrobus family survives the Ice Age by building fires and tossing in everything they can find in order to keep the fire going. At the end of Act One, Sabina asks, "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" (48). Wilder constantly implores the audience to participate in the action of the play, directly engaging them in conversation. His dramatic techniques and the ways he brings them into the dramatic conversation allows for a higher than normal investment in the subjects portrayed in *Skin*. Throughout the first act, the audience sees discussion of the

wheel being invented by Mr. Antrobus, indicating the resourcefulness and adaptive nature of mankind. The first act also introduces the family's son, Henry, referencing the first act of true evil as we learn that his original name was Cain. Cain was the son of Adam and Eve who killed his brother Abel; Wilder starts a discussion of where evil truly resides through the character of Henry.

In Act II, the family survives the flood, taking on the role of Noah and his family who save mankind and the entire animal kingdom. And in Act III, we see the destruction caused by a global conflict, directly reminiscent of World War II. But the play also portrays the endurance of the human spirit and our ability to adapt, grow, change and survive. That survival includes a reckoning with evil both in and outside our own homes; no matter what, humanity will survive and progress. I will show that this progress manifests in two distinct ways in *Skin*; in this chapter, by arguing that Wilder's drama is feminist; and, in the final chapter, by arguing that the play calls for equality and grace.

Wilder as Feminist

As Vogel states, we think that we know Wilder's work and assign him a spirit of sentimentality that is not justified by his work when it is carefully considered. I aim to show that his work exhibits a surprisingly advanced, progressive political sentiment through his female characters, as seen in *The Skin of Our Teeth* and other plays.

In a 1937 letter to his sister, Isabel, Wilder demonstrates some of his views on women's roles in the family and society as a whole. He wrote:

Don't overdo that notion that a woman has nothing to say or be or give unless she's wife-mother-and-home-decorator.

We're all People, before we're anything else. People, even before we're artists. The role of being a Person is sufficient to have lived and died for.

Don't insult ten million women by saying a woman is null and void as a spinster.

(Selected letters, 317)

The words written to his sister offer tremendous insight into Wilder's views on women. They represent his attempt to console his sister after she had been involved in a romance that did not end well. We can see the value that he places on life outside of the home. Isabel was hurt and disappointed not to have the relationship eventually become a marriage and Thornton redirects his sister by stating that women are more than the roles traditionally prescribed to them by society. He encourages her to think of the many other ways she has value and to rid herself of the absurd idea that a woman is only valuable as a "wife-mother-and-home-decorator".

Wilder sees great potential in Isabel and, seemingly, in all women. He believes women have a voice and are more than they are conventionally thought to be; they have much to give outside of the home. Yet he also acknowledges the place occupied by many women in the world at the time. He shows empathy towards those without families, encouraging Isabel not to "insult ten million women by saying a woman is null and void as a spinster." Even if a woman works and does not marry, she is never null and void. Her life matters because "We're all People, before we're anything else." Wilder's emphasis upon humanity is significant. He believes that the humanity people hold in common is "sufficient to have lived and died for." Holding simple humanity in common, human beings are equal with one another in this respect. An ethic of common and equal humanity pervades his dramatic work. Thornton's ideology

involves a respect and dignity for people, whether they are living the traditional—for the time—life of wife and mother (like his own mother did), whether they never marry and become a spinster, or whether they become writers and academics as he and his siblings did. The humanness that people share applies to every human being. Again, “we are all People, before we’re anything else.”

It is important to provide a brief history of what was going on in the world of feminism at the time Wilder was writing. What is now known as first wave feminism begins in Europe and North America during the 1850s in 1860s, lasting through the earliest parts of the 20th century (LeGates 197). In *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society*, Marlene LeGates discusses how, during this period, feminists attacked “the male monopoly of education, professional careers, and culture; married women's economic and legal dependence; sexual and more double standards; women's lack of control over their bodies; the drudgery of housework; low wages; and, not least, women's exclusion from politics” (197). This is exactly the time that Wilder was born and in which he grew up. It was a time of a tremendous change in the ways women were represented in politics and on stage.

Wilder, always the student of literature and drama, would have been directly influenced by the time that Susan Glenn writes about in her book, *Female Spectacle*. Glenn discusses the importance of the theater in challenging representations of women and providing a space for new representations to emerge. She also dissects the ways in which the stage reaffirmed traditional notions of femininity. Glenn says that “in a crucial epoch of historical upheaval, female performers became agents and metaphors of changing gender relations” and that the popular theater became a “venue for acting out in staging the cultural, social, and political

assertions as well as the anxieties associated with the era of the New Woman" (3). Many historians credit the late 1800s and early 1900s with providing the precursor of "modern feminism" in the United States (4). However, Glenn notes "it was not until about 1910, with the emergence of a reinvigorated suffrage movement and the entrance of a younger, more diverse, and ultimately more radical generation of women activists, that we witness what historian Nancy Cott has called the 'grounding of modern feminism'" (4). Wilder grew up in years of shifting political, social, and ethical thought on women's position in the family, government, and society at large. These shifting foundations of feminist thought provided a unique background for sifting through his thoughts on women's rights and the ways he wrote his female characters in his drama.

In *Female Spectacle*, Glenn discusses how two conflicting portrayals of women greatly affected theater's portrayals of women. First she discusses Sarah Bernhardt and other female actors who challenged traditional roles of women through their performance. She also contrarily discusses the Broadway culture of the chorus girl and how Broadway producers of the time made "a spectacle of women," greatly reinforced by productions like the Ziegfeld follies. "Assertive self-spectacle by theater women was of crucial importance for changing concepts of womanhood at the turn of the century. Equally significant was the way theatrical producers made a spectacle of women, positioning them as passive objects for audience consumption" (3). Glenn says that in the early twentieth century, "popular theater gave women important new sources of cultural authority and visibility. Ironically, however, theater reworked older stereotypes of the so-called emancipated female...Thus the stage contributed to changing ideas about female identity in paradoxical ways, criticizing even while promoting the notion of

female emancipation” (8). The conflicting perceptions of women in the theatre pervaded the American stage in the early twentieth century, certainly a shifting mindset that Wilder would have noticed given his own immersion in American theatre.

Wilder began his career during the first wave of feminism in the United States. While the country would see future waves of feminist movements, it is possible to consider Wilder’s writing in light of the shifting ideologies of American thinking of the 1920s and 1930s. Wilder, like writers such as Sophie Treadwell and Susan Glaspell, was ahead of his time in crafting a revolutionary piece of dramatic literature. If we hold the writing up to current standards of what is “progressive” or feminist, we certainly would find problems with the way certain things are communicated throughout the work. Some of the problematic nature of his female characters will be discussed here, but the main focus of my discussion of his feminist *sensibility* is to again unlock new avenues into his work, work that many feel they know so well.

Even though fully immersing Wilder’s work in a contemporary feminist mindset show certain pitfalls and holes in considering the work a truly “feminist” piece of literature, it is possible to line up Wilder’s work with some contemporary feminist ideologies that would develop decades later. In Jill Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, she outlines three modes of feminist thinking. The first, what she terms liberal feminism, seeks to “insert women into the mainstream of political and social life by changing the cultural perception of them as second-class citizens” (4). Instead of attempting to replace traditional male patriarchal ideology with another system of thought, liberal feminism attempts to change political thought by “chipping away at male hegemony” (4). Liberal feminism is the type of feminist thinking that Wilder’s work shows evidence of. In his drama, Wilder shows a willingness to chip away at the

traditionally male-centric hegemony present in American and global political thought. He certainly does not replace this line of thinking by promoting a radical shift, but intricately and subtly asks questions through his drama. In asking these questions and by using this subtle approach, it would be easy to fault Wilder for not going far enough. But I want to consider the ways in which his drama creates a platform to challenge political thinking and to cultivate and establish a dialogue, always of utmost importance to Wilder. In doing so, he creates a space for those questions to be asked without feeling the need to provide the answers. Wilder once wrote to a friend, agreeing with Chekhov's statement about what literature is meant to do. He writes, "Chekhov said: 'The business of literature is not to answer questions, but to state them fairly'" (306). Wilder willingly asks questions without the desire to provide exact answers for his audience members.

Wilder's *Skin* was revolutionary in form, dramatically parting with the realist dramatic form popular at the time in American theatre. Dolan notes that the very form and style of a piece of theatre might hint towards a more radical, progressive mindset. In her address to the Women and Theatre Project in 2011, she says that "even the most popular, 'dominant' American theatre and performance is no longer hegemonically realist—and of course, anti-realist, avant-garde, and experimental theatre movements thread throughout American theatre history" (Dolan address). For many years, hegemony and realist drama walked hand-in-hand, so the various forms that disrupt that hegemonic structure indicate a subversion of the traditional system of theatre. In structuring *The Skin of Our Teeth* in the way he does, Wilder subverts the popular realism of the time: breaking the fourth wall, having human-sized dinosaurs running

around the stage, stage managers and actors coming in and out of character to alienate the audience and disorient them as to the style of theatre they are viewing.

But Dolan makes sure to recognize that “departing from generic traditions alone doesn’t insure that these plays or performances are feminist...Likewise, even more experimental forms don’t necessarily predict progressive meanings”. One must investigate performances individually to determine their feminist sensibilities, “looking closely at each performance, because progressive meanings sometimes come in surprising packages”. So, we cannot assume that simply because Wilder departs with the realist tradition of the time in which he was writing that it meaningfully subverts hegemonic values. What is needed is an investigation into *The Skin of Our Teeth* specifically, taking a look at the female representation available throughout the play. By looking at Wilder’s depiction and dialogue of female characters in his plays, the ways in which his drama exhibits a feminist sensibility becomes clearer, one that was revolutionary for his time but also fits into a contemporary feminist discussion.

Although Wilder was a private person, when asked, he never shied away from expressing his opinion on politics of the day or the writer’s place in those politics. He considered it quite a noble opportunity for writers to imagine and create a reality that might not yet exist. Some of his most explicit ideas about portrayals of women came out in an interview for the French magazine *Nouvelles Littéraires* in 1951. He directly, and quite pointedly, questions his interviewer on the portrayals and perceptions of women in French theater. He says:

Since my arrival in Paris, I have been going to the theater almost every night.

Why do your playwrights seem to take pleasure in depriving woman of her

power, in taking away all her charms? Anouilh these days complacently depicts only fools and viragos. I believe, like Goethe and a few others, that woman inspires man to his noblest actions. She sees further. Man, driven by urgent tasks, occupied with his little affairs, is more shortsighted. From the 17th to the 18th centuries, women did not doubt their power. Why have they lost that serenity? (Delpech 53).

He expresses the power women have but are losing in French theatre. He also expresses his appreciation for older forms of theatre and the depictions of women found in 17th and 18th century theatre. In these comments, he also recognizes the second-class nature of women in society at the time. It seems, in Wilder's accounting, that the best a woman can hope for is to inspire man to "his noblest actions." She can participate in a man's journey towards greatness but cannot achieve that for herself. He complicates this idea, though, by recognizing that women "see further." They have tremendous power but are limited in the scope of what they can do because of the place that society has provided them.

One reason for Wilder's interest in the theatrical depiction of women is his relationship to the women in his life. As I have mentioned, he held an extremely close bond with his mother throughout his life as well as with his sisters. After the tremendous success of his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the first thing he thought to spend his money on was his family, specifically, his mother. He wrote her, speaking of *Bridge*, "It will help you build the most adorable little Engl. house and put a maid in it too. And then I'll never travel to Europe again but will sit reading aloud to you while you punch rugs. Sweetest lady in the world, au revoir" (Selected letters, 202). Here Thornton shows his desire to be reunited with his family but also

his sense of selflessness when talking about earthly possessions and fame. Instead of purchasing a home for himself, his stronger desire is to take care of his mother and share the wealth he has acquired.

Penelope Niven states that the women in Thornton's life had a tremendous affect on him and that he held them in the highest regard. She writes,

He was an artist who deftly sketched portraits of women in his fiction and drama, and in his letters. There was his affectionate relationship with the mother whose mind and spirit he revered; the vulnerability of the heroines he created in his plays...Thornton had a gift for friendship that transcended age and gender, and as he grew into his adult life, many of his friends would be older women. (191)

Given that many of his close relationships, especially as an adult, were with older women like his mother and Gertrude Stein, it is easy to see why Thornton might be interested in raising certain questions about the way women are perceived and treated.

Early in life he showed a desire and ability to collaborate with women, writing, "I have collaborated with Miss Marion Tyler the brightest and most charming girl in College...in writing two essays and a one-act play for the market. I supply some purple patches and general ideas, she adds some more ideas and reduces the whole to structure" (Selected letters, 86). Wilder was not afraid of collaboration in his work and often allowed directors and other practitioners to provide input on his drama; as we see in this letter home, he didn't shy away at an early age from consulting female friends for help.

He also had a close friendship with Gertrude Stein for many years and these relationships proved incredibly formative to his life, his career, and his thoughts on women's

roles in politics, the home, and his drama. He demonstrated his fascination and respect for Gertrude Stein in a letter home, writing, "in the presence of Gertrude's gifts one must occasionally scramble pretty hard to realize one's self, collect it, encourage it, and trust it" (Selected letters 297). When looking closely at his dramatic writing through this lens, his relationship to writers like Gertrude Stein takes an even greater significance. In a 1951 French interview, Wilder expresses his deep admiration for Stein, saying, "Gertrude Stein, who has been for me as for Hemingway, Dos Passos and many others the clearest master and the most respectful of individuality, taught me never to think of the public when writing" (Delpech 53). His relationship to this literary "master" would shape much of his writing career .

I want to unpack Wilder's brand of feminism by examining some of his most well known female characters and the ways in which they work against the prevailing philosophy of women's roles in the home and society at the time. While I would love to offer up Wilder as a radically feminist thinker, it is imperative to remember the time in which he was writing and that the world had not experienced feminism to the degree that we know now. The first wave of feminist thinkers didn't use terms like "liberal feminism" and the prevailing thoughts surrounding women provided its own level of censorship. Wilder never considered himself a political writer and we should and must recognize in any discussion of his politics that his political philosophy only comes out in careful consideration of the context in which he wrote. What was most important to Wilder was engaging a conversation through his drama, encouraging the community viewing it to consider humanity as a whole.

When considering those factors and the ways in which Wilder started to paint female characters in a new, empowered light, it is astounding to dissect the extraordinary and

revolutionary way his female characters play out on stage. Just considering his most well-known and produced plays, there is the mother in *Happy Journey* who controls most of the action and remains the central dramatic figure in the play. In *Our Town*, there is a female protagonist in Emily who becomes the main focus of the dramatic resolution in the third act. Instead of painting a picture where the male counterpart in the play, George, serves as the focus and most worthy of divine, supernatural knowledge at the end of the work, the focus centers on and around Emily's journey from this life to the next. In *The Long Christmas Dinner*, there is an equal focus placed on the women's generational journey, beginning and ending with words spoken from the matriarchs of the family, past and present. Of his first and Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Niven writes, "This novel, like much of Wilder's work, is notable for the presence of strong, complex female characters who empower the story—three in this instance: the marquesa, the Perichole, and the great abbess Madre Maria del Pilar...in all three cases the prospect of peace and redemption comes only through selfless love" (Niven 311). Female characters dominate Wilder's writing, and I want to specifically investigate a few of them for my purposes here.

The Feminism of *The Skin of Our Teeth*

A towering figure that merits close investigation in this context is Mrs. Antrobus in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Mrs. Antrobus's monologue at the beginning of Act II is provocative, intriguing, and important when thinking about *Skin* through a feminist lens. Wilder seems to be laying a more direct foundation of feminism in his writing of her character. Not only does the play provide her a more substantial voice than Mr. Antrobus in sheer volume of prose in the address to humankind at the beginning of the second act, her monologue is also clearer, more

concise and more accessible than his. While the play is rife with evidence of his feminist thinking, Mrs. Antrobus's character and the words he provides her most adequately and intentionally portray the questions Wilder poses to his audiences.

After Mr. Antrobus has given his address, the announcer implores Mrs. Antrobus also to provide some words. The announcer says, "Now I know that our visitors will wish to hear a word from that gracious and charming mammal, Mrs. Antrobus, wife and mother, —Mrs. Antrobus!" (52). Even in the announcer's introduction, the play starts to explore new ways of considering Mrs. Antrobus. It might be easy to take his words at face value; in doing so, the words seem to line up with a patriarchal and somewhat patronizing view of women. He reduces her to animal-like status, saying she is a "gracious and charming mammal." So, without using the entire play as context, one might consider the play as expressing a patronizing attitude toward Mrs. Antrobus. But Wilder provides her a voice that gets stronger and stronger as the play develops, beginning with this moment in the play.

The audience sees the uncertainty in her voice as she says, "Dear friends, I don't really think I should say anything. After all, it was my husband who was elected and not I" (52-53). Mrs. Antrobus recognizes the fact that men are the expected figures in power and she is hesitant to push past those boundaries. Yet, she does. In this moment, we see how carefully the subject of a woman's power must be navigated at the time. Mrs. Antrobus recognizes that there are certain expectations of what a woman can or cannot say. In fact, at first she expresses belief that she should not say "anything...it was my husband who was elected and not I." She references the electoral process here; indeed, it had only been just over 20 years since women achieved the right to vote. Mrs. Antrobus is, at first, a sincerely reluctant feminist .

She continues, providing thoughts on matters typically associated with the “feminine.” The act of continuing past the thought that she doesn’t feel it appropriate to say anything is a significant development. Whereas she could have stayed content to allow her husband to remain the central focus of the day, Mrs. Antrobus is instead given the last word in this scene. At first, it seems as though her speech will surround only issues of the household or topics typically associated with the “feminine” side of life. She says:

Perhaps, as president of the Women’s Auxiliary Bed and Board Society...I should give a short report from some of our committees that have been meeting in this beautiful city.

Perhaps it may interest you to know that it has at last been decided that the tomato is edible. Can you all hear me? The tomato is edible.

A delegate from across the sea reports that the thread woven by the silkworm give a cloth...I have a sample of it here...can you see it? smooth, elastic. I should say it’s rather attractive,—though personally I prefer less shiny surfaces. Should the windows of a sleeping apartment be open or shut? I know all mothers will follow our debates on this matter with close interest. I am sorry to say that the most expert authorities have not yet decided. It does seem to me that the night air would be bound to be unhealthy for our children, but there are many distinguished authorities on both sides. Well, I could go on talking forever,—as Shakespeare says: a woman’s work is seldom done; but I think I’d better join my husband in saying thank you, and sit down. Thank you. (53)

She discusses subjects she is familiar with and comfortable with sharing with the audience. She tells the crowd new information regarding cooking and nutrition, that “the tomato is edible” and information on sewing, that “the thread woven by the silkworm gives a cloth” (53). She also provides thoughts on questions in motherhood, whether or not the “windows of a sleeping apartment be open or shut...It does seem to me that the night air would be bound to be unhealthy for our children, but there are many distinguished authorities on both sides” (53). At first, it seems that she will focus most of her speech on matters of the home, seemingly inconsequential and traditional in its outlook on what women *should* discuss.

The play sets up a discussion about the portrayal of women in juxtaposing Mrs. Antrobus’s discussion of household items and the home with her sudden turn towards much stronger, activist language in the next few lines. The play establishes her as someone who fits, seemingly, fairly neatly into the traditional role of wife and mother. Yet Mrs. Antrobus defies these traditional roles throughout the rest of the play, especially in the second act and into the third. The play does not allow her to simply sit down and say “thank you”.

The announcer follows up her initial statements with a question to Mrs. Antrobus, not her husband, even though he continues to sit and listen. Both Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus have given speeches; both are available for questioning. But instead of asking Mr. Antrobus a question, the announcer decides to use the opportunity to provide Mrs. Antrobus a voice and a space to provide the answer. The reporter says, “We understand that you are about to celebrate a wedding anniversary. I know our listeners would like to extend their felicitations and hear a few words from you on the subject” (53). It is significant here to recognize the “listeners” to whom Mrs. Antrobus speaks. We are given the impression that this broadcast is

going out to all mankind, or at least most of mankind. Mrs. Antrobus not only speaks to a crowd of women or a select population of people; she is speaking from a platform to all humanity.

She says:

Yes, Mr. Antrobus and I have been married five thousand years. Each wedding anniversary reminds me of the times when there were no weddings. We had to crusade for marriage. Perhaps there are some women within the sound of my voice who remember that crusade and those struggles; we fought for it, didn't we? We chained ourselves to lampposts and we made disturbances in the Senate,—anyway, at last we women got the ring.

A few men helped us, but I must say that most men blocked our way at every step; they said we were unfeminine.

I only bring up these unpleasant memories, because I see some signs of backsliding from that great victory.

Oh, my fellow mammals, keep hold of that.

My husband says that the watchword for the year is Enjoy Yourselfs. I think that's very open to misunderstanding. My watchword for the year is: Save the Family. It's held together for over five thousand years: Save it! Thank you.

(54)

Mrs. Antrobus talks about the fight that women had to wage for marriage. They were thought to be “unfeminine” but she asserts without apology the role that she played in creating disturbances in the Senate and chaining herself to lampposts. “I only bring up these unpleasant memories, because I see some signs of backsliding from that great victory” (54). There is an

agitprop sensibility to what she says here; she has motive behind her message. She is aware and afraid of the backsliding that has occurred in society and warns against that continuing for the good of mankind. Wilder provides radical imagery here of protest, yet he collapses marriage and equality together in that discussion. By doing so, he demonstrates his residence in the present moment—recognizing the importance of marriage in the family—yet agitates the current understanding of women's roles in that marriage.

While it is not certain what, if any, specific historic events Mrs. Antrobus is referencing here, the images employed remind the audience of the women's fight for equality. Indeed, without a proper understanding of the context in which the play is born, it would be easy to consider Mrs. Antrobus's words as fitting directly into the hierarchal structure that dominated American society at the time. But the play invokes memories of the women's suffrage movement, something Wilder would have lived through himself.

Mrs. Antrobus directly references the fight for equality within a marriage that occurred in the 1800s. The feminists of that time "held marriage reform to be of paramount importance in comparison to other issues" (LeGates 208). Women had virtually no rights in their marital union, as their property and well being resided solely with their male counterpart. Laura Bullard, an early American feminist, wrote in the publication *The Revolution* in 1870 that, "woman's chief discontent is not with her political, but with her social, and particularly her marital bondage. The solemn and profound question of marriage...is of more vital consequence...than any superficial and fragmentary question as a women's suffrage" (208). The fight for women's rights inside the convention of marriage was of utmost importance to feminist in the late 1800s and early 1900s. "Feminists were determined to transform this

hierarchical relationship, so at odds with the principles of liberalism, into one of equality" (209). The fight for equality began inside the convention of marriage and Mrs. Antrobus references that reality in her monologue.

