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THE UNIVERSALITY OF
THORNTON WILDER'S OUR TOWN

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ABSTRACT

Every piece of art--whether it be literature, music, painting, or sculpture--may be said to be an attempt by its creator to "say" something to as many people as possible. Thornton Wilder's Our Town achieved that universality through a careful selection of procedures and devices which the author used in writing the play. A close study of the play itself reveals those methods. In addition, various essays, interviews, and production notes by Wilder reveal his theories of playwriting and his ideas of play production. In fact, a study of these selections suggests that, for Thornton Wilder, the writing of Our Town was inevitable. Many reviews of the play appeared in 1938 when the play was first performed, and in subsequent years when the play made successful comebacks, most notably in 1959. Most of these reviews attest to the success of Wilder's attempt at universalizing the idea that human beings should try to realize life every minute they live it.

This study discusses and cites examples of the procedures and devices used by Wilder in writing Our Town. He attained universal appeal through utilization of brief, commonplace scenes; repetition of incidents and phrases; a stage which allows freedom in time and place; and underdeveloped characters revolving about the Stage Manager, who exists independently of time, and ties the whole together.

If a theater-goer were to describe what he saw at a performance of Thornton Wilder's Our Town, the description might sound too ordinary to evoke interest. Upon entering, the audience sees a curtainless, dimly lighted, empty stage. When the play is to begin, the Stage Manager strolls on, sets some chairs and tables in place, and begins addressing the audience. He describes Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, as it is in May of 1901. Interwoven into the history, geography, and social status of the town are short scenes involving the Gibbs and Webb families and various townspeople along the street--the milkman, the paper boy, the constable. By the end of the first act, a blossoming romance between George Gibbs and Emily Webb has been glimpsed. Their marriage, three years later, is the highlight of Act II after a flashback to the scene which reveals their serious love for each other. The third act begins with a long speech by the Stage Manager in which he discloses that the scene is in the Grover's Corners cemetery, where now, nine years later, several of the Grover's Corners citizens rest. A funeral procession brings Emily to join the dead. Allowed to re-live her twelfth birthday, she realizes that people fail to appreciate life while they live it, and then returns to the dead.

The playgoer has viewed a series of somewhat related events during twelve years' time in Grover's Corners, although few people were strongly identified and no "plot" was developed. Thornton Wilder himself has said that Our Town at first glance appears to be a "genre study of a village in New Hampshire."¹ However, in the

preface to Three Plays published in 1958, the author made clear his purpose for Our Town, saying it "is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life."² Not until the final act does someone in the play put this idea into words. Soon after Emily joins the dead, she sees not herself but the live people as "shut up in little boxes" and "in the dark."³ When she goes back to her twelfth birthday, she exclaims enthusiastically about things she had forgotten; Mr. Morgan's drugstore, the white fence around the Webb home, her mother's youthful looks. Then comes the morning rush of breakfast, her father's return from out-of-town, and the opening of gifts. Emily realizes that "we don't have time to look at one another" (III, 83). Saying goodbye to the world, Grover's Corners, her parents, clocks ticking, and hot baths, she admits, "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed!" (III, 83). Returning to the dead, Emily concludes that human beings are "just blind people" who "don't understand" (III, 84,85). Those words are Wilder's final plea that the audience value "the smallest events in our daily life." The "our" suggests each life, all lives--not just Emily's. Such universality, Wilder felt, could not be attained if he were to employ what are regarded as conventional theater methods. Thus, while retaining costuming and a few sound effects, Wilder abandoned a box set, an involved plot, and highly developed characters. He sought universality through the utilization of brief, commonplace scenes, repetition of incidents

and phrases, a stage which allows freedom in time and place, and, most important, underdeveloped characters revolving about the Stage Manager, who exists independently of time, and ties the whole together. A closer study of each of these four aspects will reveal the skill which Wilder employed to achieve his purpose.