The words spoken by Mrs. Antrobus also hold a striking resemblance to the sentiments spoken nearly 100 years prior at the 1851 women's rights convention in the United States. The resolution stated:

Resolved, that we deny the right of any portion of the species to decide for another portion, or of any individual to decide for another individual, what is and what is not their 'proper sphere'; that the proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest to which they are able to attain; what this is, can not be ascertained without complete liberty of choice; woman, therefore, ought to choose for herself what sphere she will fill, what education she will seek, and what employment she will follow, and not be held bound to accept, in submission, the rights, the education, and the sphere which man thinks proper to allow her. (LeGates 200-201)

When considering the time period in which Wilder was writing, his motivations become clearer. Women gained the right to vote in 1920 when Wilder would have been 23 years old. This fight for the right to vote was so extreme at the time because, historian Ellen DuBois says, "By demanding a permanent, public role for all women, suffragists began to demolish the absolute, sexually defined barrier marking the public world of men off from the private world of women" (LeGates 223). The Equal Rights Amendment was introduced in 1923. There was a distinct push for women's equality in the United States. Wilder's role in World War II would have

undoubtedly exposed him to the fact that women composed up to 80 percent of the membership of resistance groups (329). Due to World War II, women all over the country were finding themselves thrust into the role of provider and caretaker of the family while men were away at war. They entered the workforce in record numbers but as soldiers were coming back from the war and re-entering the workforce, women started to again find themselves in the home as their main occupation. It's impossible to know whether Wilder was directly referencing this move back to the home as evidence of "backsliding" from the victories they had previously won, but his writing certainly reflects the immense shifts the United States, and the world at large, was seeing in terms of women's roles in society.

Mrs. Antrobus invokes the time in which *Skin* was written, speaks of struggle and a fight and protest. It is done in the context of getting "the ring," fighting for marriage but the images presented indicate a stronger, more direct correlation to the women's fight for equality. She employs a language of violence here that stands in direct contrast to any sense of passivity that one might normally expect from women during this time period. She says, "We had to crusade for marriage. Perhaps there are some women within the sound of my voice who remember that crusade and those struggles; we fought for it, didn't we? We chained ourselves to lampposts and we made disturbances in the Senate—anyway, at last we women got the ring" (54). Bringing the word "crusade" into the conversation references as far back as Joan of Arc, who became a figure of freedom and hope for France as it gained independence from British control. There seems a deliberate use of vocabulary associated with a history of female empowerment, harkening back hundreds of years to reference a historical fight for equality.

Mrs. Antrobus addresses the traditional roles expected of women, saying, "A few men helped us, but I must say that most men blocked our way at every step: they said we were unfeminine" (54). In this moment, the "our" she speaks of is women in general. There is not a universal "we"-ness provided here, it is distinctly and profoundly related to women. She claims that certain men, in fact "most men," did not help women in their fight, addressing the ways in which women are supposed to remain traditionally feminine. Interestingly, Mrs. Antrobus seems to be fighting for traditional marriage. She claims that they had to wage a crusade, causing disturbances in the Senate and chaining themselves to lampposts, in order to get "the ring." The play offers two disparate images here: one of women involved in assertive protest, chained to lampposts; the other of women playing traditional roles in the household and in society. Yet Mrs. Antrobus describes this fight as one to achieve marriage and the ring. Instead of someone else giving them the ring, instead of a passive, traditionally "feminine" mode of belonging, Mrs. Antrobus shows how women actively engage in the political process and take what they desire. When viewing this speech in the context of what marital rights women had at the time and the fact that they had little to no influence in a marital union, she seems to suggest a more aggressive approach to marriage and stronger influence for all women.

She continues, "I only bring up these unpleasant memories, because I see some signs of backsliding from that great victory" (54). Mrs. Antrobus suggests that she is not the passive bystander that we may have expected her to be. She has direct and personal experience with protests; she has personally engaged in the fight for marriage she is talking about. She also implores women to remember the victories they have won because of these "signs of

backsliding from that great victory.” There is purpose behind her words. They have won a victory that needs to be sustained.

Here, the play exhibits a belief in family as a stronghold of society. Mrs. Antrobus finishes her thoughts with her “watchword” for the year, “Save the Family. It’s held together for over five thousand years: Save it! Thank you” (54). It is again important to recognize that this address is supposedly heard by all of humankind. Her parting thoughts are an exhortation to protect and preserve “the Family.” Here we see the influence of Wilder’s values for family and the high regard he has for the family unit. Interestingly, Mrs. Antrobus does not describe exactly what her definition of family is; she leaves it open for interpretation but only refers to a more general “family” that is worth saving. This is a significant, and I would say, an intentional ambiguity.

Wilder also questions the current climate in the sheer size of the role he provides his female characters like Sabina and Mrs. Antrobus and the countless other female protagonists he employs throughout his oeuvre. In *Skin*, Sabina—the family maid who I will discuss in greater detail in my final chapter—starts and ends the action of the play. She holds tremendous power as an agent of discussion and questions the validity of what’s represented throughout the play. She also serves, like the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, as a bridge between audience and performer.

But Wilder gives us the most direct and surprising look into his feminist ideology in one of Mrs. Antrobus’s other monologues, found towards the end of Act II in *Skin*. Here, the family is about to hop on board a boat in order to survive the great flood and they don’t know exactly what the future of mankind holds. Mrs. Antrobus offers these words to the audience:

Before I go I have a letter...I have a message to throw into the ocean.

Fumbling in her handbag.

Where is the plagued thing? Here it is.

She flings something—invisible to us—far over the heads of the audience to the back of the auditorium.

It's a bottle. And in the bottle's a letter. And in the letter is written all the things that a woman knows.

It's never been told to any man and it's never been told to any woman, and if it finds its destination, a new time will come. We're not what books and plays say we are. We're not what advertisements say we are. We're not in the movies and we're not in the radio.

We're not what you're all told and what you think we are:

We're ourselves. And if any man can find one of us he'll learn why the whole universe was set in motion. And if any man harm any one of us, his soul—the only soul he's got—had better be at the bottom of that ocean, —and that's the only way to put it. (82-83)

This monologue is central to the action of the play, coming in the middle of the play (Act II) and also just before the play breaks again for another intermission. The placement of this monologue is an intentional move to bring attention to the content of Mrs. Antrobus's words. In his drama, Wilder often provides stage directions that guide the gaze of the audience, allowing them to center their attention on certain characters and provide extra weight to a given moment.

Here, Wilder provides the stage directions that Mrs. Antrobus fumbles in her bag for something, prefacing it with “I have a message to throw into the ocean...Where is the plagued thing?” (82). In this way, the playwright creates moments of silence and anticipation as Mrs. Antrobus searches for the message in a bottle. The audience’s gaze is directed and focused on her actions; we wait and wonder what she might say next and what mysterious object she is searching for in her bag. When she finds it, she marks its significance through saying, “Here it is” (82). The attention is drawn both to Mrs. Antrobus and the message she indicates. The silence provided by her fumbling through her handbag serves as a comma, a rest in the action of the play, in order for Mrs. Antrobus to draw the proper attention needed for the significance of this moment.

When she finds the bottle, the stage directions say, “*She flings something—invisible to us—far over the heads of the audience to the back of the auditorium*” (82). There is an additional and intentional weight added to this moment. This is a direct address to the audience and she actively flings something over the heads of the viewers. In doing so, Mrs. Antrobus gives this message collectively to the audience itself. There is something in this message that is meant for the audience to take with them, and there is a direct action taken towards the audience that stresses the importance of the words she is about to share. Her message is flung directly and intentionally towards the listeners she addresses.

What Mrs. Antrobus communicates when she finds the paper is perhaps Wilder’s most obvious contribution to early feminist thought. The play vocalizes Mrs. Antrobus’s sentiments about women in general when she describes what is in the bottle. She says that “in the letter is written all the things that a woman knows” and that those things are “not what books and

plays say we are.” In this statement, Wilder recognizes the power of literature to represent that which we think we know but also the limitations of that representation. Literature is innately limited in its representative scope to truly portray a human experience, for how can one describe one’s own experience to enable someone else fully to live and experience it for his or herself? There is a void present in representations of women that differs from the reality of who women truly are. Mrs. Antrobus recognizes this void and how women have been misrepresented through books and plays. So, she takes on the task of transcribing on paper all that a woman knows. Mrs. Antrobus also reflects what Wilder has earlier communicated to his sister Isabel; women are people, women are humans just like everyone else. The ways in which women have been denied the rights of other human beings should be dealt with.

But the greater limitations here seem to indicate a reference to the ways in which women historically have been represented. Mrs. Antrobus continues, “We’re not what advertisements say we are. We’re not in the movies and we’re not in the radio...We’re not what you’re all told and what you think we are...We’re ourselves (83). She gives a fairly direct address towards common “knowledge” about women, saying that, in fact, no one has represented women or their experience well. In challenging the common conceptions about female representation in this way, the play dialogues with Jill Dolan’s theories of feminist spectatorship that would come decades later. In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Dolan describes how the “ideal spectator” has most often been “carved in the likeness of the dominant culture whose ideology he represents” (1). Dolan says:

The feminist critic can be seen as a ‘resistant reader,’ who analyzes a performance’s meaning by reading against the grain of stereotypes and resisting

the manipulation of both the performance text and the cultural text that it helps to shape. By exposing the ways in which dominant ideology is naturalized by the performance's address to the ideal spectator, feminist performance criticism works as political intervention in an effort toward cultural change. (2)

I would argue here that Mrs. Antrobus serves as the "resistant reader" described by Dolan. She is both the embodiment of the "political intervention" and also an active participant in the hegemonic cultural text. She actively speaks against the traditional views of women by refuting the seemingly common misconception that women are accurately represented in literature and culture. She argues for a different representation of women to emerge simply by acknowledging the fact that women are "not what you're all told and what you think we are." In recognizing the ways that women are "not" what one might think, she shows that there is something women "are" that we have yet to discover. She is limited in the scope of her reach, limited by the time in which she lives and the medium in which she is communicated, but this message has the potential to reach far and wide.

Mrs. Antrobus also reveals a "political intervention in an effort towards cultural change" that Dolan encourages in feminist performance criticism. Mrs. Antrobus says that the message she possesses, everything that a woman knows, has "never been told to any man and it's never been told to any woman, and if it finds its destination, a new time will come" (82). This message will become an agent of change, ushering in a "new time." She recognizes the hiddenness of the message itself. Up to this point in time, there has not been an avenue for communicating and expressing everything a woman knows and who women truly are. It has "never been told." And that, in and of itself, is part of the "feminist intervention" that Dolan

refers, making “sure that new stories are told about subjects and subjectivities that were once completely invisible in the most accessible mainstream forums” (Dolan address). But there is great potential for altering the current state of affairs if and when that day comes; in fact “a new time will come.” This is not a passive, innocuous message in a bottle. Inside are contents that can and will alter the human experience, making us aware of what a woman knows and with that knowledge, we will know how the very universe was formed.

When considering what Mrs. Antrobus has just shared with the audience, it is important to again recognize the significance of the action surrounding the bottle itself. She has shared with the audience her thoughts on how women are represented and she references a new era where people have a better understanding of who women are and the changes that will come in our society when that happens. But what she speaks of is *not* the current social reality; Mrs. Antrobus lives in a time where women are misunderstood and misrepresented. She throws the bottle “*far over the heads of the audience to the back of the auditorium*”, which provides a sense that this message is out of reach. If the audience is going to find the contents of that bottle, they will have to undertake a search. There is a process needed to get to that “new time” that will come. Wilder recognizes again and again that the process of progress is often painful and slow, but he believes that it is possible. In this monologue, Mrs. Antrobus has strongly hinted towards progress in considering who women are and what they know, as well as how they are represented in culture, literature, and politics. She proclaims that the universe will change when we have a better understanding of who women are. But the audience must be willing to find the contents of that bottle in order for that change to occur. Mrs. Antrobus is making a direct appeal for change and is inviting the audience to be a part of it.

The Feminism of *The Matchmaker*

Next I want to investigate Dolly Levi, Wilder's towering female protagonist in *The Matchmaker*. Wilder once said that "one of the actresses who played Dolly, I won't tell you which one, said to me, 'Mr. Wilder, you're God's gift to the aging actress'" (McCoy 114). But why would an actress feel this way about this role? What about Wilder's work and the man himself made this actress so appreciate this play and the role of Dolly? Many people don't know that the musical *Hello Dolly* is a direct adaptation of Wilder's play, *The Matchmaker*. Originally called *The Merchant of Yonkers*, Wilder eventually adapted the play into *The Matchmaker*, shifting the focus in the title from one of the male central characters in the play to the female central character. The play is known as a comedy, often called a farce that reflects Wilder's sense of humor and serves as another example of the breadth of Wilder's own literary diversity. I want to take a look at this play and hopefully unpack a bit more as to why the play resonated so much with the actress mentioned above and how it might continue to resonate in contemporary feminist thinking.

The first version of the play, known as *The Merchant of Yonkers*, was produced and premiered in 1938. It was then reworked and produced in The United Kingdom in 1954, eventually transferring to Philadelphia in 1955. The reworking of the play itself signifies a shift and transformation in the overall message behind the play and could, quite possibly, signify a shift in Wilder's thoughts on women's roles in theatre. Whereas the initial version of the play focused the title on the male protagonist, as so many works often do, the reworked version makes a significant shift in naming the play after *The Matchmaker*, Dolly Levi. No longer would an audience anticipate walking into a story about a merchant; instead, the focus shifts to the

female protagonist in the play and Dolly dominates most of the dramatic action and central storyline. The change of title should not be overlooked as trivial or insignificant; instead it can be viewed (when taking Wilder's experience with his female characters as a whole) as a move in the direction of feminism.

According to the most recent published version of the play, it is about:

A certain old merchant of Yonkers is now so rich that he decides to take a wife. To this end he employs a matchmaker, a woman who subsequently becomes involved with two of his menial clerks, assorted young and lovely ladies, and the headwaiter at an expensive restaurant where this swift farce runs headlong into a hilarious climax of complication. After everyone gets all straightened out romantically, and everyone has his heart's desire, the merchant of Yonkers finds himself affianced to the astute matchmaker herself...He is fooled by apprentices in a series of hilarious hide-and-seek scenes, and finally has all his bluster explode in his face. (*The Matchmaker*, 3)

The play has many traditional elements of farce, as Wilder exercises his breadth of dramatic knowledge and form. There are multiple scenes of mistaken identity, cross-dressing, slapstick comedy, and over-the-top physicality. While this play may not seem the most obvious choice when discussing feminist ideals, we can see empowerment and surprising agency given to Dolly Levi. I say surprising, not in reference to Wilder's own ideology, but given the time in which this play was written. In American theater, theatre was experiencing a shift from the entertainment of melodrama into the realist movement. While American drama sees the inklings towards more feminist literature and drama, like Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* that had

premiered in 1918, the popular drama of the day rarely gave so much attention to a central female character.

Wilder employs satire early on in *The Matchmaker*. Throughout the play, we see the merchant of Yonkers portrayed as a successful but rather gullible and bumbling businessman that should not be taken too seriously. In the first scene, the merchant, Vandergelder, directly addresses the audience and describes his thoughts on marriage and women in general. He says, "in the first place, I like my house run with order, comfort and economy. That's a woman's work; but even a woman can't do it well if she's merely being paid for it. In order to run a house well, a woman must have the feeling that she owns it. Marriage is a bribe to make a housekeeper think she's a householder" (19). The play brings attention to the fact that in reality, women had little to no rights in a marriage. They were thought of as little more than a "housekeeper" and were expected to maintain the household with little to no actual ownership over that household.

Vandergelder calls attention to the expected roles of women in the house; he seems to make fun of the fact that women can be manipulated to think that they have ownership over a household when married, to "think she's a householder." From the beginning of the play, it is important to recognize the dramatic genre employed here. The play is a farce—a comedy that one is invited to not take too seriously. In using this genre, Wilder affords himself the ability to discuss certain subjects through the lens of comedy, lightening the severity of the message behind the script. In this initial scene, the play recognizes and calls out the position that women are put in. They have few roles other than running a house and the only way to feel ownership of a home is to marry a man. The play offers a stark contrast to that type of subsidiary role

through Dolly's character; Vandergelder's depiction of women is contrasted to the strength we soon will encounter in Dolly's character.

The merchant continues to speak of women: "what giant passions in those little bodies—what quarrels with the butcher for the best cut—what fury at discovering a moth in a cupboard! Believe me!—If Women could harness their natures to something bigger than a house and a baby carriage...they'd change the world" (19). There is a certain level of admiration and even adoration that Vandergelder has for women, though he recognizes the fact that they have a subordinate place in the house and nothing more than that. He speaks with a level of condescension, but despite these misogynistic views, he also suggests the agency and power that women *might* have. He says that if they could "harness" who they are towards something "bigger," there would be unthinkable ramifications, including the ability to change the world. This potential to change the world echoes the sentiment that Wilder wrote into *The Skin of Our Teeth* through Mrs. Antrobus. This line contains much of the sentiment that we see evidenced throughout Wilder's work. The traditional views towards and about women fail to articulate and accept their equality and their enormous untapped potential to create change. He is addressing the fact that they are not living in a time where women have the place they deserve—as equals in society with men. In *The Matchmaker*, Wilder uses a farcical lens to examine the female subject and never digs much deeper than drawing attention to the ridiculousness of their station, but the play provides a platform for Dolly Levi to circumvent traditional women's roles. In *The Skin Of Our Teeth*, Wilder goes further with this line of thinking and express the regret and danger of continuing to subjugate and marginalize the feminine subject.

The play's first interaction with Dolly portrays a woman willing to take control and deserving of control over the space she inhabits. She meets her niece Ermengarde and the man her niece wants to marry. The man, Ambrose, wants to elope since Mr. Vandergelder will not allow them to marry. Right away, Dolly exerts her influence, saying, "This thing you were planning to do is a very great mistake" (21). She then informs Ambrose that Ermengarde's uncle will allow them to marry because he "is planning to get married himself...I think we can safely say that Mr. Vandergelder will be married to someone by the end of next week" (22). What the audience doesn't know is that Dolly has a plan to marry the merchant herself that she will enact with precision and guile. Dolly is always the smartest person in the room in this play and the play immediately provides us a glimpse into her intelligence and foresight.

As the scene progress, she accidentally gives Ambrose a business card for "varicose veins reduced", saying, "I beg your pardon...I meant to give you my other card. Here...Instruction in the guitar and mandolin" (22). Ambrose, surprised, says, "You do all these things, Mrs. Levi?" (22). "Two and two make four, Mr. Kemper—and they always did" she replies (22). In this conversation Ambrose communicates surprise at the number of things Mrs. Levi is able to do, and in that surprise we see the satire with which the play treats common conceptions of female roles and also a power shift between male and female. Ambrose is genuinely surprised at the number of things Dolly can do. Dolly, however, remains supremely confident in her abilities and makes a joke at Ambrose's expense. Her line, "Two and two make four, Mr. Kemper—and they always did," suggests how obvious it should be that she can do all of these things. Ambrose should not be surprised at her remarkable abilities, but expect them.

As they attempt to figure out a way to get the merchant's approval of their marriage, Ambrose is not the character who holds the keys to solving this situation—Dolly is. Even though Ambrose protests, Dolly convinces him to abide by her plans and trust her to accomplish his ultimate desire of marrying Ermengarde. Not only does Dolly have a plan in place, her plan succeeds where others might fail. Later, when Ambrose asks what she gets out of helping them, Dolly says:

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 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 am very much amused (23).

Here the play scripts a position of tremendous power for Dolly Levi. Not only is she a personality whom others respect, listen to, and follow, but also she resides in an omniscient, divine-like space where she holds the ability to alter nature itself. She acknowledges the fact that “Nature is never completely satisfactory and *must be corrected*” (italics added). She can discern if and when a situation needs to shift or change and she has the ability to make it happen. While she doesn't explicitly delineate all of the different ways nature is unsatisfactory, she also says that she is often “bored.” Dolly, as a woman in the late 1800s, has little to do with her time even though she possesses the ability to transform a natural situation in need of correction. Dolly occupies a space too seldom provided to women in 20th century theatre—the central protagonist and agent of action throughout *The Matchmaker*. She holds the needed

control over various scenarios and provides the ability to correct things that need correcting. In her statement, she lines up with the Vandergelder's lines at the beginning of the play that recognize the great potential of women to make a positive change in society if they were given more opportunities to do so.

Dolly exercises the rights provided her in the play, not necessarily in society. Especially in the 1800s, women had no right to property and little voice in the political world; at least not when compared to male political voices at the time. Yet she controls much of the action of *The Matchmaker* and Wilder ends the play by giving her the largest platform to speak from. In the final scene, Dolly addresses her first husband, who has passed away. In addressing this "imaginary Ephraim," Ephraim being the name of her husband who has passed away, she turns and directly addresses the audience itself. Dolly is given the final monologue of the play, which also is the longest monologue in the entire work. Dolly says:

Ephraim, I'm marrying Horace Vandergelder for his money. I'm gong to send his money out doing all the things you taught me. Oh, it won't be a marriage in the sense that we had one—but I shall certainly make him happy, and—Ephraim—I'm tired. I'm tired of living from hand to mouth, and I'm asking your permission, Ephraim—will you give me away?...Money, money, money—it's like the sun we walk under: it can kill and it can cure. Horace Vandergelder's never tired of saying most of the people in the world are fools, and in a way he's right, isn't he? Himself, Irene, Cornelius, myself! But 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. (109)

Throughout the play, Dolly has recognized the power and danger of money. She says that she's going to marry Horace Vandergelder because of his money because she is "tired of living from hand to mouth" (109). And she has made the decision to marry Horace; now, she will act on that decision and the agency she holds.

While an entire study could be conducted of the play's perspective on class and money, my purposes surround the representation of women in the play. Dolly exerts agency. She decides to marry Horace Vandergelder and sees that decision through to the end. She also demonstrates the play's willingness to give her a place of empowerment and authority. Once again, Dolly appears to be the smartest person in the room when she claims that money is "like the sun we walk under: it can kill and it can cure" (109). She recognizes the fact that, when used appropriately, money has the power to "cure." But it also can exert a destructive force. There is a wisdom to Dolly's words that transcends the play and is spoken directly to the audience. Not only does the play provide a female character who speaks to other characters in the play, correcting the wrongs in a given situation and controlling the action of the play for everyone's good, the play also gives her a voice directly towards the audience. Just like Mrs. Antrobus in *Skin*, Wilder provides a platform for Dolly to share her wisdom with the audience. This is someone worth listening to and the play gives her the platform to speak. But the monologue also recognizes the ways women are still dependent on men for their station in life. Dolly makes the most of what she has available to her, but it still does not mean equality with Horace and she must continue to ask permission from the men in her life for certain things. Dolly has provided a glimpse into what is possible, yet is restrained by the society around her.

She continues exercising this agency as she decides that she will "live." 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" (109). In this statement, Dolly shows that it is her decision, and hers alone, to decide whether or not she will live amongst other people. She has the power to decide for herself. She is in control of her destiny and her future with others. Just as we have seen her control many of the events in the play, she will continue to exert control over her own existence after they marry.

Here, she also recognizes the importance of community—a connection with other humans that must be acknowledged and cultivated. She has the power to live as a "fool alone" but realizes the need to live amongst other people and the power that holds. In this recognition, we encounter a way of thinking about the individual and the community in which that individual resides. It is important for the individual, in this case Dolly, to exert agency and power to make decisions for her own life. But it is also vitally important that an individual takes that agency and lives with others, despite the foolish nature of human beings. Through Dolly's words, Wilder again exhibits his belief in the human spirit. Even though men and women consistently act in foolish ways, there still exists a power and place for an individual as a part of a community. Only in recognizing the ties we have with one another can we rightfully deal with the foolishness inherent in mankind.

She continues this affirmation of the human race in the monologue as she is reflecting on the days when she felt thankful to be "independent – that no one else's life was mixed up with mine" (110). But she has a realization. She finds an oak leaf that she placed in her Bible when her first husband asked her to marry him. She says,

A perfectly good oak leaf – but without color and without life. And suddenly – I

realized that for a long time I had not shed one tear; nor had I been for one moment outrageously happy; nor have 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...You and I have known lots of people who decided—like Horace Vandergelder—like myself for a long time—not to live among human beings. Yes, they move out among them, they talk to them, they even get married to them; but at heart they have decided not to have anything to do with the human race. If you accept human beings and are willing to live among them you acknowledge that every man has a right to his own mistakes. (110)

In this monologue she recognizes the mistake-prone nature of the human race, yet retains the desire to live life in the pleasure *and* the pain. She says that you cannot have the good without the bad, the moments on the mountaintop without the moments also in the valley. But it is part of our humanity to allow and accept our mistakes. She says that money can be a source of many of those mistakes, but when used correctly, it can do good things. She says, "Money – pardon my expression – money is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around encouraging young things to grow." In giving Dolly this knowledge, the play again exerts a feminist sensibility: it allows her to proclaim the ways in which money and relationships work best. If money is only spent on oneself, it will wreak tremendous havoc. But when invested in those around you and used to encouraging young things to grow, it will be worth much more. Giving Dolly this space of authority and intelligence in the play, Wilder turns her into a dominant, influential, and transcendent figure. We are left to recognize, just like Horace

Vandergelder states at the end of the play, that "Dolly, everybody knows that you could do anything you wanted to do" (112). Dolly provides hope that other women will be able to realize that same dream of doing anything they want to do, no matter the social trappings surrounding them.

Wilder intentionally wrote this final monologue as a message to his audience. He reports showing the play to director Max Reinhardt:

In some trembling I read him the (new) monologue that Mrs. Levi has in Act IV and asked him whether it was not too earnest for the play. When I was finished he looked at his wife and said in German: You see, he is a poet and turned to me and said: No, I have always said that in a comedy—and near the end—there should always be one moment of complete seriousness and by that the audience can see that also the comedy parts are not just pastime" (Selected letters 347).

Thornton feared that the final monologue was too earnest in the context of farce. But he finds relief when Reinhardt, a theatre practitioner whom Thornton greatly admired and respected, agreed with the placement and purpose of this monologue. Comedy, despite its ability to entertain and provide an escape from the everyday, still should have a serious moment or two. It should not be considered "just pastime" but can provide a message to its audience in the midst of the entertainment. Dolly Levi communicates this final message in *The Matchmaker*. And in this role, we find a protagonist that has continued to live decades past the original productions of the play. Through Dolly, Wilder communicates grace for human beings mistake-prone social operations. Even though humanity has much more to experience in terms of

female involvement and equality in society, Dolly has decided to live among humanity and believes in our ability to continue moving forward towards greater progress.

Other Examples

Another example I want briefly to examine is Wilder's version of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Wilder completed a translation of the play that was never published during his lifetime and, in fact, was not published in any form until a few years after David Hammond, Artistic Director Emeritus of Playmakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, directed the premiere in 2007. Hammond discussed why he used the version Wilder wrote instead of the one translated by William Archer shortly after the play premiered in the late 1879. Hammond says that of all the versions of *A Doll's House*, "Wilder gets the whole play" (Hammond 19). He discusses the fact that Wilder really understood what Ibsen was trying to do and the issues he was trying to talk about. He says that, "it isn't that Wilder downplays the gender conflict; he's trying to make you see the bigger issues." The bigger issues that Hammond is talking about include, "the 'other' of our society, the social contract in the line, is (the focus) of the play". (Hammond 19).

Vast literary criticism has explored the issue of feminism in *A Doll's House* and there has been disagreement as to how to treat Ibsen's play. Ibsen's biographer, Michael Meyer, refutes the idea that Ibsen intentionally argued for feminist ideals in his play, "Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become that person" (Templeton 28). In Meyer's view, the play was always about humanity and individual human identity, not to single out drama as a means for arguing for women's rights. Ibsen addressed the issue when the Norwegian Women's Rights League gave a banquet in his honor in 1898:

I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement...True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity" (Templeton 28).

I do not want to provide an in depth analysis of Ibsen's work itself; that has been done multiple times and would be tangential to my overall purposes. But it is important to recognize the connection between Wilder and Ibsen's work. Obviously, a connection exists simply in the fact that Thornton decided to translate *A Doll's House*. But when looking further into this translation, as David Hammond did when producing the play in North Carolina, one might discover new avenues for approaching Wilder's work as a whole.

Hammond discusses some of the alterations in the play that Wilder made, noting that "Mrs. Linden in many versions is also terribly vague. Here, she is a faint voice of feminism. She's a pragmatist and a tired realist, not a busy body that interferes in nor his life or gets involved enough to say you should leave your husband. It is all very emotionally logical" (3). He also says that Wilder expands the part of the maid to include her in more of the family's activities. But, importantly, where some might assume, as many have, that Ibsen intended to write a directly feminist play, Wilder understands that it is about the bigger picture of humanity. Hammond says:

I think Archer gets it wrong because Ibsen is writing not just a feminist play. It is not "men do this to women." It is: "our society is based on contracts that we agreed to because we believe they make society work." Ibsen thought all social rules should be changed every seven or eight years because they die. When a

contract is no longer working it should be abolished and different bases should be found. He uses marriage as a microcosm of that kind of social contract. He is saying: "men do this to women, corporations do this to employees, and governments do this to people." He is saying everything about this society is phony. You can be in a high position in government and a bald-facedly lie and get away with it. People will allow it to happen, so that is a false contract.

("Interview with David Hammond")

What Ibsen attempts to do is shine a light on the ills of his society. He provides a story that is not specifically feminist in nature but focuses on a female character's journey through the society that she inhabits.

Hammond continues, "I think Wilder gets it exactly right. There are versions that assume Nora is an airhead, but she is not. She knows exactly what she's doing. She's just oblivious to the fact that she is virtually enslaved by it. Nora thinks she is doing a very good job at being a mature, loving wife" (23). In this way, Ibsen/Wilder seems to agree with what Jill Dolan calls a materialist approach to feminism: that the more important aspect of feminism might not be viewing feminine roles or a woman's place in society as a singularity. Women should be viewed instead as parts of a larger ideological system that needs adjusting. Ibsen, as quoted above, never intended to focus solely on what he called the "women problem,". But he acknowledges the fact that there *is* a problem. Here, Wilder and Ibsen are kindred spirits. They recognize that there are much larger questions to ask. They also seem to recognize that they, as male authors, might not be the most appropriate voices to answer them. Instead, they provide richly textured female characters that allow for certain questions to be opened up. They use the platform

available to them to raise, not resolve, these issues. Feminist scholars for decades have attempted to fit *A Doll's House* into the parameters of feminist literature. And while Ibsen would never identify it as such, he has provided a platform for questions about a woman's role in society to be addressed. Wilder's female characters can be approached in the same way. Enveloping these characters in a work that has more to say about society as a whole than about one singular issue might be the biggest achievement of all. Instead of the work being viewed as propaganda, it introduces issues, begs questions of our representations, and allows for a dialogue to be unlocked.

It would be remiss not to discuss what is arguably Wilder's most famous female character, Emily in *Our Town*. I will discuss the play in depth in my next chapter, but I want to recognize the significance of centering much of the action of the play on Emily as a leading character. Certainly, *Our Town* can and should be considered an ensemble piece. There are many deeply drawn characters, all of which exemplify life in small-town New England at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century. I will discuss that representation in the next chapter. For now, let's take a look at Emily in terms of female representation in the play.

The play demonstrates and portrays fairly traditional representations of family life. There are two neighboring families, The Webbs and the Gibbs, both of which are composed of a male and female married couple with children. Throughout *Our Town*, the play recognizes the more traditional roles assigned to husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. In portrayals of the younger generation, however, there are hints towards changes in the ways those roles and family life are conceived. In one of Emily's first scenes, we see her discussing a typical school day with her mother, Mrs. Webb. She tells her mom that she gave a speech, "and I was very

good" (*Our Town* 30). When her mother asks her what the speech was about, she says, "the Louisiana purchase. It was like silk off a spool. I'm going to make speeches all my life" (31).

Emily portrays a confidence in her ability as a public speaker and recognizes the potential she has to make speeches for the rest of her life. She even proclaims that that is exactly what she will do. In recognizing this potential, she imagines a future where the world provides her a platform to speak from. It's a simple line, but one with large ramifications. The play gives Emily the ability to imagine a future where she speaks and others listen. It is a world where women have a platform to speak from. In *Our Town*, Wilder provides a dramatic platform that allows Emily a voice uncommon (except arguably in his own and certain female writer's drama) in American drama at the time.

In the same conversation, the play demonstrates the traditional norms associated with femininity. Emily asks her mom, "Mama, am I good looking?" (31). Emily is preoccupied with the anxiety about her appearance and looks to her mother for reassurance. After a bit of conversation, her mother says, "I've already told you, yes. Now that's enough of that. You have a nice young pretty face. I never heard of such foolishness" (31). At the same time, the play addresses and portrays traditional anxieties about a woman's appearance, it identifies them as foolish. The conversation does not go far before it is cut off by the pragmatic approach of Mrs. Webb. She feels there is no need to discuss the matter at length because of how foolish a conversation it is.

Later, the play provides more evidence of how important dialogue and conversation between two people can be. In the pivotal scene when George and Emily start to fall in love, they have a conversation about men and women. Emily tells George that he has become "awful

conceited and stuck up" (65). George thanks her for telling him saying, "I guess it's hard for a fella not to have faults creep into his character" (66). The conversation continues:

EMILY. I always expect a man to be perfect and I think he should be.

GEORGE. Oh... I don't think it's possible to be perfect, Emily.

EMILY. Well, my father is, and as far as I can see your father is. There's no reason on earth why you shouldn't be, too.

GEORGE. Well, I feel it's the other way around. That men aren't naturally good; but girls are.

EMILY. Well, you might as well know right now that I'm not perfect. It's not as easy for a girl to be perfect as a man, because we girls are more—more—nervous.—Now I'm sorry I said all that about you. I don't know what made me say it.

GEORGE. Emily,—

EMILY. Now I can see it's not the truth at all. And I suddenly feel that it isn't important, anyway.

When looking at this conversation in detail, we see the difference that dialogue between two humans can make. In expressing these thoughts to each another, the characters reveal things that they assumed about the other that aren't true. Emily has made false assumptions about men and George has made them about women. In the context of this conversation, the false assumptions surround the "perfect"-ness of the opposite sex. But once they reveal those assumptions to each another, they recognize that their assumptions are not true. This moment reveals the insecurity Emily has and how "nervous" she can be at times. The final line of this conversation is the most telling. Emily says, "Now I can see it's not the truth at all." This line

seems to be in reference to the things she believed about George's character. But it comes on the heels of her discussing how women are different than men. Capping the conversation off with the statement, Emily invokes an uncertainty in the things that women and men believe about one another. In fact, when coupling it with what they have both just said, it is possible that Wilder is calling into question every assumption men and women have about one another and their respective roles in relation to each other: "it's not the truth at all." She and George have a new and deeper understanding of each other because of this conversation. Ideas that they had about one another are revealed to be untrue, and they now can walk ahead together in better understanding of who each person is. This insight only comes, as it so often does and Wilder demonstrates again and again, from conversation with one another. Rather than continuing to live in uncertainty and untruth, truth is revealed through speaking with one another about those beliefs. Only in doing that can we achieve a greater understanding of things we don't know.

A final comment should be made about the revelation provided to Emily at the end of the play. The scene in the graveyard ends with Emily coming to terms with a supernatural understanding of life on this earth. Wilder provides her the platform to gain this knowledge, before George and in front of the audience. She is the central focus of this final act, and it is her journey from life to death that the play follows. Wilder offers Emily the space to recognize and exclaim, "They don't understand, do they?" (111). Here she is making an incredibly big claim about life in general—that the living don't understand the significance of every moment while we are on earth. She is referencing George and the other townspeople still living. After death, Emily understands now. She is the voice of reason and revelation at the end of *Our Town*. Emily

is the one who says, "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you" (108). In providing Emily this final act, the play indirectly positions her as representative of all humanity. It does not assume that the man's journey is the normal one, but assumes that Emily's journey can be related to and is recognizable by every human being.

As we see in the examples I've discussed, Thornton Wilder does not pursue a feminist or non-feminist agenda in his writing. He deliberately avoids any traces of propaganda. But, upon closer inspection of his female characters, we see rich portraits of female characters that can speak to and relate a universal human experience. The word "universal" can be a tricky to employ but Wilder was not afraid to examine it through his plays. In so many of his works, he gives female characters the most significant dramatic weight. While his work should probably never be classified as directly "feminist," he provides hints towards a conversation about representations of women that express a feminist sensibility revolutionary to the time in which he wrote. And in his writing, he has provided enduring female protagonists from plays that continue to be produced and interpreted around the world, opening up more and more opportunities to dialogue about how those women are represented and the roles we have assigned them in our society.

CHAPTER FOUR

WILDER'S COSMOPOLITANISM

“This play is called *Our Town*...Nice town, y’know what I mean? Nobody very remarkable every come out of it, s’far as we know” (Stage Manager, Act One, *Our Town*). As I have mentioned a couple of times throughout this work, casual theatregoers consider *Our Town* a folksy, nostalgic look at small-town America. If you ask someone about the play, you often will get a response that it is not very “remarkable,” just like the Stage Manager says in his opening lines. In this view, the play is strictly American in focus, centered on the small fictional town of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, which is largely based on Thornton Wilder’s own experience living in New England—after high school he spent most of his university schooling and writing career in the area. It might seem that such a specific look at a particular American town would make the play accessible only to an American audience. However, *Our Town* has become a work of global import, each year receiving productions around the world. I want to explore the idea of *Our Town* as cosmopolitan literature in this chapter. By examining *Our Town* through a cosmopolitan lens, we discover a new way of encountering this oft-produced play. No longer do we have the distinct, defined worlds of past versus present, fantasy versus reality, audience versus actor. The play fuses these worlds together and thrusts us into a communal experience, a cosmopolitan reality.

Cosmopolitanism is a place where connections can be made that provide a democratic space for literature and politics to reside. Approaching this play through a cosmopolitan lens becomes particularly important when considering Wilder’s democratic political ethics. Wilder constantly has the global *and* the particular in mind. His work never centers on just the cosmos

or just the local; they always encapsulate both. He is concerned with how the larger global expanses affect and relate to the minutely particular everyday moments, and there is no better indication of that than in *Our Town*. In considering this play through a cosmopolitan lens, we have a greater indication of Wilder's own system of political thought. The cosmopolitan worldview becomes central to any consideration of his politics because of the ways that democracy, equality and representation are central themes of his drama. Cosmopolitan etymologically means a citizen of the cosmos. By connecting cosmopolitanism to Wilder's work, we can see how his interest in the particular experience of everyday human beings relates to the larger universal citizenship of that individual human. By showing that we are all humans who are a part of a larger cosmos, he can start to hint at the ways we should operate as equal citizens towards one another. We all reside in an expansive universe and we must relate to one another through our common, shared humanity as citizens of that same cosmos.

Our Town has been produced all over the globe, literally hundreds of times every year. It is purportedly performed at least once per day somewhere around the world (Stabler, "Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer-winning..."). Penelope Niven says that it has been translated into over 70 languages because of the "universal connection that this play has made" ("*Wilder Created*"). It would be easy to discuss *Our Town* as a work of global literature, simply because the geographical breadth of its performance history. What I want to discuss is how the play hints at a cosmopolitan worldview by establishing a cosmopolitan figure in the character of the Stage Manager, through the cosmopolitanizing force of grief and death in Act III, and by using a language of "we" throughout. First, I hope to unpack the definition of cosmopolitanism, a relatively recent offshoot of literary theory that focuses on the cross-cultural and cross-political

nature of literature and art. What I hope to uncover is the way that the Stage Manager crosses boundaries, moving from one world to another, thereby becoming a personification of cosmopolitanism. I will also discuss the recent experience of directing the play for the University of Colorado and the ways in which the cosmopolitan nature of the Stage Manager and the play as a whole can be magnified through specific staging choices.

There is an ironic appeal in dissecting *Our Town* through a cosmopolitan lens. The play has often been considered far more sentimental and nostalgic than Wilder ever intended, or that the play merits. Playwright and professor Donald Margulies says that we often think we are familiar with *Our Town* before encountering it again. “You sneered at the domestic activities of the citizenry of Grover’s corners, New Hampshire, and rolled your eyes at the quaint-seeming romance between George Gibbs and Emily Webb. You dismissed *Our Town* as a corny relic of Americana” (xi). Upon encountering the play again, he remarks, “I was so mesmerized by its subversive power, so warmed by its wisdom, so shattered by its third act, that I couldn’t believe it was the same play I thought I had known since childhood” (xii). Margulies talks about how the play confounded his—and our—expectations of it. Looking at the play through a contemporary cosmopolitan lens, we can see past the ways in which it defies our expectations of what sometimes seems “a corny relic of Americana.”

Part of the reason the play comes across as particularly American in nature is its setting and story. Wilder set the play in Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, which most believe to be based on his upbringing in New England. There are three simple act titles, all of which the Stage Manager informs the audience of at the beginning of the second act. The Stage Manager says, “The First Act was called the Daily Life. This act is called Love and Marriage. There’s another act

coming after this: I reckon you can guess what that's about" (48). Simple enough: the play will be about daily life in a Grover's Corners, love and marriage, and death.

The acts follow the basic structure outlined by the Stage Manager. In Act One, the play depicts the mundane daily life of Grover's Corners. It depicts everyday conversation between townspeople, the relationships between family members (specifically the Gibbs and the Webbs), students going to school, and talk of work and homelife. In the second act the story mostly focuses on the marriage between George Gibbs and Emily Webb, two average members of the town who happen to be neighbors. It flashes back to show how they knew they would marry one another and comments on the seeming regularity of marriage in a town like Grover's Corners, but the Stage Manager makes note of the fact that it isn't anything particularly unique about the experience. In the third act, the play shifts to focus on death and dying. So, it eventually follows the normal life cycle of a small American town, focusing on the specific townspeople that make up Grover's Corners.

On its face, then, the play appears to be rooted in nostalgia and sentimentality. But a different *Our Town* emerges after inquiring further, especially when considering the third act in light of the first two. Pulitzer prize winning playwright Paula Vogel says of Wilder, "I am astonished each time I read him, at the force of his work, at the subtle blend of humor and pathos, and his masterful balancing act of abstraction and empathy" (ix). The force of Wilder's work comes from recognizing the ways he couples the particular with the cosmic; while portraying a specific American town, he relates it to a larger global collective and draws parallels between the two. The play draws out specific relationships and dynamics in order to bring attention to not only the cosmopolitan nature of theatre, but also humanity itself.

Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism, at its heart, is a political discourse. Cosmopolitanism is a way of looking at the world that is inclusive rather than exclusive. Gender theorist Judith Butler discusses how experiences with grief serves as an equalizing, cosmopolitan force in her book *Precarious Life*. The shared experience with grief is an aspect of cosmopolitanism that I will discuss in detail throughout this chapter. In *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*, Pheng Chea questions the parameters of whom we consider to be “human” and wonders whether current economic and political circumstances truly have the potential to support a global community of equality. A cosmopolitan ethic has to do with two types of recognition—the recognition of, first, similarities already present between cultures and their literatures and, second, an expansion of the individuals included in those groups. Often in discussions of the cosmopolitan, the conversation centers on groups of people, nation-states, and specific cultures. Cosmopolitan discourse naturally involves issues on a global scale. But I want to discuss not only cosmopolitanism as it relates to the ways in which we interact globally but also its surprisingly local nature—the minutely particular, cosmopolitan, individual human subject as it is portrayed in *Our Town*. Only by expanding our recognition of the human subjects in cosmopolitan discourse can we truly make strides towards a more global worldview. Recognizing the ways in which human beings are already connected with one another opens up more avenues for cosmopolitan inclusivity.

Bringing the term “cosmopolitan” into the conversation is somewhat problematic because of scholars’ radically different views of it. Rosi Braidotti, Bolette Blaagaard and Patrick

Hanafin, in their introduction to the 2013 collection of essays titled *After Cosmopolitanism*, which investigates the continually shifting landscape of cosmopolitan theory, ask,

Is the idea of cosmopolitanism still useful? The concept was the target of serious criticism already in the second half of the twentieth century, especially from progressive political movements such as post-colonialism, feminism and environmentalism. The radical epistemologies engendered by these political movements attached or attacked? the pretentious universalism and the violent applications of the classical notion of cosmopolitanism (1).

They discuss the ways in which the “rise of global terror, nationalism, populist politics and xenophobia” have all decreased the chances of a “productive global interdependence.” Even though “the notion of cosmopolitanism nowadays enjoys great currency both in the academy and in political discourse, it apparently has many different and often contradictory meanings and uses.” Their volume of essays on the cosmopolitan idea “starts therefore with the assumption that, at this point in time, there is no political or intellectual consensus about the idea of cosmopolitanism” (1). In light of this fact, I want to highlight certain aspects of cosmopolitanism most relevant to my purposes here.