The three acts of Our Town can be divided into ten scenes, four in the first act, and three in each of the second and third acts. Ordinarily, both plot and characters could be developed easily in ten scenes. However, Wilder has divided each of the scenes into mini-scenes, conversational little occurrences which develop into nothing sensational or unique. The conversations and occurrences are common to everyone. Here, Wilder finds universality, but he also finds a uniqueness which he explains in the preface to Three Plays: "Every action which has ever taken place--every thought, every emotion--has taken place only once, at one moment in time and place. 'I love you,' 'I rejoice,' 'I suffer,' have been said and felt many billions of times, and never twice the same."⁴ Because each of those billions of times is an individual occurrence, Wilder concludes that "every person who has ever lived has lived an unbroken succession of unique occasions."⁵ These occasions, then, take on a special charm, for "the more one is aware of this individuality in experience (innumerable! innumerable!) the more one becomes attentive to what these disparate moments have in common, to repetitive patterns."⁶ Thus, the scenes in Our Town consist not "of the isolated occasion," but "that which includes and resumes the innumerable."⁷

In Act I, as the Stage Manager introduces the town, Dr. Gibbs comes down Main Street and his wife enters the scene as if she is coming downstairs into the kitchen to make breakfast. Mrs. Webb also enters her kitchen. As they pantomime breakfast preparations, Dr. Gibbs converses with Joe Crowell, the boy who delivers Editor Webb's Sentinel, and Howie Newsome, the milkman. Both conversations cover everyday concerns: the condition of Joe's knee and the weather. Then Dr. Gibbs enters his home and talks to his wife, again about everyday concerns: the doctor's loss of sleep and son George's disinclination toward work. George and Rebecca Gibbs come down for breakfast, as do Emily and Wally Webb. The brief conversations deal with school attire and spending money. After the children leave for school, the two mothers chat as they string beans. Theirs is the longest conversation thus far, but it, too, deals with everyday concerns: their health, canning, a furniture buyer, and their husbands' hobbies.

In the second scene the Stage Manager, better acquainting us with Grover's Corners, elicits scientific information from a college professor and sociological information from Editor Webb. Questions by three people in the audience prompt the Stage Manager and Mr. Webb to provide additional information, including the cultural tastes of the people in Grover's Corners. The short third scene begins with a brief exchange between Emily and her father. Then George appears and asks Emily for help with his algebra. Following that, Emily talks to her mother about her school successes and her own

prettiness.

The Stage Manager's interlude introduces the fourth scene in Act I. This scene, I think, shows a special quality, for it simultaneously involves people in three separate areas. Simon Stimson is rehearsing his church choir, Dr. Gibbs sits at home reading, and George and Emily are upstairs in their respective homes (standing on step ladders) working on their algebra. While the choir sings, we listen first to George and Emily, and later to Dr. Gibbs as he calls to George and gives him some fatherly advice. As that talk ends, the choir members go to their homes; we listen to Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Soames discuss their drunken choir director, Simon Stimson. When Mrs. Gibbs reaches her home, she persuades Dr. Gibbs to sit outside and chat. We hear them talk about Mr. Stimson, and we hear Mrs. Gibbs trying to convince her husband to take a vacation. After they go into the house and upstairs, we see George and Rebecca, who are both upstairs now, looking at and discussing the moon. Then Editor Webb comes walking down the street and talks to Constable Warren, to Simon Stimson, and to Emily, who is still upstairs. This busy collection of mini-scenes concludes with an exchange between George and Rebecca. So ends Act I.

Thus, we realize that we have met several people from Grover's Corners--thirteen, to be exact--but only in a long series of everyday conversations, seemingly unimportant. We can identify no plot. We have heard a choir rehearsal; we have heard a professor and three other people help us get to know the town. Neither the town nor

the people are remarkable.