The essays collected in *After Cosmopolitanism* explore the term “cosmopolitanism.” Some contributors reach the conclusion that it should be replaced altogether with “planetary interdependence,” “cosmo-politics” or “becoming-world” (2). The main argument presented by Braidotti, Blaagaard, and Hanafin “is the idea that ‘we are in this together’, namely that we inhabit a trans-national community as our historical location. This globalised condition forms the heart of contemporary cosmopolitan claims which do not refer to a transcendental ideal,

but are rather immanent to the material conditions of global interdependence” (2). I would venture to go a step further by adding that the term ought not be confined to the material conditions of global interdependence; “cosmopolitanism” can *also* include a transcendental ideal. I believe that such an ideal should develop out of the material conditions of global interdependence. The fact that humans today are all connected in a material sense means that we must find ways of living together and attaining towards that transcendental ideal. We all breath the same air, we all inhabit the same Earth. We must develop new ways to live together. We must adopt an ethic of global inclusiveness that recognizes both the diversity of the individuals from radically different cultures and also acknowledges a common humanity. Connecting the material with the transcendental in this way, I will refer to a cosmopolitan *ethic*—the idea that we are seeking a goal of global inclusiveness that is abstract yet potentially attainable. I agree with and affirm Wilder’s belief that humanity progresses forward and improves, that humanity can and will continue to move forward in positive ways. My argument centers on the fact that Wilder recognizes how humanity falls short of an ideal of global inclusiveness, yet he also clearly believes in humans’ ability to progress towards it.

In this chapter, I apply a cosmopolitan lens to Wilder’s most well known and most-produced work, *Our Town*. The Stage Manager directly references the ideas associated with cosmopolitanism in his monologue at the beginning of Act III:

Now there are some things we all know, but we don’t take’em out and look at’em very often. We all know that *something* is eternal. And it ain’t’ houses and it ain’t name, 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 (87-88).

The play recognizes that there is "something way down deep that's eternal about every human being" (88). The Stage Manager recognizes the ambiguity and difficulty of determining what it is that connects every human being, specifically giving it the general term of "something". But something connects all human beings; he takes specific caution to say *every* human being. Not some, not a specific group or race or nationality, but every human being has an eternal quality. No one is excluded from this eternal quality in *Our Town*. Every character holds it. This eternity-based all-human inclusiveness is crucial to understanding how the play advances a cosmopolitan ethic.

Wilder's dramatic work, and specifically *Our Town*, explores three characteristics of a cosmopolitan ethic: 1) a borderless system of belonging, 2) a human "we"-ness, and 3) the common experience of grief. Like many of the theorists who continue to decipher the exact definition and usefulness of cosmopolitanism, the play recognizes the fact that we are all in this together, even though our connection with one another might be ambiguous and difficult to describe.

These three characteristics are a part of current cosmopolitanism discourse. Butler sees them in our common experience with grief and Chea sees them in a borderless system of belonging. The process of recognizing individuals who belong to compromised and voiceless populations remains paramount in cosmopolitanism and vital to the global political future. Equally important is the process of recognizing the ways in which global cultures currently

already cross over and reside as parts of one another. Cosmopolitanism recognizes collective similarities within global cultures while also, at the same time, continuing to bring to light the people that have never been a part of that global collective. *Our Town* affirms this line of thinking as it investigates and portrays ways that human beings are already connected to one another, even when we don't realize it. My argument here centers on the fact that theatre, and specifically Wilder's *Our Town*, serves as a vehicle for breaking down boundaries between people and establishing a sense of community, even if just for one night.

It might seem outlandish to consider Wilder's *Our Town* through a cosmopolitan theoretical lens, given that the play itself seems particularly rooted in American—some might say patriarchal—culture. However, I will discuss the ways the play naturally crosses cultural and political boundaries through its performance history, the fluidity of the Stage Manager character, and its portrayal of death in Act III. Doing so, the play expands our views of what qualifies as cosmopolitan. However, it would be remiss not to mention the tension that exists in examining a play like *Our Town* through a cosmopolitan lens. Thornton Wilder, a white male, certainly comes from a position of privilege and embodies Western ideals. I myself, also a white male, operate from a position of privilege even as I write this chapter in the Western-dominant language of English. But discounting any individual person's view runs the risk of establishing the very boundaries that cosmopolitanism stridently seeks to break down—we must continue to provide a place for multiple voices to be heard and those given an opportunity to speak must continue to make a space for the voiceless. My earnest hope is that the voice exercised here will continue to help open up space for other voices in the process, not silence others in that discussion.

I am not contending that Wilder intended to engage cosmopolitanism with *Our Town* or that applying a cosmopolitan lens to this distinctly American play is not a risky proposition. But, if we are to expand our notion of that which is “other” in contemporary critical discourse, we must include an expansion of the global community as a whole. Listening to voices that have not always had one does not mean other voices must be silenced in the process; it simply means that now we have the benefit of more voices placed on an equal footing. But it also means that those whose voices have always been part of the global conversation must *listen* rather than speak. It is the obligation of those (like myself) coming from a position of privilege to do our best to destroy the hegemonic system that privilege creates. It is not an inversion of the process of inclusivity, but an earnest search for a space of equality of voice and influence. Looking at *Our Town* through a lens of cosmopolitanism, we discover various ways that multiple people groups might connect to the world of Grover’s Corners, hinting all the while at the “borderless mode of belonging” prescribed by Cheah.

An expansion of the term “other” remains vitally important in contemporary cosmopolitan thinking. In a way, this expansion dissolves the very concept of an “other.” An element of cosmopolitan thought is the individual cosmopolitan subject. The cosmopolitan ideal does not erase injustices of the past but seeks to legitimize the experiences of the othered populations. It seeks to include them as agents in a global community. It seeks to set populations on equal footing with equal voice given to each. It is a utopian ideal where the pain and injustice of the past is recognized and used to inform our establishment of the future.

Grief

I first want to discuss grief as a cosmopolitan force in *Our Town*. Judith Butler contends that the process of grieving serves as a connecting force that binds people together in a global collective. She asks the question in *Precarious Life*, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?” (20). Butler frames her questions in terms of what “makes for a grievable life,” insisting that the very process of grief itself connects human beings across global expanses (20). Chea echoes the same questions when he says that in terms of the political nation-state, “one fails to see a clear definition of who is actually human and who really counts in the broad scope” (30). Butler continues on with what she believes connects people globally. “Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody” (20). In bringing “we” into the conversation, Butler connects the process of grieving with a language of “we” that I will also discuss. Here, she uses grief as a connecting factor between human beings. She makes note of difference, never discarding it; in fact she says “despite our differences in location and history”, there is a “we” that we can reference when talking about the process of grief. The grieving process connects us to one another in a way that is undeniable and unmistakable. Everyone knows what it is like to have lost a loved one. In Butler’s terms, the grieving process becomes a universal commonality that may very well break down critical boundaries existing between various people groups.

Butler makes note of the fact that in the process of losing a loved one, whether through death or displacement, one not only loses another person but part of oneself as well. “For, it is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here and then simply loses a ‘you’ over there...If I lose

you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you...On one level, I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well" (22). Human beings possess an unbreakable tie with others, a bond that exists whether acknowledged or not. This bond, or "tie" as Butler puts it, crosses national and cultural boundaries. When we attempt to represent another person as absolutely "other," we deny the connection of our common human relationality, including the ways in which we are all related and vulnerable to one another through the process of grief.

Death/grieving as cosmopolitan force in *Our Town*

Possibly the most obviously equalizing and cosmopolitan force within *Our Town* is death itself, discussed and portrayed in devastating detail in the third act of the play. Throughout the play we have seen the ordinary, mundane details of life portrayed in the small town of Grover's Corners. We have seen various characters grow up, get married, fall in love, perform daily chores...all of the things one might assume make up life in a very ordinary town. However, in Act III, we are clued into the fact that the play is about to take a turn towards the global and away from the particular.

The Stage Manager helps set the stage for the audience at the beginning of the final act, recognizing that death serves as an equalizing force. Throughout this monologue, the character refers to the audience as a collective instead of maintaining a strict boundary between audience and performer, what I later discuss as a language of "we". The Stage Manager says,

Now there are some things we all know, but we don't take'm out and look at'm very often. 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.

(87-88)

The Stage Manager uses the language of "we" throughout this opening monologue and specifically in this portion of the play. Instead of referring to things that one person knows or recognizes, instead of using this as a moment of separating himself or herself from the audience, the Stage Manager speaks of a collective knowledge: "we *all* know something is eternal" (italics added, 81). This eternal quality is not something specific to a nationality or race; rather, "there's something way down deep that's eternal about *every* human being" (italics added).

The play shifts towards focusing on death in the transition from Act II to Act III. The play's stage directions say, "*twelve ordinary chairs have been placed in three openly spaced rows facing the audience. These are graves in the cemetery*" (85). The stage directions indicate that these simple chairs are graves and that the actors sitting in them represent their own gravestones. The audience is not made aware of this convention until the beginning of the act when the Stage Manager informs them that they are viewing a cemetery. Once the Stage Manager starts referring to the various gravestones, it becomes very clear that the play steps out of reality once again and begins to discuss much larger themes. Death takes center stage during the intermission and plays a vital role in this final act.

When directing the play, one of the ways my co-director, Lindsay Weitkamp, and I tried to portray the cosmopolitan community that is established through *Our Town* came in the final act in our staging of the graveyard. Many productions isolate the dead on one part of the stage and have them facing the same direction, not looking at one another when they speak but only looking straight ahead as is outlined in the script. We decided to have various inhabitants of the graveyard, those members of the community that have died like Mrs. Gibbs and Wally Webb, facing multiple directions during the scene (pictured in Figure B).



Figure B

We hoped that this staging choice would provide some visual interest; more importantly, it established a sense of the dead looking in multiple directions and enveloping the entire space. Mrs. Gibbs explains to Emily that they must only look towards "what's ahead and be ready for what's ahead." Instead of staging the scene so that all the characters are looking in the same direction, we decided to have them look in multiple directions to signify the global and all-encompassing nature of the play. We also gave the performers freedom to sit in different positions. Coupled with their gazes in multiple directions, the actors' postural variety visualized

the fact that each individual is unique yet is provided an equal voice. One character's experience is different from the next; they do not see or look forward to the exact same thing. Taken as a whole and as a holistic community, however, they view the entire space together.

The play reinforces a distinct picture of equality through death in Act III. Throughout the act, we see the dead converse with one another and many are given a distinct voice.

Interestingly, the act focuses on Mrs. Gibbs and Emily. Mrs. Gibbs provides words of wisdom and counsel, helping Emily to adjust to her new environs. In many ways, Mrs. Gibbs is provided a voice that she didn't have in the day-to-day activities of Grover's Corners. There is a sense that she is in charge of this environment or, at the very least, knows much about it. We see Emily go on a journey of revelation, recognizing that living people don't truly understand the eternal implications of the lives that they lead. I have already noted the importance of Wilder's representations of women; in this act, *Our Town* contributes to the democratizing force of his drama by making women the source of wisdom after death. The play gives Emily and Mrs. Gibbs the most significant voices in the final act.

The stage directions also say, "*Toward the end of the intermission the ACTORS enter and take their places. The front row contains: toward the center of the stage, an empty chair; then MRS. GIBBS; SIMON STIMSON*" (85). Each chair is filled apart from one and that empty chair occupies center stage. As the act continues, it becomes clear that the chair is reserved for Emily Webb. Emily literally takes center stage as the central focus of this act. While she has only been a part of the story up to this point, certainly a central figure in the play but by no means the sole main focus of the story, her presence center stage is needed in the final act. Mrs. Gibbs sits

next to her. Putting these characters in the strongest positions on stage, Wilder stresses the importance of their perspectives.

The play does not announce that the stage represents a cemetery until the Stage Manager says, “This is the new part of the cemetery. Here’s your friend Mrs. Gibbs. ‘N let me see—Here’s Mr. Stimson, organist at the Congregational Church. And Mrs. Soames who enjoyed the wedding so—you remember? Oh, and a lot of others. And Editor Webb’s boy, Wallace, whose appendix burst while he was on a Boy Scout trip to Crawford Notch” (87). The Stage Manager guides the audience grave by grave, pointing out that the people they see sitting in the chairs represent gravestones in a cemetery. Throughout the play, the Stage Manager directly addresses the audience in a conversational tone. Not only does this practice break the fourth wall but the relaxed, even casual style of speech, brings the audience into the play in a unique way. Direct address remains paramount in communicating common human experiences in *Our Town*. The Stage Manager references the events of the play as if the audience can and does know exactly what he or she is talking about.

The Stage Manager comments on the common experience found in grief. He tells the audience, “Yes, an awful lot of sorrow has sort of quieted down up here. People just wild with grief have brought their relatives up to this hill. We all know how it is...and then time...and sunny days...and rainy days...’n snow...We’re all glad they’re in a beautiful place and we’re coming up here ourselves when our fit’s over” (87). Like Judith Butler writes, “Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody” (20). As the Stage Manager says, “We all know how it is”. Grief does not discriminate; it touches every human life, regardless of a

person's age, race, or national identity. Even though the experience with grief is wildly different depending on one's individual's situation, we all have some idea of what it is to lose someone.

Like Emily and Mrs. Gibbs, Simon Stimson, the town drunk and social outcast, is also given a distinct voice in Act III. He occupies an othered space in the town throughout the play, yet in death he takes center stage next to Emily and Mrs. Gibbs. The play introduces Simon in the first act as the choir director and musician, leading a choir rehearsal. But the play leads us to believe that he is drunk during that rehearsal, saying, "Now look here, everybody. Music come into the world to give pleasure...Get it out of your heads that music's only good when it's loud" (34). The scene cuts back and forth between the choir rehearsal and a conversation between George and Emily at home. Simon continues to direct the choir, then finishes the rehearsal and releases the choir. Later, Louella Soames worriedly exclaim to Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb, "To have the organist of a church drink and drunk year after year. You know he was drunk tonight" (39).

Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb respond to Mrs. Soames, reprimanding her for gossiping about Simon Stimson. In their discussion, the women demonstrate empathy towards Mr. Stimson that surprises Mrs. Soames:

MRS. GIBBS. Now, Louella! We all know about Mr. Stimson, and we all know about the troubles he's been through, and Dr. Ferguson knows too, and if Dr. Ferguson keeps him on there in his job the only thing the rest of us can do is just not to notice it.

MRS. SOAMES. Not to notice it! But it's getting worse.

MRS. WEBB. No, it isn't, Louella. It's getting better. I've been in that choir twice as long as you have. It doesn't happen anywhere near as often. (39-40)

Here, Wilder offers insight into the town's view of Simon Stimson. He is someone that is talked *about* rather than talked *to*. Even though hints of empathy and sympathy emanate from the women's conversation about him, they fail to offer any solutions or help towards his situation.

Mrs. Soames represents a voice in the town that willingly gossips about Stimson's actions, while the other women offer an empathic perspective towards his plight. In telling Mrs. Soames, "We all know about Mr. Stimson, and we all know about the trouble he's been through," Mrs. Gibbs communicates the importance of understanding where someone is coming from. Since she has taken the steps to know about the trouble he has gone through, troubles the audience never finds out about, she holds a more sympathetic view of his character.

Yet all three women demonstrate an ostracizing tendency towards Simon. Instead of talking about his problems with him or offering to help, the best they can do is "just not to notice it" (40). Later in the evening, Dr. Gibbs demonstrates the same tendency as he discusses Simon with his wife. He says, "I guess I know more about Simon Stimson's affairs than anybody in this town...I don't know how that'll end; but there's nothing we can do but just leave it alone" (41). Even though there are townspeople who know much about his troubles, Simon is sectioned off from the rest of the town; the best they know how to do is leave him alone. They do not offer to step in and help him; that lack of communal involvement in Simon's life will later have dire circumstances.

Later, in an encounter with Mr. Webb and Constable Warren, Simon is literally silenced by his drunkenness:

MR. WEBB. All quiet tonight?

CONSTABLE WARREN. Simon Stimson's rollin' around a little. Just saw his wife movin' out to hunt for him so I looked the other way—there he is now.

SIMON STIMSON comes down Main Street from the left, only a trace of unsteadiness in his walk.

MR. WEBB. Good evening, Simon...town seems to have settled down for the night pretty well...

SIMON STIMSON comes up to him and pauses a moment and stares at him, swaying slightly.

Good evening...Yes, most of the town's settled down for the night, Simon...I guess we better do the same. Can I walk along a ways with you?

SIMON STIMSON continues his way without a word and disappears at the right.

Good night.

CONSTABLE WARREN. I don't know how that's goin' to end, Mr. Webb. (44)

Wilder here reiterates the town's chosen method of dealing with Simon, which is to look the other way. Constable Warren does not know "how that's goin to end" but the play reveals Simon's ultimate fate in the third act as it is revealed that he commits suicide. Here, the play quite literally portrays a "silent" Simon. Certainly, he speaks when he is directing the choir but he communicates more in the third act than in any other. Up to that point, the audience has learned about Simon through someone else or through watching his experience with Mr. Webb and Constable Warren. He is a tragic figure, silenced by his condition—arguably a disease—and

by the townspeople. He “continues his way without a word”, so the play never provides Simon the opportunity to share his experience with others; at least not until after his death in Act III.

By silencing Simon through the first two acts, the play shows the dire consequences suffered by people who reside on the outskirts of society. There is so much emphasis on conversation and dialogue in *Our Town* that, when conversation does not exist, when someone remains silenced by the town or their situation, tragedy ensues. Towards the beginning of the final act of *Our Town*, Joe Stoddard, the undertaker, reveals that Simon has killed himself:

SAM CRAIG. *Reading Simon Stimson's epitaph.*

He was the organist at church, wasn't he? –Hm, drank a lot, we used to say.

JOE STODDARD. Nobody was supposed to know about it. He'd seen a peck of trouble.

Behind his hand.

Took his own life, y' know?

SAM CRAIG. Oh, did he?

JOE STODDARD. Hung himself in the attic. They tried to hush it up, but of course it got around. He chose his own epy-taph. You can see it there. It ain't a verse exactly. (91)

Contrarily, where Simon was displaced and silenced in life, he is recognized in death. The stage directions place him in the front row next to Mrs. Gibbs and the chair that Emily will eventually occupy. He speaks the second lines that we hear from the dead, referencing Joe Stoddard and Sam Craig who are in the graveyard before Emily's funeral, “I'm always

uncomfortable when *they're* around" (90). We hear his true voice for the first time. By providing Simon a voice, the play begins to substantiate his life through death.

Simon later provides his thoughts in conversation with Emily. After Emily has relived her twelfth birthday and realized that she "should have listened to" the others who warned her not to go back, he speaks a monologue "*With mounting violence; biting*" according to the stage directions:

Yes, now you know. Now you know! That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those...of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another. Now you know—that's the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness. (109)

Simon Stimson, who has spoken few words throughout the course of the play, speaks at length about and from his experience. His existence was not a happy one and he views life through that lens. He reveals difficult truth here, a dark truth about human nature that sometimes gets forgotten when discussing *Our Town*. People have the tendency to "waste time as though you had a million years." People "move about in a cloud of ignorance" and "go up and down trampling on the feelings of those...of those about you" (109). People like Simon who, as we have seen, lack community in life do not have the "happy existence" that so many long for and deserve.

Here, Wilder provides significant voice to someone who has been mostly silent—and silenced—throughout the play. Simon's life and his experience are legitimized when he makes

a significant contribution in the graveyard scene. When Judith Butler asks, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And finally, What *makes for a grievable life?*” (20), she connects the process of grieving to the existence of a life. “It is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unmarkable” (35). When we fail to mark a death, to make nothing of it, we dehumanize the life lost. She says “certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized...they fit no dominant frame for the human” (34). When a life does not fit into the dominant ideology, it is dehumanized through the *lack* of grief associated with its loss. *Our Town* provides Simon a seat at the table of grief in Act III; The play acknowledges, affirms and constitutes his life when it proclaims he is *worth* grieving. While he was othered and dehumanized by the townspeople in life, he is given more equal footing in death.

After Simon speaks to Emily, Mrs. Gibbs quickly and “*spiritedly*” responds, “Simon Stimson, that ain’t the whole truth and you know it” (109). While the interaction between Simon and Mrs. Gibbs is incredibly short and easy to pass over, it offers an important glimpse into the validation provided Simon in death. What might, at first, seem like another dismissal by those around him, becomes, upon closer inspection, a reinforcement of his value as a person and a grievable life. Mrs. Gibbs speaks directly to him. This is dialogue between Mrs. Gibbs and Simon; a conversation, not another moment when someone talks *about* Simon rather than *to* him. Doing so, Mrs. Webb acknowledges his voice. She directly recognizes Simon’s experience and point-of-view as legitimate.

Mrs. Gibbs then says, “that ain’t the whole truth and you know it.” She brings attention to two things with this statement: first, that Simon speaks truth. The things that we have heard him say about human nature and the ability of humankind to hurt one another are true. But

there is more to the story; he has not told the “whole truth.” Mrs. Gibbs does not have to educate him of that whole truth because he *already* knows that what he has said isn’t wholly true. Mrs. Webb recognizes that Simon’s experience clouds what he says yet still validates his voice. Like characters in Wilder’s drama always do, she hears what he says, recognizes it as legitimate, yet responds with a different perspective. In this way, Wilder opens up multiple points of view. By giving Simon a voice, the play offers space to grieve his life and to consider what it could have been had he not been ostracized from the rest of the community.

The play affirms Butler’s assertion that the process of grief helps to develop a cosmopolitan worldview, where the differences between characters in life no longer matter in death. Death is a place where boundaries between people can be traversed and the grieving process can make us aware of how little those differences actually mean. In scripting these specific voices into the third act, an act almost wholly devoted to death and the grieving process, it substantiates these characters as human by grieving them through the dramatic action. In grieving Simon Stimson and by legitimizing his life by including his voice and experience in this act, Wilder argues for adopting those people who have been othered in our communities into the larger human family.

Emily and Mrs. Gibbs are also given a significant platform from which to speak in the play’s final act. Something about the transition from life to death affords Emily a voice that she did not have in life. In Acts I and II, she belongs to an ensemble, while in Act III she is the central focus. Mrs. Gibbs speaks the first lines that we hear from the dead. Joe Stoddard, the undertaker, and her nephew Sam Craig (two living townspeople who are in the cemetery) are having a conversation and she says, “That’s my sister Carey’s boy, Sam...Sam Craig” (90). Mrs.