The first scene in Act II begins again with the Stage Manager giving us the date, July 7, 1904. As he talks about marriage in general and this specific wedding day of George and Emily, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb come downstairs to prepare breakfast. Si Crowell, Joe's brother, delivers the paper, Howie Newsome again delivers milk to both homes and talks to the mothers about the wedding, and Constable Warren makes a brief entrance on the street. Dr. Gibbs comes downstairs and talks about weddings, his own and George's. When George comes downstairs, he stays only long enough to say good morning before going to the Webb home. Here, he chats with Mrs. Webb until she leaves him with Mr. Webb. An awkward conversation follows, concerning the future and marriage advice.

In the second scene the Stage Manager takes us back about two years to see George and Emily meet after school and discuss their feelings for each other and their future. Scene three returns us to 1904 and to the church for the wedding. First, we are allowed to listen to Mrs. Webb's apprehensions of the approaching marriage. Then three baseball players come by to tease George. As the townspeople enter the "church" for the wedding, Mrs. Gibbs and George converse, as do Mr. Webb and Emily. The bride and groom make private promises before the organ begins the Wedding March from Lohengrin. The ceremonial words themselves fade out beneath Mrs. Soames' remarks about the wedding. Act II is over.

The final act begins with a procession of people taking their

places in rows on one side of the stage. The Stage Manager appears and tells us that it is 1913. He describes the scenery from this new vantage point, the Grover's Corners cemetery, and points out acquaintances in the rows of seated people, all of them dead. Then the undertaker and a visitor appear. From their conversation we learn that Simon Stimson had committed suicide and that this is the day of Emily's funeral. The dead--who include Mrs. Gibbs, Wally Webb, Simon Stimson, and Mrs. Soames--converse quietly as they sit, aloofly aware of the live people. The funeral group enters and Emily joins the dead. She talks to them and especially to her mother-in-law, telling her of changes on their farm. When Emily realizes she can return to the living, she asks to re-live her twelfth birthday.

The second scene begins as Emily turns from the dead to her childhood home. Howie Newsome and Constable Warren come down the street, followed by Joe Crowell. Mrs. Webb begins making breakfast and converses briefly with Howie. Mr. Webb, having returned from out-of-town, arrives and talks to Constable Warren before entering his home and talking to his wife. She is calling the children for breakfast. Emily then not only re-enacts herself as she receives her birthday gifts, but also sees herself re-enacting. It is then that she realizes that "We don't have time to look at one another" and that human beings fail to "realize life while they live it--every, every minute" (III, 83). With that, Emily asks to return to the dead.

Emily's turning from the living to the dead starts the final

scene of the play. The dead speak briefly, and George comes alone to Emily's grave. The Stage Manager talks of the day ending and bids the audience goodnight.

Together, this long chain of unemphatic scenes presents no spectacular "story." However, any one link in the chain has in it something familiar to someone; further, everyone can find something familiar somewhere in the chain. Who is not familiar with a wife's suggesting to her busy husband, "I do wish you could go away some place and take a rest" (I, 9)? Or a boy shyly praising a girl for making "a fine speech in class" (I, 21)? Or a father chastising his son for shirking his chores about the home? Or a woman shocked at the behavior of a townsman and thrilled at a wedding? Or a father asking the local policeman, "If you see my boy smoking cigarettes, just give him a word, will you?" (I, 35). Or a parent's nervousness on the wedding day of a child? Or a girl's embarrassment at confessing to a young man that she is more than casually interested in him? Or a person's wish to re-live a day? These familiarities are the meat, not the side dishes, of Our Town. They are the story; they are the plot. It is because these trivialities are identifiable as ordinary and familiar and personal that they have a universal appeal. Wilder would say they form a repetitive pattern and include the innumerable.