Gibbs provides a voice of reason and knowledge. She is self-assured and gifts pieces of wisdom throughout the act. Seeing a group of people, dressed in black and presumably coming as a funeral procession, Mrs. Soames asks, "Who is it, Julia?" (92). Mrs. Gibbs, without hesitation, says, "My daughter-in-law, Emily Webb" (92). The stage directions say that she delivers this line "*without raising her eyes*" (92). In the world of the dead, she does not need to look up to find out the necessary information. She is already in possession of that knowledge and shares it with others. She is in control of her situation and the world around her.

Throughout the final scenes the audience sees Emily ask multiple questions, all answered by Mrs. Gibbs. Emily begins simply by noting, "It's raining", to which Mrs. Gibbs replies, "Yes...They'll be gone soon, dear. Just rest yourself" (95). Mrs. Gibbs knows this new world they inhabit and begins to share that knowledge with Emily. As Mrs. Gibbs already knows, the living never stay for long, so there is no need to worry too much about it; she communicates that to Emily. Later, Emily asks, "Live people don't understand, do they?" Mrs. Gibbs replies, "No, dear—not very much" (96). Emily begins to understand that there is new revelation available on the other side of life, revelations that the audience begin to see Emily realize as the act progresses.

One of the most dramatically significant questions Emily asks arises when she realizes that she can go back and live days over. She says, "But, Mother Gibbs, one can go back; one can go back there again...into living. I feel it. I know it" (98). The Stage Manager and Mrs. Gibbs try to convince her not to go back. The Stage Manager affirms the fact that she can go back but says, "You not only live it; but you watch yourself living it" (99). When Emily fails to see the importance of that fact, the Stage Manager continues, "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” (99). Mrs. Gibbs then adds, “That’s not the only reason why you shouldn’t do it, Emily. When you’ve been here longer you’ll see that our life here is to forget all that, and think only of what’s ahead, and be ready for what’s ahead. When you’ve been her longer you’ll understand” (98). Mrs. Gibbs “understands” already; she has achieved the knowledge that comes with death. The play does not provide Dr. Gibbs or George or Mr. Webb this knowledge—here, again, Wilder gives women a voice in keeping with his feminist sensibility. Also, Mrs. Gibbs has the greatest influence on Emily. She tells Emily not to go back to the living, but when the young woman’s desire gets the best of her, Mrs. Gibbs says, “At least, choose an unimportant day. Choose the least important day in your life. It will be important enough” (100). Emily follows her advice.

Emily then goes back to her 12th birthday and the play shows the pain associated with experiencing a day over again while knowing what is to come. Emily steps back into the morning of her twelfth birthday, trying to soak each moment up as she relives it. After she has relived the morning of her birthday for a while, she starts to see the ways in which we fail to recognize how important everyday moments are. Emily says to her mother, Mrs. Webb, “*With mounting urgency*”, as the stage directions note:

Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I’m dead. You’re a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally’s dead, too. Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it—don’t you

remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. *Let's look at one another.* (107)

After reliving the moment a while longer, she finally says, loudly, "I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another...I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed" (108). Emily now understands. She knows that there was *something* that she missed while she was a living person. It is something that "we" never notice.

In death, and through the third act, Emily has passed from life to death, from a lack of understanding to otherworldly understanding. Wilder provides Emily a moment of pathos that concludes with her final question to Mrs. Gibbs, the last lines spoken by the actors in the play before the Stage Manager gives a final monologue:

EMILY. Mother Gibbs?

MRS. GIBBS. Yes, Emily?

EMILY. They don't understand, do they?

MRS. GIBBS. No, dear. They don't understand. (111)

Mrs. Gibbs and Emily have the last words here. The play takes Emily on a profound journey in the final moments of *Our Town*. She realizes that human beings are just "blind people" and that true revelation and understanding comes after death. She proclaims that "They don't understand, do they?" She is no longer a part of the "they" of whom she speaks. She, like Mrs. Gibbs, now understands. She sees and recognizes the importance of the everyday, mundane moments that seem so insignificant at the time. She realizes how we fail to really look at one another when we have the opportunity. And she knows that living human beings will continue to make those same mistakes while they live their daily lives on earth.

“We”

As I have briefly mentioned, *Our Town* incorporates a language of “we” throughout the play that helps bring the audience into a collective group. It affirms the sense that we—the audience or reader and every human being—are all in this together in some way, directly relating to cosmopolitan thinking and theory. The Stage Manager invokes this collective language in his monologues at the beginning of each act. I maintain that the language of “we” aids in developing a cosmopolitan experience. Before exploring that idea further, however, it is important to reflect that use of words like “we” and “our” can foster a dangerous presumption. “We” language can intentionally or unintentionally morph into bourgeoisie everyman-ness, where one assumes that the whole of a group or population of people are included but, in fact, they are being subordinated to ideologies formed and reinforced by those in positions of power. In my view, Wilder’s “we” does not exclude people in this way. His use of “we,” like the experience of grief as theorized by Judith Butler, belongs to his search for a common ground among human beings. Wilder believed that people can relate to one another on a fundamental level because “we” are all mortal, subject to grief, all temporary residents of the same planet. He believed, like cosmopolitanism suggests, that there are threads connecting people that can be explored and recognized, even in the face of many areas of difference. In my final chapter, I will explore the ways in which Wilder recognized areas of difference and the stark pitfalls of human inequality. He does not assume an equality between human beings; he creates space for it by positioning people in the vastness of eternity.

This notion of “we” informed many of the choices that my co-director and I made when directing *Our Town* at the University of Colorado-Boulder. We used the entire space of the

theatre to stage the play, taking down the fourth wall (as the play begs to do) and having each actor perform in the midst of the audience at some point. The key to establishing this environmental approach was to have the actors “living” in this world before the audience entered. As people walked into the space, we had the actors performing their daily activities: practicing baseball, doing daily chores, homework and the like (figure A).



Figure A

Specifically, we established the Stage Manager as the bridge between the world of the play and the world of the audience. While other cast members also had the freedom to interact with audience members before the official beginning of the play, the Stage Manager specifically and intentionally struck up conversation with audience members and interacted with them on an individual level. We also had many of his entrances come from the audience and he would sit with the audience in moments he was not a part of the action, becoming another viewer of the play. These choices helped the audience become part of the world of the play as opposed to viewing it from a distance. Through engaging the audience before, during and after the play, the Stage Manager and the rest of the cast provided the opportunity for the audience to actively engage with the theatrical event that is *Our Town*. The goal was always to establish an

environment that spoke of the “we” provided by the play and referenced by the Stage Manager. The “Our” in *Our Town* does not come from one storyteller dictating the play to an unidentified, uninvolved audience. Instead, the “our” encapsulates every person in the audience, no matter who they are or where they come from.

Returning to this language of “we”, the Stage Manager begins incorporating “we” language in Act I, as he explains to the audience the layout of the town, saying things like “Well, I’d better show you how our town lies” (4), “In those days our newspaper come out twice a week” (5), and “In our town we like to know the facts about everybody” (7). From the beginning of the play, the Stage Manager describes a world that the audience will see but also one that it is a part of. It is “our” town, not someone else’s.

The “our” quickly turns into “we”. Later in the first act, he says “But first we want a little more information about the town, kind of a scientific account, you might say” (21). When Professor Willard enters, the Stage Manager says, “A few brief notes, thank you, Professor,— unfortunately our time is limited.” It is a subtle yet significant shift between these two words, “our” and “we”. At the beginning of the play, the Stage Manager describes “our town” as if it is a town separate from the audience. But in making this shift to saying “we want a little information,” the Stage Manager brings the audience into the experience as part of the town itself. The “our” in “our time is limited” refers to the Stage Manager and the audience. At this point, the audience comes to be included in the “our” of “our town”. No other characters are this scene besides Professor Willard and the Stage Manager. When the Stage Manager references “we” and “our” here, he can only mean the audience is included. The Stage Manager later says, “There’s an early-afternoon calm in our town: a buzzin’ and a hummin’ from the

school buildings; only a few buggies on Main Street—the horses dozing at the hitching posts; you all remember what it's like" (27). He describes a scene that might seem particular to Grover's Corners, yet he refers to the audience as if they have experienced these types of scenes before, too. Again, this is not a specific experience to the characters portrayed in the play; the play is directly absorbing the audience into the experience of the play through collective language, words like "our" and "we".

The language of "we" continues towards the end of the first act, as the Stage Manager says:

So I'm going to have a copy of this play put in the cornerstone and the people a thousand years from now'll know a few simple facts about us...So—people a thousand years from now—this is the way we were in the provinces north of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century,—This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying" (33).

When the Stage Manager says these lines, he is the only person present on stage; as in his other monologues, the lines here are spoken directly to the audience. His "we" must be meant to reference himself and the audience since there is no one else on stage. The play intends to represent a larger collective—even humanity itself.

Throughout the rest of the play, the Stage Manager continues to use the language of "we." When talking about George and Emily's love, the Stage Manager says, "You see, we want to know how all this began" (62). It is not the Stage Manager alone who wants to know; it is not some other characters in the play; it is "we" who want to know. The Stage Manager who,

obviously, includes himself in the “our” of “our town,” continues bringing the audience into the collective of the town through this language of “we.”

The strongest instance of the play’s language of “we” occurs at the beginning of Act III, mentioned already:

Now there are some things we all know, but we don’t take ’em out and look at ’em very often. 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.

(87-88)

Using the language of “we”, the Stage Manager has transformed the audience into a collective. He has taken the play out of the particular experience of Grover’s Corners and planted it squarely in the cosmopolitan, discussing the ways in which all human beings hold something eternal. The play intentionally leaves out an explanation of what that eternal quality is specifically, but that’s the point. There is something inside each of us that will last beyond our time here on this earth. In leaving the exact “something” ambiguous, the Stage Manager provides an open-ended “something” to which any and all people can relate. Even someone with no religious or eternal worldview can appreciate the fact that human beings leave a mark on the earth that lasts beyond their lifetime; we are continually influencing the generations that come after us, even if that influence is a negative one. The “something” referenced by the

Stage Manager may be different for every person; the eternal quality that people hold may even be extremely particular in nature. Yet there is “something” that every human being has that is eternal and that knits us together in a community. And given Wilder’s preoccupation with the cosmos and questions of universal concern, one can assume he is imploring his audience to consider how we are all a part of a larger global community, not just a particular one.

Using the term “we” throughout his final monologue, the Stage Manager creates a new community. No matter what someone’s background might be, no matter where they may come from, he envelops members of the audience into one community through these words. He assumes and creates a connection between varied people groups by placing each and every person listening to his words into this “we”. He is not separate from the audience to whom he speaks, nor are they separate individuals viewing *Our Town*. They are now part of a larger community, a “we” beyond the boundaries of nation, race, language, etc. that people have erected between themselves.

Borderless Belonging

I want to also discuss how *Our Town* exhibits characteristics of a “borderless belonging”. Pheng Chea states that any responsible appropriation of cosmopolitan thinking “breaks down these particularistic barriers and envisions borderless modes of belonging” (20). He notes how certain French philosophes believed in cosmopolitanism as “an intellectual ethic, a universal humanism that transcends regional particularism” and that involves “a universal circle of belonging that embraces the whole of humanity...Hence, the cosmopolitan embodies the universality of philosophical reason itself, namely, its power of transcending the particular and

contingent” (21). Chea’s discussion greatly contributes to my own understanding of cosmopolitanism, specifically his reference to a “borderless” mode of belonging. In referencing a “universal humanism,” he establishes the possibility that something resides in every human being that connects us to one another; it is up to us to seek out what that “something” is. There are similarities inherent in each of us that transcend particular cultural barriers and knit us together in a global collective, regardless of geographic location or political affiliation. Chea also states that cosmopolitanism need not require a disavowal of national attachments but, rather, that national attachments should be seen as being “based on existing attachments that bind us into a collectivity larger than the state” (24). A collectivity larger than the state is something that *Our Town* references again and again by assuming and searching for connections between audience and performer, past and present, and the living and the dead.

Chea aptly describes my views on true cosmopolitan thinking: a focus on “borderless” modes of belonging. Instead of highlighting the differences that exist between people groups, cosmopolitan discourse focuses on the ways that we already are connected to one another. Butler affirms this perspective when she says, “Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody” (20). She uses the term “we” because of the common experience with grief. Cosmopolitanism does not discount the differences found between people. Because it can be presumptuous to assume that “we” all experience the same things in life, a nuanced version of cosmopolitanism is needed. Instead of assuming that “we” all come from the same place, a truly cosmopolitan ethic involves searching for those things that connect people, that bring us into a collective “we” despite our many social and political differences. I am not advocating for

a universal humanism here; I want to suggest that we can find discrete points of connection—those “somethings” that bind human beings together—amidst significant differences.

Cosmopolitanism espouses an ethic where we find and illuminate the connections between various people groups; not ignoring the differences that exist between people but instead magnifying the things that tie humanity together as a collective whole. Instead of deconstructing one barrier or border only to turn around and construct another, cosmopolitanism has the potential to traverse those boundaries in search of human connectivity and relationality. *Our Town* contributes to cosmopolitan discourse though it is certainly not a perfect espousal of cosmopolitan ideals—the Stage Manager is most often cast as a male and thus the play can be criticized for promoting a dominant male perspective. However, I would argue that the performance history echoes a dominant ideological mindset that has been put *on* the play rather than one that is *inherent* to it. There are hints provided to the audience that point towards more of a borderless mode of being, where people don’t define one another based on sex, politics or skin color and instead look to things that connect rather than divide us.

James Clifford brings up the valid point that people are not “permanently fixed by his or her ‘identity’; but neither can one shed specific structures of race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history” (12). But even as we live in a world where these elements of history, sexuality and the like affect our everyday lives, we still have space for including others by recognizing the already existing ties between individual human beings. One might be so bold as to claim that cosmopolitan thinking involves a process of “queering” the political process—in the same way that queer theory seeks out the ambiguities and gray areas

of sexuality, so cosmopolitanism searches out the profound similarities hidden deep in our social and political makeup.

The Stage Manager exhibits a borderless mode of belonging by easily traversing boundaries in the play. Specifically, the Stage Manager goes between male and female, both in the world of the play and through the potential of casting the Stage Manager with a male or female actor. I have specifically referenced the Stage Manager as “he”, due to the fact that the first Stage Manager was cast as a man and that Wilder uses a male pronoun for that figure in the script. But I have intentionally used the term “Stage Manager” more than “he” or “him” to refer to this character because of the amorphous nature of the role. As written, the role can be played by either a male or a female actor, as seen in contemporary productions such as the famed Barrow Street Theatre production’s casting of Helen Hunt in the role (Healy, “*Our Town Evolves...*”). While, historically, the Stage Manager has been played *on the stage* as a male, the nature of the role *on the page* allows for traversing sexual boundaries. Recent productions of *Our Town* have seen the Stage Manager played by diverse genders, races, and backgrounds, like the recent Ford’s Theatre production starring the actress Portia as the Stage Manager (Jones). Regardless of Wilder’s original intentions, he has crafted a role that can be played by male or female with equal legitimacy.

Another way that the Stage Manager helps establish a borderless community in the play is simply through his direct references to the audience; the Stage Manager crosses the boundary between audience and performer. From the play’s first line, we see that the action is not rooted in realism. The Stage Manager refers to the fact that we are all watching a play, himself included. His first line is “This play is called *Our Town*” (5). The audience knows from the

start that this will not be a play that keeps a strict boundary between audience and performer. The story of the play and the story of the audience's experience of it are intimately linked beginning with the very first lines. By directly addressing the audience, the Stage Manager recognizes the communal nature of the dramatic journey he and they—"we"—are about to embark on.

The Stage Manager provides background information on the various characters and he also comments on the world of the play. Each act in *Our Town* begins with the Stage Manager directly addressing the audience, narrating the passage of time and setting up the scenes we are about to see. He says, "The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go,—doesn't it?" (4). This line serves as a commentary on what the town experiences with the "morning star," but it is also an invitation. He makes the comment but follows it with "doesn't it?" Gently soliciting audience response, he invites the audience into the experience of the play and treats them as if they know exactly what he is talking about. The Stage Manager never *just* educates the audience, but discusses things as if he is reminding them of things they already know, things they have already experienced.

My co-director and I took an environmental approach to staging *Our Town*. We deeply desired to stay true to the "heart" of *Our Town* and the various meanings and messages we felt most obviously come through in the play. However, we consistently felt that the play begs for the audience to experience the production in a way that envelops them into the process. The ways in which the Stage Manager and other characters, like Mr. and Mrs. Webb, engage the audience directly begs for an experiential, environmental approach to the production as opposed to maintaining a strict fourth wall separating the audience and the world of the play.

We hoped that as soon as audience members walked into the space, they would feel like they entered into a world similar to the one that they occupy in daily life. We wanted the audience to become a part of our production of *Our Town* in the same way that Mrs. Gibbs, the Stage Manager, the technical crew and the director are. We did not intend to provide a cosmopolitan rendering of the play but, in our view, it begs for a style of production that breaks down particularistic borders and affirms the borderless mode of belonging described by Chea. The play invites a cosmopolitan conversation. It joins the audience and production team into a community where boundaries are crossed and everyone recognizes the need to relate to one another on a different level. Coupled with the exploration of grief, “we” language, and direct audience address in *Our Town*, the communal experience of theatre-going opens up a space where the ideals of cosmopolitanism come to life.

As I have discussed previously, Thornton Wilder held the utmost regard for writers that influence and directly affect his writing. He also held tremendous respect for multiple styles of writing and had a particular affinity for Emily Dickinson’s poetry. In describing her work, Wilder shows his desire for a borderless mode of belonging when describing his appreciation of Emily Dickinson’s writing:

And can we say of her that she wrote for Everybody? Yes; for when one has overcome the ‘low’ desire to write for anybody in particular—the cultivated, the chosen souls, one’s closest friends; when one has graduated from all desire to impress the judicious or to appeal to the like-minded—then and only then is one released to write for Everybody—only then released from the notion that literature is a specialized activity, an elegant occupation, or a guild secret. For

those who live in 'immensity' it is merely (and supremely) the human voice at its purest, and it is accessible to Everybody, not at the literary level, but at the human. ("Emily Dickinson" 62)

I believe that Wilder is here speaking about a sort of literary democracy, a style of writing that can appeal to everyone and not just to "the cultivated" or "like-minded." Certainly, Wilder has his blind spots and now may seem antiquated to some. But he expresses a desire in his writing for a truly democratic fiction, for writing to which "Everybody" can relate. Good writing breaks down barriers between people because it can appeal to everyone.

Our Town does not just cross the boundary between auditorium and stage, it also crosses the boundary between past and present. The Stage Manager introduces the Gibbs family, saying, "There's Doc Gibbs comin' down Main Street now, comin' back from that baby case. And here's his wife comin' downstairs to get breakfast" (6). The audience sees exactly what the Stage Manager describes, Dr. Gibbs coming down the street and Mrs. Gibbs entering the kitchen. But next, the Stage Manager provides some surprising information: "Doc Gibbs died in 1930. The new hospital's named after him. Mrs. Gibbs died first—long time ago, in fact" (7). In this, the Stage Manager places the story in both the past and the present. The audience sees Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs for the first time at the same time that the Stage Manager describes their deaths. They are alive yet they also are dead. We are told the end of their story even as their stories begin in the play.

The play's temporal fluidity continues when the Stage Manager introduces Joe Crowell, a young boy on his paper route, "Want to tell you something about that boy Joe Crowell there. Joe was awful bright—graduated from high school here, head of his class. So he got a

scholarship to Massachusetts Tech. Graduated head of his class there, too....goin' to be a great engineer, Joe was. But the war broke out and he died in France.—All that education for nothing" (9). Again the play traverses the boundary between the present: the Stage Manager introduces a young character at the same time he speaks of the future, referencing his death during the war, presumably World War I. But time isn't the only boundary traversed here; the Stage Manager also uses a different tone of voice. Up to this point, the play has methodically introduced us to the daily happenings of Grover's Corners without too much additional commentary. However, here the audience is informed of Joe Crowell's death and the consequences of that death. Not only did Joe die in the war, his future as a "great engineer" was lost: "All that education for nothing." The play starkly deals with the reality of death and war with this information. There are a few comments regarding war during the play, but none more surprising than the Stage Manager's lines about Joe Crowell. In this instance, we see the play cross the border between drama and comedy, between melancholy and a sense of hope. The hope that a young character like Joe would have for his future life is met with the painful reality of what is lost in war.

It would be easy to pass off the Stage Manager simply as a narrator who helps tell the story of a realist drama. But the play does not allow for that assumption as we encounter other characters that also directly address the audience. *Our Town* constantly employs metatheatrical techniques that remind the audience they are in a theatre, watching a play. But audience members are not simply inactive viewers; the play directly addresses them over and over again. Mr. Webb, the editor of the newspaper, tells the audience much about the town's social and political history. Later, we see Mrs. Webb also directly address the audience and explain her

feelings as her daughter is about to be married. Thus the play envelops the audience and invites them to participate in the storytelling process. It establishes an environment of active engagement where the proverbial “fourth” wall between actor and audience is eliminated. Wilder’s characters promote a sense of community through the act of theatre-making undertaken mutually by members of the production team and the audience.

The Stage Manager also has the ability to go back-and-forth between the imaginary and the “real”, the world of the play and the world of its audience. We see this right away in the first scene as the Stage Manager explains the various backgrounds of different characters. He says, “this is our doctor’s house” and continues the scene by describing the different characters that walk on stage (7). In doing so, he establishes himself as a participant in the audience’s experience even though he is also a character in the play.

As I mentioned earlier, the Stage Manager also provides a road between genders throughout the play, easily stepping into both male and female roles. One moment we see the character performing the role of Mrs. Forrest, furiously telling George that he should “go out and play in the fields young man” after George almost knocked her over playing baseball (28). In the next act, we see the Stage Manager playing the role of Mr. Morgan, serving George and Emily ice cream sodas at his drugstore. The stage directions say, “*The STAGE MANAGER, wearing spectacles and assuming the role of Mr. Morgan, enters abruptly from the right and stands between the audience and the counter of his soda fountain*” (67). Here we see the Stage Manager literally serving as a bridge between the audience and the play, standing between the audience and the soda counter visited by Emily and George. Here again we see the Stage able to travel between the world of reality—the real-time viewing of the play by the audience—and

the world of the imagined story of *Our Town*.

In the drugstore scene, we also see an instance of the Stage Manager serving as a bridge between the past, present, and future. The Stage Manager has already described the town at the beginning of the play and informed the audience of various characters deaths at the same time he introduces them. In the soda shop, he steps in to the role of Mr. Morgan and begins to share an anecdote with George and Emily about how one used to be able to go about the town without any threat of traffic or moving vehicles. It is a moment of nostalgia; it occurs in the present but looks back toward the past. But the Stage Manager is also a figure of the future; he has already shared with the audience that we are about to see the moment where George and Emily knew they were "meant for each other" (60). The audience knows how the present scene, featuring a vision of the past, will turn out in the future. Through moments like these, Wilder complicates temporality in *Our Town*. The audience does not experience distinct, well-defined worlds of past versus present, fantasy versus reality, audience versus actor. The play fuses the terms of such binary oppositions together, breaking down the lines between them in order to thrust us into a communal experience, a cosmopolitan reality.

One final production element to mention that spoke to the cosmopolitan nature of the play was the light canopy that our scenic designer hung above the audience. It signified a night full of stars. Making this choice, we extended the sky over each and every audience member and made direct reference to the cosmos. It was as if we extended a cosmopolitan blanket that covered everyone present in the theatre, both the actors performing the play and the audience viewing it. Hopefully, we broke down the boundaries between the world of the play and the world of the audience in the same way that truly cosmopolitan thinking breaks down the

boundaries between people of all backgrounds. This desire was intentionally highlighted in the Stage Manager's final lines, as he wishes the audience a good evening. During these lines, the lights above the audience pulsed, giving the sense of stars covering the entire space.

Conclusion

Our Town reminds its viewers and readers that we are all in this together because we are all temporary (mortal) residents of the same planet. The play promotes the reality that each individual human being is a part of a larger global and cosmic immensity. By providing a connecting point in death and grief, by incorporating a language of "we" throughout, and by employing the Stage Manager as a representative of a borderless belonging, *Our Town* suggests that people might one day achieve a cosmopolitan reality. Wilder believes in the potential for humanity to continue to find things that connect rather than divide us, and he uses *Our Town* to promote that sense of community through his theatre. In doing so, he asks his audience to consider who is really included in "our" town and how might we expand our views of who deserves to be a part of that global, cosmic community.

CHAPTER FIVE

WILDER'S DEMOCRACY

Democracy has a large task: to find new imagery, new metaphors, and new myths to describe the new dignity into which man has entered.

--Thornton Wilder²

Thornton Wilder was a playwright idealist who, later in life, articulated his political and ethical views. In 1957, at the age of 60, when receiving the Peace Prize of the Association of German Publishers and Booksellers, Thornton Wilder gave an address that eventually was inscribed as "Culture in a Democracy." This is one in a collection of his speeches and essays gathered by his sister Isabel and published under the title *American Perspectives and Other Essays*. In these essays, he elaborates his view of democracy in a much clearer way than he ever had before. Wilder says, "The leadership of elites is giving place to the leadership of majority opinion. That is culture under a democracy. And our attitude to it depends upon our belief in the potentialities—the so-to-speak intuitive capabilities—of the average man existing in a democracy" (69). Thornton Wilder wholeheartedly believed in culture under true democracy. He saw potential in the average man as a part of a democracy, where equal weight is given to every voice and human beings progress toward their great potential. Although Wilder cannot be classified as an overtly political writer, his *American Perspectives* essays allow us to see him as an implicitly political one. In this chapter, I am interested in exploring his democratic ethic as it is woven throughout his drama, including his most well-known plays. This imagined, utopian democracy was something thread throughout his plays and that I have examined in the previous chapters—his feminist sensibility and cosmopolitanism all deeply

² From Wilder's address, "Culture in a Democracy" (Niven 644)

connect to his views on democracy. But it was not until later in life that he expressed those views explicitly. In Wilder's democracy, no longer should a "leadership of elites" dominate political and social thought; there should be a place for majority opinion and for the free operation of the common man.

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed Wilder's feminist sensibility and his cosmopolitanism in order to show how he was ahead of his time in his political thinking. This political thinking was something that came naturally for Wilder and each aspect of his politics develops naturally into the next: his feminist sensibility is a particular ideology that stems from a cosmopolitan mindset where we all have a shared humanity. In this chapter, I hope to show that his concern with female representation and a cosmopolitan worldview grow out of a deeply held democratic ethic. He believed in the equality of humankind. He believed that women had the ability to contribute to civilian life in the same way that men did. He scripted women with tremendous influence, agency, and responsibility. He pointed at the reality that "we" are all citizens of this planet, and our residence here provides us common ground upon which we can relate to one another. But he recognized these beliefs as ideals, not actualities. Women had just received the right to vote near the start of his writing career. The Civil Rights Movement would not take hold until the latter part of his life. There continues to be a struggle to attain those ideals. But he believed in an authentically democratic ideal and he most often used the family as the form to portray that ideal and how we might listen to one another, dialogue with one another, and eventually come to an understanding that is impossible outside of that dialogue.

I first want to look at Wilder's specific notion of democracy and the component parts of his democratic ideals expressed in his speeches and personal writings. Wilder's imagined and utopian democracy involved a common ground found in humanity where we stand as equals. He believed that if people believe the best about one another, we can continue to find those areas that we possess common ground with each other, even with those who we think might be radically different from ourselves. I will also discuss how Wilder's notions of democracy relate to the theories of utopian performance and "rehearsing democracy" expressed by contemporary theorist Jill Dolan. In doing so, it continually becomes clear that Wilder was a man both in and ahead of his time. I will then investigate a few more examples in his drama that portray Wilder's imagined democracy: his short plays *Pullman Car Hiawatha* and *Bernice*, and another look at *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

At the heart of Wilder's democracy is a belief in the capability of human beings. He holds the optimistic view that the evil encountered by people in times of war or oppression is an outlier. Wilder maintains that humankind is naturally good and that we are endowed with the capacity to understand one another better. In a 1962 interview for *The New York Times Magazine*, he discussed Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. He recognized that there must be a pursuit of those positive attributes common in humanity:

There is only one answer in the haste imposed on us by this tension: if we have virtues, to make them attractive; if we have strength, to display it without ostentation; if we have grave flaws, to concern ourselves, as a whole country, with them; if we believe with Burke that we cannot indict a whole nation, and that we could enter into friendship with the vast majority of individuals in the

world, to let our imagination prompt us to ways of expressing among ourselves also this belief in the human being. (Lewis 98)

Here he again demonstrates his ability to hold seemingly binary positions as part of a whole. Not only should those who possess “virtues” and “strength” not be afraid to display them, he also encourages the pursuit and correction of “grave flaws.” The people of an entire country (specifically, the United States here) should concern themselves with resolving these grave flaws and moving towards a more positive outcome. At the heart of all of his social, political, or ethical thinking is this “belief in the human being” who is able to evaluate where we are falling short of our ideals, to address those failings, and to pursue great and greater virtue individually and collectively.

Wilder’s democratic ethic is most explicitly outlined in his 1957 essay, “Culture in a Democracy,” where he dismisses former systems of privilege as a kind of “insult”:

I shall try to show you that [this insult] has found its way into religious thinking, into our daily life, and into our assumption about the life of the family. That danger is withdrawing like bright-colored clouds from a sky at dawn; but it is present in all these ‘great poems of the past’ and it lingers under the surface of thought and feeling.

This was the insult: that God and destiny had given to a small number of persons an unearned superiority and that to the majority He had given an inferior lot; that privilege is not only in the order of society, but that it is in the order of nature; and in the order of divine governance. This was the feudal lie: that leadership is transmitted in the chromosomes; and that only communities enjoying these mystical privileges can produce and encourage and maintain all that is excellent, true, and beautiful. (70)

In Wilder's statement, we see a direct refutation of previous systems of power. He refers to them as an "insult" and a "lie," yet he recognizes their reality. For millennia, human beings have operated under the assumption that some people have been gifted with divine power and that others must remain under the influence of that power. When he emphasizes the "lie" that "only communities enjoying these mystical privileges can produce and encourage and maintain all that is excellent, true, and beautiful," he argues that increased equality—democratization—can be achieved *through* artistic expression. Not only do novelists, artists, playwrights, actors, and others have the ability to work against the "feudal lie" by providing artistic expression no matter their identity or origin, they also have the ability to create a new reality through the art that they produce. They *create* a new reality that is contrary to that feudal lie. The ideological system suggested here is what I shall call Wilder's "imagined democracy," a place where the common man or woman holds tremendous influence, where power and authority is not passed down through genes or unfair systems of power, and where creative expression—specifically here, Wilder's drama—can serve as a democratizing force.

Wilder continues to expand on his democratic ideals, saying, "The evil that I am bringing to your attention is not so much that there were coterie of persons in high places, but that their jealous protection of their undeserved and unjustified privileges robbed the rest of the world of spiritual dignity—not only social dignity, but spiritual dignity" (72). Wilder recognizes the privilege that certain systems of power have cultivated and calls those privileges "undeserved and unjustified." He says that it is not merely the fact that people existed in "high places," but that their protection of those undeserved privileges affected others, robbing them

of dignity, both social and spiritual. This is a sort of “evil” that must be dealt with. There must be a process of restoring dignity to those who are not experiencing it.

Wilder believes that the world is making progress towards getting rid of the old systems of power and privilege but he always recognizes it as a process, and often a painful one. He knows that the ideal, utopian version of society continues to take form as time marches on—it is a destination, not a current reality. Yet the old “lies” are disappearing. He says:

And let us remember for a moment all the other thousand-year-old lies that are gradually disappearing:

That a woman is incapable of responsibility in civil life...

That a man—under God and the state—may own and buy and sell total ownership of another man;

That children, because of the accident of their birth in needy families, may be made to work from dawn to sunset;

That a man because of race or color or religion is an inferior creature—

Oh, the journey to truth and freedom and the maturity of man is not yet ended. The world is still full of sweet and comforting lies.

But the lie I have described is losing its strength. (72)

Wilder emphasizes women’s equality when he says women are capable of responsibility in civil life. He argues for children’s rights at a time when child labor laws were needed to protect those in need. We see his refutation of slavery and discrimination as he emphasizes the lie that “race or color or religion” should allow one person to be considered inferior to another. He lays

out these statements almost as a manifesto of sorts; while it is not a proclamation of belief, it is a direct refutation of old ways of thinking towards a place of “truth and freedom.”

Wilder has the ability to see new realities and to appreciate how the old lies and injustices, the previous systems of dominating power, are falling away and creating new possibilities for those who never have had much social influence. Democracy for Wilder was not just an abstract idea; it was a social reality that we can and *should* strive for. He acknowledged the struggle to attain that ideal, saying that the “maturity of man is not yet ended...The world is still full of sweet and comforting lies...But the lie I have described is losing its strength” (72). In Wilder’s view, humankind is on a journey towards a utopia free from prejudice and unwarranted privilege. It is a world free from denying others dignity because of race or religion or sex. We are not yet to this utopia. We are headed in that direction, but the “comforting lies” that have been around for far too long persist. Wilder’s drama suggests that they are losing their strength, day by day, and that hope in human nature is justified.

Wilder felt the sociopolitical route towards that ideal was democracy. “Democracy is not only an effort to establish a social equality among men; it is an effort to assure them that they are not sons, nor subjects, nor low—that they should be equal in God’s grace” (73).

Democracy must make an effort towards two ends. First, it must attempt to establish “social equality among men.” Where there has been a distinct lack of equality, it is the purpose of democracy to rectify those inequalities and establish a new system of belonging. Second, it is the job of democracy to “assure” men and women that they should not consider themselves as subject to others or lower in stature or importance or value. There is an active process here. We must recognize those places where others have felt low or subject to others, and must work

to assure the people occupying those places that they no longer operate from that subject position. We all have power; we all have social equality that must be fought for and attained by breaking apart the old ideological systems—both those that currently reside from a place of privilege and power and those that do not.

Yet, as Wilder suggests earlier in saying that “the journey to truth and freedom” is ongoing, he knows that democratic representation is a process. Humans are often slow to wake up to the mistakes of the past and the potential for the future, yet he maintains a steadfast belief in the human spirit to progress. He states, “It will take some time. Call men dogs for five thousand years and they will crawl” (73). Creating equality will not happen overnight. There will be a process and it will not be easy. He also demonstrates knowledge of the power of language and identification; he says that calling men “dogs” for thousands of years will slow the journey to equality.

Wilder also says that democratic communities do not come without risk. He says, “Culture in a democracy has its dangers, but it has also this hope and this promise. It has a vast new subject to write about, to think about, to express, to explore: the Man with Raised Head” (73). When men and women no longer believe the lies that have been reinforced through thousands of years of ideology, they will become new subjects. A new human being is created whenever someone raises their head. New possibilities exist that have never been seen before. They are given a new perspective. There is a ripe vista available to discover and democracy holds the keys towards that exploration. Wilder knows that there will be a distinct and recognizable increase in our cultural output and capacity when people whom have not been operating from that perspective are able to raise their head, possibly for the first time.

In a 1941 NBC radio interview with Rex Stout, Wilder expressed how democracy is a vehicle for the common man to exercise his or her voice in the process of governing. He stressed that in democracy, in its ideal form, the will of the people is exercised without domination from those in power, saying, "democracy can collect itself into one mind and one will and that one will is not imposed upon it from the governors and is not maintained through either oratory or hypodermics nor through police" (39). He continued:

It rises instinctively from the people. That deep sense of responsibility from neighbor to neighbor is the finest thing a democracy can show. It is wonderful in wartime; it will be still more wonderful in peace. The Nazi spirit with its contempt for the human being as anything else but a tool has clarified for all of us just what a democracy is. A democracy has greater things to do than to organize itself towards a total war. But when it sees itself threatened with extinction, it can do that too. Our great danger is that we may underestimate the power that drives the Nazis on. They are in a condition which in the days of witchcraft they used to call a state of possession. It may still have a long cruel course to run. To oppose it the rest of the world must also present a unified state of mind as formidable in degree even though it's different in kind. It is hard in a democracy for individuals to abandon temporarily some of those liberties which they have taken five thousand years to acquire. But when the extinction of democracy itself is threatened, democracy too can collect itself to make a total war. When democracy has been saved from this menace we shall have learned better how to apply it to our own country. (Stout 39-40)

Wilder recognizes the process of democracy and the progress needed; once the United States has been “saved from this menace” of Nazi Germany, its citizens will have a better idea of how to apply democratic ideals at home. The United States still needs to learn much about applying democratic principals within its own borders and the threat posed by the “witchcraft” of Nazi power will help in applying those principles to their system of government. He acknowledges the ideals of democracy have not yet been achieved in the United States, but recognizing and confronting the evils of Nazi Germany will allow the United States to see the value of democracy and apply those principles at home. When democracy and the ideals of democracy are threatened, we will realize its value.

Wilder also reinforces his anti-pacifist view of global politics. He does not believe, despite his undying optimism about the human spirit, that humankind should simply sit idly by when democratic values and principles are threatened. There are “greater things” for citizens of the United States to do than to participate in total war. But when democracy is directly threatened by extinction, “it can do that too.” War, like grief, can bind human beings together; it can produce a “deep sense of responsibility from neighbor to neighbor.” Wilder felt a responsibility to those around him and in times of crisis, like World War II, that responsibility was brought to the surface in a powerful way.

This brings me to Wilder’s quote at the beginning of this chapter and the work of the remaining pages. He writes, “Democracy has a large task: to find new imagery, new metaphors, and new myths to describe the new dignity into which man has entered” (73). He knows the enormity of the task at hand. For thousands of years, people have thought that power should be held by the few rather than the many. It is an ideology not easily deconstructed. Yet that is

exactly the task a democracy assigns itself: to find new ways of describing and representing the newly-realized dignity of each and every human being. Finding the “new imagery, new metaphors, and new myths to describe the new dignity into which man has entered” was part of the task Wilder set for himself.

Jill Dolan gives theoretical voice to many of the ideas Wilder expresses through his drama and that I have investigated throughout this work. Dolan, a professor of theatre and Dean of the College at Princeton University, has become well known for her feminist theory, including her books *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* and winning the 2010-2011 George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism for her blog *The Feminist Spectator* (Dolan, et al 23). While I already have discussed some of her theory in my chapter about Wilder’s feminism, I want specifically to discuss her views on democracy and utopia and performance. In her book *Utopia in Performance*, Dolan gives a theoretical framework to what Wilder accomplishes through his drama. She argues that performances can help invigorate audiences towards greater equality and social justice, saying, “live performance provides a place where people come, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning-making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world” (Dolan 164). Her book “investigates the potential of different kinds of performance to inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential” (164).

Dolan describes what she calls “utopian performatives” that:

describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of

what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense...Utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better. (6-7)

Wilder's writing agrees with and affirms the notions of utopian performance put forth by Dolan. Anyone who has seen or heard of a performance of *Our Town* knows that the play centers on the appreciation of the everyday moments shared person to person; it "lifts" us "slightly above the present" and calls attention to the value of the mundane. The worlds he creates throughout his drama imagine and *perform* new realities, ones that we do not currently possess but ones that we should strive for. The ideals that he has adhered to in his drama help perform those very realities; his characters *perform* their equality in the midst of a political world where it does not exist. In the following pages I want to provide examples of the utopia he scripts in areas of race, class and war. He imagines a "better" world and hints at ways that we might create that world through these plays.

Dolan also expresses the importance of theatre in the democratic process in her 2001 essay *Rehearsing Democracy: Advocacy, Public Intellectuals, and Civic Engagement in Theatre and Performance Studies*. Dolan states her belief that "theatre and performance and the academic departments in which they're studied are ideal places to rehearse for participatory democracy" (2). She notes the influence of Augusto Boal on her ideas and his notion of theatre as "rehearsal for revolution." Throughout the essay, Dolan outlines the various ways she sees theatre's capacity for participating in the democratic process, for providing a venue to discuss and describe the ways in which equality amongst individuals continues to be denied. Where

democratic values are being compromised, theatre has a place to argue for attaining equality in democracy for every human being. Theatre can help put the othered populations of the United States on equal footing with the traditional hegemonic systems of power; in fact, theatre can help deconstruct those very systems so that other historically marginalized communities are given equal voice.

She concludes *Rehearsing Democracy* by saying, "For theatre and performance studies educators, advocacy means teaching performance as political currency, as a tool for participating in democracy, as an expressive mode of being heard, seen, encountered, contended with as someone—an artist/scholar/citizen—who has something to say in our current systems of power and representation" (13-14). While the initial comparison might strike some as surprising, I would go so far as to say that Wilder directly agrees with Dolan's sentiment that come decades after his playwriting career ended. While he will never be confused with the aggressive political tactics of someone like Augusta Boal or even Dolan herself, upon closer inspection, his drama demonstrates multiple instances of commenting on the "current systems of power and representation." He does not settle for the status quo, but introduces somewhat revolutionary ideas into his drama involving issues of race, class, gender and war. He, like Dolan, believes in theatre's ability to question and criticize the systems of thought we are so used to.

Wilder creates a utopian space like the one theorized by Dolan. Wilder doesn't simply describe what is, but envisions what might be. He imagines a world that is "ours." He helps provide a platform for voices of those who have not been heard. He portrays women and men as equal contributors to society. He promotes a dialogue between characters that, ordinarily,

would never encounter one another. These inventions are all part of Wilder's idealized democracy, achieved in and through the theatrical event. With this in mind, I want to look specifically at a few more instances of Wilder's democracy.

Race

Wilder does not preach to audiences but uses his theatre to subtly suggest new ways of thinking about issues of race, sex, war, family and relationship. His plays never address the issue of race head on and this is an area where certainly he can be criticized. Still, he definitively rejects racism, the idea "that a man because of race or color . . . is an inferior creature," calling it a "lie" in the essay "Culture in a Democracy" quoted above. Racism is one of the lies that Wilder's idealized democracy must root out. It was a stance that, again, comes naturally to Wilder because of his life experience. He attended Oberlin College for two years, which played a significant role in the abolitionist movement and was the first college in the nineteenth century to have a racially integrated and coed student body (Bryer 6). His personal stance on race becomes clear in his depiction of the Porter in his short play, *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, written in the 1920s and first published in 1931.³

Pullman Car Hiawatha can be seen as a one act "study" for *Our Town*. It features a Stage Manager who speaks directly to the audience and follows a set of passengers aboard a Pullman car on an overnight journey. During the play Wilder depicts a wide range of characters, including a grandmother on her way to provide gifts to her family, a doctor, a man in love, and a woman named Harriet who passes away while on the train. Like Emily in *Our Town*, after Harriet passes away, she says, "I understand everything now" (58). Also, just as he does in *Our*

³ Wilder worked on this collection of short plays throughout the 1920s, first being published in 1931 as *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act*.

Town, he uses this short play as a platform for examining the relationship of the individual life in the midst of a greater humanity, the very cosmos in which we reside. Wilder eventually has the entire solar system represented on stage after Harriet's death. Wilder is always negotiating the relationship of the individual human subject with the larger cosmopolitan issues surrounding that specific person. While the play focuses on the journey of the passengers inside the Pullman car, Wilder scripts a moment with the Porter of the sleeper car that reveals much about his views on race and the rights of African Americans in the United States at the time.

The Stage Manager sets the scene for the audience. "THE STAGE MANAGER. (*To the actors*): All right! —Sh!Sh!Sh! (*To the audience*) Now I want you to hear them thinking". The characters "*begin a murmuring-swishing noise, very soft. In turn each one of them [speaks and] can be heard about the others*". Various characters then express their inner dialogue to the audience, saying seemingly inconsequential things. One female passenger goes through a list of gifts in her head, saying, "I've got the doll for the baby. And the slip-on for Marietta". Another passenger thinks about his love life, saying, "Was I ever as hot and bothered about anyone like this before? Well, there was Martha. But that was different. I'd better try and read or I'll go cuckoo" (44). A doctor reads from a medical journal. A woman wishes she had a hot water bag to help her sleep on the train. All of these characters speak the inner thoughts going on in their head while the audience listens. Like he would later expand in *Our Town*, Wilder provides gravitas to the mundane, everyday events and thoughts of men and women simply by scripting these moments into the work of his plays.

The Stage Manager then interrupts the action of the play in order to give the Porter a platform in which to speak:

(The Stage Manager strides toward them with lifted hand, crying, 'Hush,' and their whispering ceases.)

THE STAGE MANAGER. That'll do! –Just one minute. Porter!

THE PORTER. *(Appearing at the left)*: Yessuh.

THE STAGE MANAGER. It's your turn to think.