Admittedly, several of the scenes resemble each other. This is no accident. Recurrences and repetitions have helped Wilder in achieving universality in Our Town. Basically, each act contains

a scene on the street and a scene in the home. There is a sameness about what happens which turns it from repetition to ritual--a special, almost sacred ritual. The occurrences appear as uneventful incidents. Seeing them repeated causes us to regard them as more than uneventful incidents; they become notable. Each event has significance in itself and significance in a larger episodic sequence. This regularly followed sequence traces itself from preparing breakfast to bidding good night, and becomes a ritual. In Act I Mrs. Gibbs begins the ritual right after the Stage Manager has announced the passing of the 5:45 train for Boston. She grinds coffee as Mrs. Webb comes into her kitchen and readies her stove. Dr. Gibbs, meanwhile, is approaching his home on his return from a baby case. Joe Crowell brings the morning paper at this time, followed by Howie Newsome with the milk delivery. Although Howie is late, the conversation is cheerful. Both mothers call their children for breakfast and the day's patterns are well in motion. As the day--and Act I--end, Mr. Webb meets Constable Warren making his rounds. We have met the Grover's Corners "regulars."

Act II, three years later, begins with the announcement of the 5:10 train for Boston. We see that things have not changed much in the three intervening years since Act I. Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb come down to make breakfast. They grind coffee and shake grates on their stoves. Howie Newsome again brings the milk, this time stopping to comment on George and Emily's approaching marriage. Again, cheerfulness prevails. Joe Crowell's brother Si delivers

the paper this time. Constable Warren makes an appearance on his way to check on the rising river. Thus, although there is to be a wedding, this particular day too is a ritual in which the "regulars" have a role.

When Emily returns to the living in Act III, the Stage Manager does not announce a 5:00 train for Boston. The suggestion is still there, however, as the Stage Manager reminds Emily: "your father had been away for a couple of days; he came back on the early morning train" (III, 77). Mrs. Webb appears, begins to shake the grates on the stove, and calls her children for breakfast. Howie Newsome brings the milk as Constable Warren makes his way up the street after rescuing a Grover's Corners citizen. All of these acts appear as incidents, parts of a simple routine. But they are, rather, notable events in the episodic ritual based on the simple pattern for which Thornton Wilder wishes a priceless value.

Wilder has not limited himself to utilizing these obvious daily tasks of everyday activity. Several of the recurrences are less noticeable. For instance, all four parents chide their children in typical parent-fashion. Mr. Webb advises his daughter: "Emily, walk simply. Who do you think you are today?" (I, 21). Mrs. Webb warns her son: "Walleee! You wash yourself good or I'll come up and do it myself" (I, 10). Dr. Gibbs lectures his son on the necessity of helping with chores at home. Even on his wedding day George does not escape mother's orders as he is told "Now, George, you put on your rubbers. It's raining torrents. You don't go out of this

house without you're prepared for it" (II, 45). Incidentals? Yes, but they are the very things which Wilder proposes are the essence of living, and they do occur and re-occur.

Recurring references are made also to baseball. Mrs. Gibbs complains about George to her husband; "All he thinks about is that baseball" (I, 9). Later that day, George is throwing a ball high into the air and catching it as he meets Emily. On George and Emily's wedding day, Si Crowell complains to Howie Newsome that George's marriage will result in "losin' about the best baseball pitcher Grover's Corners ever had" (II, 40). In the flashback scene before the wedding, George directs a friend to "start practice, and give Herb some long high ones" while he talks to Emily (II, 51). During this talk, of course, Emily admonishes George for spending so much time at baseball. Then, just before the wedding, three ballplayers come by to tease.

Wilder has extended his plan for recurrence in the play by using the hymn "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." We hear it first as the choir rehearses in Act I. Three stanzas are sung, serving as a background to both speech and action in other scenes. Later that evening, after Mr. Webb has warned Emily to avoid her mother's seeing her up that late, he leaves the scene whistling the melody. During the wedding scene, the choir sings two stanzas before the vows are made. We hear it a final time at Emily's burial, as during the singing of "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds" Emily separates from the living, takes her place among the dead, and greets them quietly. One of

the women among the dead remarks, "I always liked that hymn" (III, 72), and Emily says "Papa remembered that that was my favorite hymn" (III, 73). The choice of the hymn is significant in that it suggests that all life is tied together, that all life is "blessed." This is certainly part of Wilder's intention.