(The Porter is very embarrassed.)

Don't you want to? You have a right to.

THE PORTER. *(Torn between the desire to release his thoughts and his shyness)*:

Ah...ah...I'm only thinkin' about my home in Chicago and...and my life insurance.

THE STAGE MANAGER. That's right.

THE PORTER. ...Well, thank you...thank you.

(The Porter slips away, blushing violently, in an agony of self-consciousness and pleasure.) (45-46)

The whispering of the other characters completely stops before the Stage Manager addresses the Porter. In this way, he gives focus—privilege—to the voice of the African American worker.

Up to this point in the play, the Porter has had only a few lines, all in direct response to a request from one of the passengers. For example, three times in the opening lines, he replies “Yes ma’am” to various female passengers (43). The interaction between the Stage Manager and the Porter begins this way, too. When the Stage Manager calls out to him, he appears onstage and simply says “Yessuh” as if the Stage Manager were just like any other customer (45). But the Stage Manager is not just another customer. Just like in *Our Town*, the Stage

Manager is a bridge between the play and the audience, a character with the ability to bring us into and out of the world of the play.

Whereas the other characters simply give voice to their inner thoughts, the Porter and the Stage Manager have a conversation. Wilder makes a revolutionary claim through the play, considering the time period it was written. The Stage Manager says, “It’s your turn to think” (45). At first, the Porter does not know what to do with the request. The stage directions say that he “*is very embarrassed*” (45). The length of time between the Stage Manager’s line to the Porter, requesting him to express his thoughts, and his next line of “Don’t you want to?” is entirely left up to the actors and director of a given production. But the play signifies there is at least enough of a pause here to lead the Stage Manager to follow up with the question of “Don’t you want to?” The act of providing the Porter a place from which to express his thoughts leaves him embarrassed and speechless for a time. The Stage Manager’s next line provides a significant glimpse into Wilder’s views on equality—equality that he recognizes is *not* yet in place, but *should be*. After telling the Porter that it is his turn to think, the Stage Manager says, “*You have a right to*” (italics added). The significance of this line might not be readily apparent to a contemporary audience; information about African Americans porters during this time period will help to unpack it.

During the 1920s, when *Pullman Car Hiawatha* was written, many African Americans were becoming a part of a movement for equal rights that they called the “New Negro” movement: “African Americans, defining themselves as ‘New Negroes,’ formed a social movement to put an end to their subordinate place in American democracy” (Bates 6). The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters became a symbol for that struggle towards equality. In the

1920s, the black labor activist A. Phillip Randolph was hired by the group of black porters, known as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, to help them fight for representation in their occupation. Before the union formed, they had little to no ability to speak out against unfair labor practices, including incredibly long working hours and little pay. Yet working as a sleeping car porter was considered a good job for black men at the time due to the steady income and ability to travel around the country.

In *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* professor and author Beth Tompkins Bates discusses the connection between the Pullman porters and the rights denied Black American workers during the 1920s and 1930s. She writes,

In the battle against the paternalism of the Pullman Company, the BSCP employed the legacy of slavery to depict the Pullman Company as 'callous and heartless as Nero,' treating the Pullman porter 'like a slave.' To make it's point, BSCP used the idiom of manhood rights to describe the servile relations that prevailed. 'The porter has no manhood in the eyes of the company,' according to BCSP... 'And if...he should assert his rights as a man, immediately he is branded as a rattled brain radical, and hounded and harassed out of the service.' (8-9)

So, at the time Wilder wrote *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, the porter stood as a unique symbol for the struggle of black people in the United States to obtain equal rights under the law. Wilder is acknowledging this context and, clearly, taking the side of African Americans in their struggle.

This moment with the porter is simple and brief yet starkly significant in defining Wilder's views on race relations. At the time, most white Americans had a racist mindset, through which they saw porters as second-class citizens. Porters were supposed to be rarely

seen and never heard from. They served for the pleasure of the white middle and upper class citizens who could afford to ride on an overnight Pullman car. Yet the Stage Manager calls the Porter out onto the stage, telling him “It’s your turn to think.” When the Porter hesitates, embarrassed, the Stage Manager says, “You have a right to.” Using the word “right” invokes more than just a passing moment between two characters in a play. Instead, it pointedly reveals the equality that a Porter should have in Wilder’s idealized democracy of the stage. This character has a right to share his thoughts like every other character in this play. In those places where he may have been denied those rights in the past, at least in this moment, in this play, he has a right to. A play written during the 1920s—decades before the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in America—creates the democracy that was not yet an actuality for African Americans at the time. Unaccustomed to exercising this right, the Porter is caught off guard and has to be coaxed into sharing with the audience. Yet, it is his turn. It is his *right*.

Class

In another dramatic work written in the 1920s, Wilder provides a glimpse into his views on both race and also class systems. In his short play *Bernice*, Bernice is a black maid hired to serve a man who has just gotten out of jail. Instead of relegating her to a servile role in the play, Wilder makes her the main dramatic focus as evidenced by the play’s title. The short play centers on Bernice, who has been hired as a housekeeper for the other main character, Mr. Walbeck. Mr. Walbeck’s former occupation is never revealed, but the play leads us to believe he is wealthy enough to have hired serving men and women throughout his life and even while he is in jail. Mr. Walbeck is just returning from his time in jail for fraud. The play follows the beginning stages of Mr. Walbeck and Bernice’s relationship. In the play, Wilder represents his

views of both race—similar to how he does in *Pullman Car Hiawatha*—and also issues of socioeconomic class.

In *Bernice*, Wilder not only chooses to turn the focus towards a black leading character, he also incorporates a lower class central character as the main focus of the play. There are four characters in this short play, two of which are men in their 40s and 50s. Yet the play focuses on Bernice, the 50-year-old African American maid. Even though Bernice is a complicated individual, with faults of her own, simply by creating this character, Wilder has contributed to leveling the playing field in contemporary American drama. Introducing Bernice, Wilder gives her a distinct sense of agency. She has a reputation as a qualified employee; as Mr. Mallison says, "Mrs. Willard recommended you as an experienced cook and housekeeper, Bernice" (126). Bernice responds, "I don't have to take any jobs unless I likes them, Mr. Mallison. I never agrees to work any place more than three days. Mrs. Willard don't like it, but that's my terms—if I likes it, I stays" (126). Bernice has control over whether she remains in a place of employment or not. She is the one with the power to decide if a job suits her, no one else. It must be stressed that Wilder is imagining this reality. Most African Americans at the time did not have the power to control the "terms" of their employment. Wilder creates a world where Bernice does.

Wilder later puts Bernice and her employer, Mr. Walbeck, on the same playing field as we find out that they are both criminals who have spent time in jail. Mr. Walbeck has just been released; when Bernice offers him some dinner, he refuses at first. She then replies, "Now, you don't want to eat that steak, Mr. Burgess, but I've got some tomato soup there that's the best tomato soup you ever ate. You aren't going to waste my time by refusing to eat that soup"

(130). Mr. Walbeck acquiesces to Bernice's request and agrees to dinner. But he insists that he doesn't want dinner in the dining room, as is the custom. Instead, he instructs Bernice to bring the food in with him in the sitting room, so that she can also have her dinner at the same table. Here we see an inversion and re-ordering of the social norm. Wilder depicts Bernice and Mr. Walbeck as equals. They converse and eat a meal as equals. Certainly there is a realistic depiction of who is employer and who is employed but, through the play, Wilder endows Bernice with a personal power that suggests possibilities for future political power.

As they eat their dinner, they share with each other why they spent time in prison. Bernice says, "I was in because I killed somebody." Walbeck says, "I was in because I cheated two or three hundred people out of money," to which Bernice replies, "Well, everybody's done something" (132). Bernice, a black female housekeeper, and her employer, a white upper-class male, are talking like two people who have more in common with each other than they have differences. Bernice's comment that "everybody's done something" rings significant when considering the play in relation to the rest of Wilder's oeuvre. The word "everybody" belongs the language of "we" that Wilder uses in *Our Town*. This is not an "us versus them" situation despite the differences in race and social class. It is a moment where Bernice recognizes and discusses the reality that, like Mr. Walbeck, she, too, is a part of "everybody."

Bernice makes an important revelation when she tells Mr. Walbeck that "Bernice" has not always been her name. After she left prison, she came up with an alias in order to protect her family from disgrace. She says, "Bernice Mayhew is the name I gave myself" (132). Here, again, we see her exercise authority over her own life. She gave herself a new name. No one assigned it to her and no one helped her decide what it would be. She is also the one has

decided to shield her family from her past decisions. Her decisions, specifically her action of killing someone else, have had tremendous consequences and she is willing to deal with that. So, she decided that having her family believe she is dead is better than living in disgrace.

Their conversation continues:

WALBECK. You say you changed everything about yourself?

BERNICE. Yes. Everything was changed, anyway. I was in a disgrace—nobody can be in a bigger disgrace than I was. And some people were avoiding me and some people were laughing at me and some people were being kind to me, like I was a dog that came to the back door. And some people were saying: cheer up, Sarah, you've paid your price. There's lots of things to live for. You're young yet. —

You're sure you wouldn't like a piece of that steak, Mr. Walbeck, rare or any way you'd like it?

WALBECK. No. I'm going downtown soon. If I get hungry, later, I'll pick up something to eat down there.

BERNICE. (*After a short pause, while she continues to gaze into the distance*): Did anybody come to meet you when you came out of the door of the place you was at?

WALBECK. No.

BERNICE. That's what I mean. I don't blame them. I wouldn't want to go 'round with a person who's very much in disgrace—like with a person who's killed somebody. I wouldn't choose 'em.

WALBECK. Or with a person who's stolen a lot of people's life savings.

BERNICE. I only mention that to show a big part of the change: you're alone.

WALBECK. Did that lawyer who was here, or the agency, know that you'd been in prison?

BERNICE. Oh, no. It was Sarah Temple who did that. She's dead. When I changed my name she became dead. You see the first part of my life I lived in Kansas City.

Then I came to Chicago. Bernice Mayhew has never been to Kansas City. She don't even know what it looks like. (132-133).

Part of the shared experience Bernice and Mr. Walbeck have, besides both spending time in prison, is that they are currently both alone in life. They have both been "disgraced." Mr. Walbeck has just experienced a prison sentence and comes home to learn that his wife has left the home with his children. In just a few minutes after returning home, he loses his family because of the choices he has made. He is in need of comfort, of companionship, and Wilder allows for that community to come through Bernice. They may not have their families any longer, but now they have one another for the community they both still need.

A consequence of the decisions made by Bernice and Mr. Walbeck is that each is separated from their children. Bernice has decided that the best thing for her children is to pretend that their mother no longer lives. She has come up with a new identity and lives with the fact that they believe her to be dead. Her old name is no longer; she is now Bernice. She is resolved in the fact that she will never see her children again because of the crimes she has committed. But when Mr. Walbeck suggest the possibility of being reunited with his daughter, she allows herself to imagine what life would look like if she was reunited with her own daughter. In her imaginings, she also reveals Wilder's thoughts on the class system that exists:

Maybe my daughter'd be having a good big life living with me. Maybe she's just having one of them so-so lives, living with silly people and saying jabber-jabber silly things all day...I hate people who don't know that lots of people is hungry and that lots of people has done bad things. If my daughter was with me, we'd talk...I got so many things I've *learned* that I could tell it to a girl like that...And we'd go downtown and we'd shop for her clothes together...and talk...I've got a weak heart; I shouldn't get excited. (*She looks at the floor a minute*) No, Mr. Walbeck, don't ask me to throw your daughter back into the trashy lives that most people live. (136)

For Bernice, she possesses a "hate" for people who operate in ignorance of others' needs. Those are people who live "silly" lives without much meaning. There is a correlation between those who talk about silly things all day and those who live in ignorance of the world around them. Bernice indicts the kind of people who live with little or no regard for the well-being of others. She fears that her daughter may be living that life. She is speaking directly about another class of people who seemingly have no cares in the world, but she criticizes the lives they lead and the meaningless nature of the conversations they have. The life she and her daughter would have together is highly preferable to the life her daughter might be living now.

As soon as she starts to imagine the possibility of life with her daughter, Bernice awakens to the reality that it isn't possible any longer. She says:

These are just fancies. We are a stone around their necks now! If we were with them we'd be a bigger stone. Sometimes I think death come into the world so we wouldn't be a stone around young peoples necks. Besides you and I—we are

alone. We did what we did because we were that kind of person—the kind who chooses to think they are smarter and better than other people... And people that think that way end up alone. (136-137)

Behind her philosophic attitude, one can hear grief in Bernice's voice: the loss of a loved one has bound her and her white wealthy employer together. In this monologue, we again encounter the humanistic and democratic side of Thornton Wilder. Just like Emily has a revelation after death so, too, Bernice has "died" to her old self and knows things that it wouldn't be possible to know otherwise. Bernice holds the revelation and the reality that people who live for their own selfish desires always end up alone. When you fail to recognize that humans are on an equal playing field, when you think that you are or were better than someone else, you will not be "company for anybody" (137). This is a cautionary tale, one that posits a black female servant as the holder of truth and revelation. In giving us this character, Wilder continues to people his utopian democratic theatre.

Discussing issues of class in Wilder's drama, I would be remiss not to consider one of Wilder's most well-known protagonists, the character of Sabina in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Examining Wilder's feminism in that play, I centered on Mrs. Antrobus though, certainly, I could have included Sabina: she, too, is a powerful female figure in *Skin*. However, I want to discuss Sabina in relation to Wilder's views of social class. She is the family maid but much more than that. She is the first named character that the audience encounters in the play and she speaks the last words as well. Sabina starts off the action of the play following the announcer's opening monologue, saying, "Oh, oh, oh! 6 o'clock and the master not home yet. Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River. If anything happened to him,

we would certainly be inconsolable and have to move into a less desirable residence district" (7-8). In Sabina's first lines, the play depicts dependence on the patriarch of the family. She is waiting for the "master" of the house.

She continues, "Every night this same anxiety as to whether the master will get home safely: whether he'll bring home anything to eat" (8). While Sabina is dependent on her master in the world of the play, Wilder, as he so often does, takes the audience outside the play as well. One story is told through the dramatic action while another is told outside of that framework. Like the Stage Manager in *Our Town* and Pullman Car *Hiawatha*, Sabina serves as a bridge between the play and its audience. When the rest of the characters fail to make their entrance, Sabina steps out of the world of the play and addresses the audience directly: "I can't invent any words for this play, and I'm glad I can't. I hate this play and every word in it. As for me, I don't understand a single word of it, anyway,—all about the troubles the human race has gone through, there's a subject for you" (10-11). Addressing the audience in this way, Sabina shows herself to be a dominant figure who can step in and out of the dramatic action and shape the message portrayed to the audience. Note that the message is critique: Sabina gives audience members permission to criticize the work from a position within it. Also, the timing of her interruption is important. She directly addresses the audience right after she has discussed waiting on the master to get home, saying that she hates the play and every word in it. Sabina criticizes the play moments after she has communicated her subservience to a "master".

I also want to highlight the consistency of her presence throughout the play. Sabina is involved in the action of the "play"—the dramatic story being told about the Antrobus family—and the "play" with the audience—the actor and audience interaction provided by Wilder. By

giving Sabina such a prominent role, Wilder constructs a conversation between opposing points of view. Sabina is a servant to the family Antrobus and, at the same time, through her relationship to the audience, a master of the play. Giving Sabina this position of power and continuity, Wilder opens up the possibility of a new utopian feminist and social reality. Sabina is in every act, and begins and ends the play. She is an adaptable character, portraying the maid, the beauty queen in Act II, and then the maid again in Act III. Most significantly, however, she always is there. Sabina is just as much a part of the Antrobus family as father, mother, and children. She survives the events as they do: the Ice Age, the great flood, the war. In the final lines of the play, she becomes a voice of reason and revelation:

SABINA. Oh, oh, oh. 6 o'clock in the master not home yet. Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River. But I wouldn't be surprised. The whole world at sixes and sevens, and why the house hasn't fallen down about our ears long ago is a miracle to me.

She comes down to the footlights.

This is where you came in. We have to go on for ages and ages yet.

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: goodnight. (121)

Note Sabina's use of "our" to describe the "house" in which she, the other characters, and the audience are located. Here, again, we see the language of "we" that Wilder used in *Our Town*. The play is named *The Skin of Our Teeth* because it tells a story of survival in which everyone

shares. This is her story. This is the Antrobus story. This is “our” story, a human story of crisis, adaptation, and survival. Yet the end of the story is not yet written. There is a great sense of potential and possibility in all of Wilder’s writing, but none so obvious as the conclusion of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. We have the ability to author the end of our story. We have the ability to continue to grow and change and adapt to new ways of thinking and new ways of relating to one another. She also says that the Antrobuses are “as confident as the first day they began.” Despite the trials they have faced—the Ice Age, world war, a great flood, family struggles and questions about whether or not they will survive, they still have hope that gives them confidence, as much as they have always had. Once again, Sabina participates in the “play” but resides outside of it, able to comment on the whole of the human race as it is represented by the Antrobus family. While she remains a servant to the Antrobus family in the context of the “play”, the reality that Wilder provides is that she holds the greatest revelation and agency in the work by her ability to observe, discuss, and dialogue about the story just like the audience does.

War

Finally, finishing with another look at *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder provides a new metaphor for the way we think about war and the legitimacy of fighting for democratic ideals. He constructs a dialogue between family members that serves as a direct model for how people might diplomatically solve problems on a global scale. It concerns the character of Henry in Act III. I want to break down the action that occurs after Henry has returned home in this act, as it gives insight into the problems and possible solutions that Wilder sees in dealing with the effects of war on humanity. When investigating the final act of *Skin*, and specifically looking at

it's portrayal of war, we see the complicated nature of Wilder's relationship to it. Wilder never desired for war to be the solution to our global problems; the foremost method of resolving conflict comes through dialogue, discussion and peaceful resolution between people. He saw it as part of his duty to use literature and theatre to encourage that resolution, yet he recognized the need for active and sometimes violent defense of democratic ideals. When life, liberty and personal freedoms are threatened by a government or individual, those rights are worth fighting for. While war was never the solution Wilder desired, he knew that global conflict, at times, left no other option.

In the final act of *Skin*, the war is over and Henry has returned home, but he is entirely changed. He doesn't believe it to be his home anymore and he is disagreeable in conversation. Sabina starts to get at the source of his discontent:

SABINA. Gracious sakes, Henry, you're so tired you can't stand up. Your mother and sister'll be here in a minute and we'll think what to do about you.

HENRY. What did they ever care about me?

SABINA. There's that old whine again. All you people think you're not loved enough, nobody loves you. Well, you start being lovable and we'll love you.

HENRY. *Outraged*. I don't want anybody to love me.

SABINA. Then stop talking about it all the time.

HENRY. I never talk about it. The last thing I want is anybody to pay any attention to me.

SABINA. I can hear it behind every word you say.

HENRY. I want everybody to hate me.

SABINA. Yes, you've decided that's second best, but it's still the same thing...

(104-105)

As we have seen, death and grief serve as unifying human experiences in Wilder's plays. Here we see another experience of the same kind: the desire for love. Sabina recognizes Henry's desire to be loved. Yet she also states that he has a duty to be loveable. Once he acts in that way, the family will love him in turn. There is a stark simplicity in her words, a clear directive for Henry to change the ways he behaves in order to deserve the love he so desperately seeks. Even though he denies knowing that he is loved, Sabina says "I can hear it behind every word you say" (105). She also says that it is "all you people" who desire to be loved. Taken literally, this phrase refers to everyone in the audience. All people, not just Henry, desire to know that they are loved and have the agency to behave worthy of being loved. Sabina communicates the idea that people deserve to be treated well, to be loved, when they act "loveable." There is a responsibility on each individual man or woman to act worthy of love; it is not something that comes with no responsibility in return.

Henry has just returned from war and is a changed man. Sabina recognizes that his desire to have "everybody" hate him is the "same thing" as wanting everyone to love him. She is talking about a psychologically complicated idea here; the reality that when someone does not receive the love that he deserves, the second best option is that he wants everyone to hate him. He wants attention, wants to be loved; since that does not seem possible, he settles for what is second best. Sabina, says that "Yes, you've decided that's second best, but it's still the same thing." Trauma, as Henry has experienced in war, can so warp one's ideas about love and

hate that they seem interchangeable, yet what looks like the desire for hate is actually a desire to be loved just like everybody else.

In the next part of the scene, Mr. Antrobus returns home and Henry has fallen asleep. Henry tosses and turns in his sleep, furiously reliving moments in the war. As he is sleeping, he says:

HENRY. All right! What have you got to lose? What have they done for us? That's right—nothing. Tear everything down. I don't care what you smash. We'll begin again and we'll show 'em.

ANTROBUS takes out his revolver and holds it pointing downwards. With his back toward the audience he moves towards the footlights.

HENRY's voice grows louder and he wakes with a start. They stare at one another. Then HENRY sits up quickly. Throughout the following scene HENRY is played, not as a misunderstood or misguided young man, but as a representation of strong unreconciled evil.

All right! Do something.

Pause.

Don't think I'm afraid of you, either. All right, do what you were going to do. Do it.

Furiously.

Shoot me, I tell you. You don't have to think I'm any relation of yours. I haven't got any father or any mother, or brothers or sisters. And I don't want any. And

what's more I haven't got anybody over me; and I never will have. I'm alone, and that's all I want to be: alone. So you can shoot me.

ANTROBUS. You're the last person I wanted to see. 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 peacetime with you in the middle of it.

ANTROBUS walks up to the window.

HENRY. I'm not going to be a part of any peacetime of yours. 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 own way.

The scene, showing the contentious reunion between father and son, begins with Henry expressing his experience and mindset in his sleep. Henry is suffering from his experience with war. He still carries it with him, even in his sleep. He carries trauma, hate, and the “evil” of war. He experiences post-traumatic stress both consciously and unconsciously. Wilder directly portrays the consequences of war and the ways in which Henry has started to believe that everything must be destroyed. He says, "Tear everything down. I don't care what you smash. Will begin again and will show 'em" (109). When coupling these lines with the play's directive that Henry should be played "*not as a misunderstood or misguided young man, but as a representation of strong unreconciled evil*," Wilder reveals his thoughts that war produces horrifying results. It doesn't just cause confusion or misunderstanding between people; it produces manifestations of evil as we see in Henry. He is the enemy and, to those who are

fighting in a war, the enemy is a type of unreconciled evil. While Wilder calls for this moment to be played by Henry as “unreconciled evil,” Wilder does not let us conclude that the evil of post traumatic stress will be unreconciled. He eventually provides an outlet for healing and reconciliation as the scene continues and is resolved.

Mr. Antrobus addresses Henry as if he were an enemy, saying, "You're the last person I want to see... I wish I were back at war still, because it's easier to fight you than to live with you... War's a pleasure compared to what faces us now: trying to build up a peacetime with you in the middle of it" (110). While at war, it is easy to identify and try to erase an enemy. It is much more difficult to try to live with one's enemy. Mr. Antrobus wishes that the war was still going on so that he could fight Henry as opposed to trying to resolve their relationship and build peace. The more difficult work is in front of them.

Henry then reveals a desire that changes his father's outlook on their relationship. He says that he is "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 own way" (110). Something in Henry's response drastically changes Mr. Antrobus's outlook on the situation:

ANTROBUS.

His attention arrested; thoughtfully. He throws the gun out of the window and turns with hope.

...Henry, let's try again.

Here, Wilder shows the deep human desire to "have a chance" to live in the way he or she wants to live. When Henry has expressed this desire, his father "throws the gun out of the

window and turns with hope," then suggests, "Henry, let's try again." Mr. Antrobus hears his son's desire to be known, to be free, and to live life freely. When he hears Henry express that desire, it not only changes how he relates to his son, it also causes him to completely discard the weapon he was about to use to kill him. Henry's comment reveals something that allows father to understand son in a different way, to realize that they can relate as human beings. It's simply that Henry's views have been so distorted by war, his desires so misdirected, that he feels alienated and separate. But his father recognizes the humanness of those desires. He recognizes the connection that he has with his son, the similarity of desire, perhaps even knowing that Henry is settling for "second best" in wanting everyone to hate him, when really what he wants is to be loved. Henry responds to his father's request to "try again":

HENRY. Try what? Living here?—Speaking polite downtown to all the old men like you? Standing like a sheep at the street corner until the red light turns to green? Being a good boy and a good sheep like all the stinking ideas you get out of your books? Oh, no. I'll make a world, and I'll show you.

ANTROBUS.

Hard.

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. (109-111).

In Mr. Antrobus's response, Wilder reveals much about his views on global politics. He does not sugarcoat the fact that people have the capability to deny the rights of others. In those situations, they deserve to be fought. They have mixed up their "idea of liberty" with an "idea of hogging everything for yourself." Being free, in Wilder's world, does not mean having everything for oneself. When that ideology is adopted, as it was by Nazi Germany during the writing of the play, those enemies must be dealt with. Antrobus says "you and I want the same thing; but until you think of it as something that everyone has right to, you are my deadly enemy and I will destroy you" (111). Everyone has a right to be free. Every human—no matter where they come from, no matter what their background is, no matter their experiences in life—deserves the same freedoms. We all deserve the same rights. When those rights or denied to every human being, it is the responsibility of others to fight to promote a different more equal and democratic ideology.

Mr. Antrobus then tells Henry that he must behave himself when his mother returns. Henry, continuing his defiant tone and denying that he is a part of this family anymore, argues that nobody has the right to tell him what to do. The scene escalates to a point of physical altercation between Mr. Antrobus and Henry. Henry lunges for his father, and Sabina interrupts the scene, disrupting the entire action of the play itself; the moment that follows is one that provides deep insight into Thornton Wilder's politics in ways that I will discuss in my conclusion.

Thornton Wilder continued to work out his own democratic ideologies through his drama, most explicitly seen in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, written at a time—as World War II was

happening—when it might be easiest to lose faith in the human spirit. Yet the resolve and belief he had in humankind dominates his plays and by providing characters like Bernice, Sabina, the Porter, and Henry, Wilder creates a more democratic reality through his drama. The democratic thoughts he expressed later in life provide insight into the ways his plays reflected those ideals earlier in his writing career. He asks the question and imagines the answers of what might life be like if things were just a bit better, if people treated each other with more respect and as equals, and he believed in the human ability to continue to pursue and promote those ideals.

Producing Wilder's Democracy

Lastly, I want to briefly discuss how Wilder's dramatic works have provided a canvas for democracy to be performed in and through more recent production of his plays. In this chapter, I have made note of some of the democratic ideals that his drama intentionally promotes and how he specifically addresses certain societal inequalities through his plays' dramatic action. Yet, another facet of Wilder's theatrical work is the ways it has continued to open up space, again and again, for a democracy of theatrical representation to be born through non-traditional or reimagined versions of his oft-produced plays. There is something about Wilder's work that invites new ways of telling these stories—productions that demonstrate many of the democratic qualities of dialogue, cooperation and human connection that Wilder so valued. In discussing Wilder's cosmopolitanism, I discussed my firsthand experience of directing *Our Town* and the ways it asks for some of those democratic ideals to be displayed. I specifically want to look at two other productions involving *Our Town* that exemplify the expansive view of whose town the "our" really refers to. In the recent production of the play at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC, and a production of *Our Town: China/USA* at City University in Hong Kong,

Wilder's work demonstrates how it can literally stretch across global expanses and encourages a democracy *through* production. The play does not relegate itself to a particular setting or type of storytelling; it allows and encourages diverse ways of presenting this story to its audience.

In the 2013 production at Washington DC's Ford's Theatre, the production of *Our Town* embodied the play's potential for expanding our notions of the inhabitants' race in "our" town. Instead of using a cast of white actors, which would have been a fairly accurate portrayal of a town when setting it in turn-of-the-century small-town New England, the production cast actors of multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds as the citizens of Grover's Corners. The director, Stephen Rayne, "reimagines the Gibbsses and Webbs as interracial families, which reminds you that *Our Town* is about humankind, and not any one kind of human" (Marks). In doing so, the production contributes to establishing a new democratic reality by performing the very democracy Wilder desired. *Our Town* is not an exclusive place where the melting pot nature of contemporary America is denied; instead, the play welcomes an interpretation that signifies and acknowledges the wide range of diverse backgrounds in the United States.

In the production, Rayne says, "The cast is about 70 percent non-Caucasian" (Walker), which includes Asian-American, Black, Caucasian, Pacific Islander and Latino-American actors. Rayne says, "I welcomed the diversity and cultural backgrounds all the actors have brought to the project. I think it gives a much richer representation of America today" (Walker). As I have previously mentioned, the production included Portia, an African-American actress, as the Stage Manager. "In 1938, the stage manager probably would have been a 60 year-old white man in a suit...I wanted to reflect what would be correct today" (Walker). I would argue that this reflection of contemporary America is something that is not just a directorial choice for this

specific production of *Our Town*, but a reality of the play itself as it exhibits and argues for the equitable, cosmopolitan, democratic reality that Wilder was hoping for throughout his life and career. The play itself offers a blank canvas that directors, producers, actors and audiences can paint a diverse, complex and borderless story on. It allows for, and even invites, productions of multiple racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic and political backgrounds. The recent production at Ford's Theatre will, in my estimation, be one of many productions in the near and distant future that take the freedom the play provides and perform democracy.

In 2011, the City University of Hong Kong produced *Our Town: China/USA*. In the production, director Alvin Eng used the play as direct inspiration for writing and performing a play telling the background stories of its Chinese actors, showed how the citizens of "our town" include people of varying international backgrounds, not just Americans. Alvin Eng, a Chinese-American playwright and creative writing professor at Fordham University, directed the production. Students read the play and responded directly to it, coming up with their own play based on the time capsule idea communicated in *Our Town*. Eng says of the production:

The next step was to transform their "Time Capsule" objects, as well as the spirit of Grover's Corners 1938, into foundations for plays about Hong Kong 2011. In bringing the omniscient Stage Manager back to China, the students transposed him into a Mongkok street magician/trickster. Teenagers Emily and George became Lan Kwai Fong buskers and siblings in the historic Po Leung Kok orphanage...

Beyond the classroom it was also fascinating to see American and Hong Kong culture co-existing...Such good-natured cultural camaraderie was in stark contrast to chilly relations between the U.S. and China during my 1970s childhood. My parents

were illegal immigrants from the southern Chinese village of Toishan...I grew up standing in the shadows of the Cold War. (Eng 23)

In transposing *Our Town* into 21st century Hong Kong, the play again demonstrates its ability to cross expansive cultural divides. Where division between “East” and “West” might exist, *Our Town* serves as a bridge towards cultural and theatrical understanding. As Eng notes here, the play, in fact, provides a stark contrast to the fear associated with China during the Cold War.

Eng concludes his discussion of the production, describing how audiences cheered the students’ dramatic work and how astounding he found the connections between Wilder’s play and his experience directing at City University. He says:

We are cheering and crying for the CityU students, and for the timeless, borderless power of theatre in general and *Our Town* in particular.

To convene the souls and spirits in one’s heart and imagination with the souls and spirits in the audience is the most important goal of theatre. Perhaps no other American or even English language play convenes all of the souls and spirits in the theatre like *Our Town*. (24)

This convening of souls and spirits is something that the play does without discrimination; Eng recognizes the “borderless power” of *Our Town* which can affect and speak to citizens in China in the same ways that it has spoken to American theatre-goers for decades. Eng had a heightened interest in Wilder because of the influence of Chinese dramatic forms on his work, but more significant was his connection to the themes, ideas, joys, and struggles expressed in exploring daily life in Grover’s Corners. Wilder’s play transcends and travels across political boundaries, allowing for a dialogue to occur between seemingly disparate people groups. In

doing so, it communicates the power of theatre to not only speak to differing populations of people, but to bring them together through the communal act of theatre-making. Grover's Corners can be populated by people of differing cultural, ethnic, political, social or economic backgrounds. By bringing such diverse people together, *Our Town* performs the democratic values Wilder promoted in his life.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Thornton Wilder believed in humanity. It was the center of his politics, his ideologies, and his philosophy of life. He believed that human beings have the ability and the power to change themselves, to change the circumstances around them, and to change the world for the better. His brand of humanism is remarkable considering the time in which he grew up and lived. He experienced World War I as a teenager and World War II as a man in his forties. He lived through the Depression, McCarthyism, and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the United States. He knew Nazi Germany as a serviceman fighting in World War II, was separated from his family for most of his growing up, and helped to take care of his mother and siblings after his father passed away. Despite such difficult experiences, Wilder maintained a belief in humankind. He believed that men and women have the capacity to take care of those around them and to build a community through dialogue, mutual respect, and equal treatment. When I say that Thornton Wilder believed in democracy, I mean that he believed in the ideals of democracy, not the ways in which he knew that we fell short of those ideals. And he believed that we all can keep aspiring towards those ideals.

While serving during World War II, he experienced the ability of humanity to put differences aside and come together for a greater good. He writes,

It seems to come from a powerful sense of community responsibility, the responsibility of each individual to his neighbor. Each one conceals his or her own trepidation or concern in order to protect the welfare of the group. For example, during those nineteen successive nights when the greater part of the population of London took

shelter underground...They are people who could easily have gone into the safer provinces but they chose to remain where they were to show that they could suffer these things shoulder to shoulder with the whole city's population (Stout 38).

Seeing this type of human community reinforced Wilder's opinion that we have the ability to progress forward. We can help those next to us. We have a responsibility towards our neighbors and we can achieve greater understanding towards one another when we find common ground.

The ideals to which Wilder aspired are manifest in the final scene of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, one I partly discussed in the previous chapter. Mr. Antrobus and Henry are continuing their conversation about Henry's desire to keep everything for himself and Mr. Antrobus's willingness to fight against that mindset. The two men eventually begin a physical altercation. Sabina, as she has done throughout the play, stops the action in order to comment on what is going on. I want to provide the entire scene and then discuss how it offers a snapshot of Wilder's politics.

SABINA. Stop! Stop! Don't play this scene. You know what happened last night. Stop the play.

The men fall back, panting. HENRY covers his face with his hands.

Last night you almost strangled him. You became a regular savage. Stop it!

HENRY. It's true. I'm sorry. I don't know what comes over me. I have nothing against him personally. I respect him very much...I...I admire him. But something comes over me. It's like I become fifteen years old again. I...I...listen: my own father used to whip me and lock me up every Saturday night. I never had enough

to eat. He never let me have enough money to buy decent clothes. I was ashamed to go downtown. I never could go to the dances. My father and my uncle put rules in the way of everything I wanted to do. They tried to prevent my living at all.—I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

MRS. ANTROBUS.

Quickly.

No, go on. Finish what you were saying. Say it all.

HENRY. In this scene it's as though I were back in High School again. It's like I had some big emptiness inside me,—the emptiness of being hated and blocked at every turn. And the emptiness fills up with the one thought that you have to strike and fight and kill. Listen, it's as though you have to kill somebody else so as not to end up killing yourself

SABINA. That's not true. I knew your father and your uncle and your mother. You imagined all that. Why, they did everything they could for you. How can you say things like that? They didn't lock you up.

HENRY. They did. They did. They wished I hadn't been born.

SABINA. That's not true.

ANTROBUS.

In his own person, with self-condemnation, but cold and proud.

Wait a minute. I have something to say, too. It's not wholly his fault that he wants to strangle me in this scene. It's my fault, too. He wouldn't feel that way unless there were something in me that reminded him of all that. He talks about

an emptiness. Well, there's an emptiness in me, too. Yes,—work, work, work,—that's all I do. I've ceased to live. No wonder he feels that anger coming over him.

MRS. ANTROBUS. There! At least you've said it.

SABINA. We're all just as wicked as we can be, and that's the God truth.

The first significant moment in this scene occurs when the actress *playing* Sabina interrupts a physical altercation between the actor *playing* Henry and the actor *playing* Mr. Antrobus. She says:

SABINA. Stop! Stop! Don't play this scene. You know what happened last night.

Stop the play.

The men fall back, panting. HENRY covers his face with his hands.

When she exclaims, "Don't play this scene," she starts a conversation between the actors portraying the roles of Henry and Mr. Antrobus. By taking us outside the play, Wilder brings specific attention to the conversation the audience is about to encounter. The actor playing Sabina also reveals that the violence in the scene has escalated to a new level with each performance. She says:

Last night you almost strangled him. You became a regular savage. Stop it!

HENRY. It's true. I'm sorry. I don't know what comes over me. I have nothing against him personally. I respect him very much...I...I admire him. But something comes over me. It's like I become fifteen years old again. I...I...listen: my own father used to whip me and lock me up every Saturday night. I never had enough to eat. He never let me have enough money to buy decent clothes. I was

ashamed to go downtown. I never could go to the dances. My father and my uncle put rules in the way of everything I wanted to do. They tried to prevent my living at all.—I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

MRS. ANTROBUS.

Quickly.

No, go on. Finish what you were saying. Say it all.

Here Wilder provides one of his most optimistic moments in suggesting that what we thought was “unreconciled evil” can be explained with reference to psychological trauma. The actor refers to experiencing bullying as a teenager that has affected his outlook on life and the ways he relates to other people. We have stepped outside of the play in order to conduct psychotherapy for the actor.

Once again it is the character of Mrs. Antrobus, this time the actress playing Mrs. Antrobus, that holds the keys to understanding in the play, a key to greater human understanding as evidenced by what occurs in the following moments. Dialogue becomes a catalyst of resolve. She implores the actor playing Henry to, “Finish what you were saying. *Say it all*” (Italics added, 113). She gives him permission and a platform to share his experience with the other characters but also with the audience. They have stepped out of the “fiction” of the play and are addressing each other as human beings. They appear no longer to be playing characters in a fiction. They present as human beings relating simply and honestly to one another, as equals.

Mrs. Antrobus's line also signifies another important characteristic of Wilder's politics—the ability and openness to hearing the whole of another's perspective. She tells the actor

playing Henry to “Say it all.” He has the stage to share whatever he wants and to hold nothing back. This is not a conversation where he will be interrupted before he has finished telling his side of the story. True understanding and empathy achieve their greatest potential when people are given the opportunity to describe strong feelings and pain. The actor playing Henry is provided just such an opportunity here.

In the remaining conversation between the actors in the play, Wilder reiterates the solution to the problem of human misunderstanding. I say “actors” specifically because they are still playing the scene as it is written in *Skin*, but Wilder has taken us out of the story into a metatheatrical space. What might have developed into an act of violence, possibly severe or fatal violence, is literally stopped by the play itself. Here Wilder has scripted a moment of peace *through* theater. The actress playing Sabina has stopped the violence with her dialogue. And it is this dialogue that becomes the solution. Even though the audience still encounters actors playing roles set out for them, they are no longer playing the fictional family roles that we have seen up to this point. They are, supposedly, playing themselves. The actor playing Henry continues to describe the bullying that he experienced as a youth:

HENRY. In this scene it's as though I were back in High School again. It's like I had some big emptiness inside me,—the emptiness of being hated and blocked at every turn. And the emptiness fills up with the one thought that you have to strike and fight and kill. Listen, it's as though you have to kill somebody else so as not to end up killing yourself.

SABINA. That's not true. I knew your father and your uncle and your mother. You imagined all that. Why, they did everything they could for you. How can you say things like that? They didn't lock you up.

HENRY: They did. They did. They wished I hadn't been born.

SABINA: That's not true.

Here, the actress playing Sabina continues her role as questioner, mediator, and constructive critic. While her statement seems to invalidate his claims, she pushes him to consider his perspective and his truth. An important component of Wilder's democracy is self-reflection, the ability to step outside of oneself. The actress playing Sabina is an agent of reflection here. Wilder's democracy allows for skepticism, for challenging the assertions that people make. But it also allows us to continue misunderstanding one another; quite possibly, the actress playing Sabina will never fully understand his experience because of her own truth and perspective. Still, the path towards understanding one another involves engaging each other's perspective and and listening to one other.

We see the actor playing Antrobus do this in the following moments. He says:

ANTROBUS.

In his own person, with self-condemnation, but cold and proud.

Wait a minute. I have something to say, too. It's not wholly his fault that he wants to strangle me in this scene. It's my fault, too. He wouldn't feel that way unless there were something in me that reminded him of all that. He talks about an emptiness. Well, there's an emptiness in me, too. Yes,—work, work, work,—

that's all I do. I've ceased to live. No wonder he feels that anger coming over him.

MRS. ANTROBUS. There! At least you've said it.

SABINA. We're all just as wicked as we can be, and that's the God truth.

The actor playing Mr. Antrobus is empathetic to the actor playing Henry. He recognizes, "It's my fault too. He wouldn't feel that way unless there were something in me that reminded him of all that. He talks about an emptiness. Well, there's any emptiness in me, too. Yes,—work, work, work,—that's all I do. I've ceased to live. No wonder he feels that anger coming over him" (113). When the actor playing Mr. Antrobus hears the actor's real story, he understands more about where he comes from and he can relate. He recognizes the fact that they are not so different. The same "emptiness" that Henry talks about is an emptiness that he feels as well. And one might wonder, an emptiness that Thornton Wilder knew all too well. His constant search for community and family often left him lonely and isolated, and he hints at the ways these characters feel the same. This metatheatrical moment comments on the play yet continues to relate it to the audience and actor's real life experience.

The dialogue that has opened up between these characters as encouraged by the actress playing Mrs. Antrobus leads to resolution. Henry does not tell just part of his story; he is not cut off by others' ideas about who he is (although Sabina risks doing so with her response). He is provided the platform to "Say it all." Wilder suggests that when that occurs, when someone truly is heard and understood and related to on a human level, then people can find resolutions that they might not have thought possible. Indeed, the actor playing Henry says, "Thanks. Thanks for what you said. I'll be all right tomorrow. I won't lose control in that place. I

promise" (114). Because he now feels heard and understood on a deeper level and because he has heard the actor playing Antrobus describe the ways in which they feel similar, he promises no longer to lash out in violence. The play shows Mr. Antrobus surrendering his weapon as he starts to understand Henry better; in the metatheatrical space of the stage, the actor playing Henry also promises not to "lose control in that place. I promise." A moment of truly participatory democracy where dialogue is promoted and voices are heard leads to understanding, then to resolution in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. And here, the play serves as a model for the ways we might continue to find resolution on a larger political and social scale.

The metatheatrical nature of the healing that takes place at this point in *Skin* highlights the fact that, for Wilder, the theatre is a utopian space where democratic ideals can be realized and promoted. This is an idea that theorists like Jill Dolan would take up decades later, but one that he investigates and promotes throughout his writing career. The actors playing these roles are able to find a common ground—their "emptiness" inside—that facilitates empathetic engagement with and understanding for one another. The actor playing Henry goes through a healing process through an act of theatre and an act of dialogue that knits him into a community, repairing a brokenness that had been leading to violence. Healing can occur, literally and figuratively, through the act of theatre making. Theatre can stop the process of violence and reveal the humanity behind the character. When we see the actual people behind our conception of them, we have potential for peace, resolution, and living together in a new way.

Wilder repeatedly referred to the theatre as the greatest of all art forms. In the theatre, he found an avenue for imagining and "rehearsing" democracy. He scripted worlds where

women were equal to men. He believed in a shared human experience that was part of the cosmopolitan reality in which we reside. And he promoted a democratic ideal through his theatre. He knew the potential of theatre to provide a common shared experience where we examine the ways we both are alike and different and how to reach common ground. If we have ever wondered about the ability of art to provide a democratizing force in contemporary society, we can simply look up any recent live performance, be it a vocal performance, dance, theatre, or the like, and take a look at the audience's experience of that performance. In my experience enjoying a performance with others, people pay little attention to the social and political differences between them. Theatre became the main focus of Wilder's career because of that fact; the reality that a group could become a community through the theatrical event.

His brother, Amos, puts it this way:

In his best-known plays and in much of his fiction he appears to speak for a grass-roots American experience which they may look on as banal, insipid, or moralistic. But what if his 'notation of the heart' is, indeed, that of Mr. And Mrs. Antrobus, that is, Everyman? And what if his inquisition goes beneath the sentiment of Grover's Corners or the Philistinism of Coaltown, Illinois, to some deeper human marrow?

It is a question of the anonymous millions in our streets and countryside, and of finding a register and a language for their potential. (A Wilder 27)

Thornton Wilder spent his career searching for ways to connect to that "deeper human marrow". He sought out new ways of thinking about and representing the "anonymous millions in our streets and countryside." Through theatre, he connected and continues to connect us in

our common humanity. Wilder's politics subtly, yet profoundly, suggested that men and woman are equal, that we have a shared humanity with everyone else who inhabits this earth, and that areas of difference should not be used to reinforce a lie that one person is more valuable than the next. If we can connect to those around us on a deeper, more personal level, we might just create that better reality that we all know is possible. Interpersonal connections might enable us to achieve our greatest potential. Opening eyes to that possibility, in the world in which we find ourselves, may be Wilder's greatest gift.

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