In addition to scene, incident, and song recurrences, he has also employed particular words. In his preface to Three Plays, Wilder stated that in trying to find a priceless value for the small things in daily living, he "set the village against the largest dimensions of time and place. The recurrent words in this play (few have noticed it) are 'hundreds,' 'thousands,' and 'millions.'"⁸ The universality intended by the author becomes more apparent when the specific daily tasks of the Grover's Corners villagers are placed in the larger scope of hundreds, thousands, and millions. Wilder has used these words sometimes singly and sometimes in clusters.

An early reference to the age of the earth comes in the scene in which Professor Willard assists the Stage Manager in providing geological information. From the perspective of geology, some of the local rock is "comparatively new--perhaps two or three hundred million years" old. The arrival of man is even more recent, dating from the tenth century A. D. In contrast, when giving the town's population, Professor Willard gives the number 2,640, and then, at the Stage Manager's request, corrects it: "The population at the moment is 2,642" (I, 16-17). This is an example of Wilder's putting the Grover's Corners villagers into the larger scope of hundreds

and millions. At the same time, he takes the two newest citizens into the larger scope of 2,642. The statistician's geological data sound impressive, but Wilder shows that they are relatively inconsequential by bringing our attention back to Grover's Corners and its two newest citizens who are a part of the continuity of life in this village or any village. Although the scientific conditions the professor discusses are far more lasting than human life, it is human life which Wilder wants us to treasure because it is not lasting. In the total scope of time, it is ephemeral.

Later in the first act the Stage Manager discusses the proposed contents of a cornerstone "for people to dig up a thousand years from now" which will include paper preserved "with a kind of glue . . . that'll make it keep a thousand-two thousand years." Commenting that "Babylon once had two million people in it," he regrets that "all we know about 'm is the names of the kings and some copies of wheat contracts and--the sales of slaves." We have not been told how "all those families sat down to supper, and the father came home from his work, and the smoke went up the chimney." That is why the Stage Manager believes that, along with documents, a copy of Our Town belongs in the cornerstone so that "the people a thousand years from now" will know what we were like in our daily living (I, 25). Here, significantly, the Stage Manager uses both past and future, the Babylon of long ago and the people a thousand years from now, to show the continuum of everyday life.

As he begins the second act, the Stage Manager uses the large

numbers to emphasize the passing of time. He wants us to do more than dismiss the fact that "Three years have gone by"; he magnifies the passing of three years by saying, "The sun's come up over a thousand times." He mentions the effect that three years of weather have had on the mountains, and the difference in babies who "have begun talkin' regular sentences already" and older people who "can't bound up a flight of stairs like they use-ta" He summarizes the activities of three years, commenting that "All that can happen in a thousand days." When Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb come down to make breakfast, he interprets those three years in yet another way: "both these ladies cooked three meals a day, one of 'em for twenty years and the other for forty" (II, 37-38). Little by little, we become more aware of Wilder's effort to have us realize that those three years were filled with commonplace incidents which were important events because to each person involved they were "an unbroken succession of unique occasions."⁹

The author employs this method again, though not so thoroughly, in the Stage Manager's discussion of marriage. The Stage Manager calls a marriage "a life-time together," a "big" thing. "Then whissh! you're seventy; you've been a lawyer for fifty years, and that white-haired lady by your side has eaten over fifty thousand meals with you" (II, 49). He has used three different expressions to indicate the passing of fifty years. When George ridicules the superstition that the groom should not see the bride on the wedding day until the ceremony, Mrs. Webb defends the superstition with "Millions have

folla'd it" and places George against this background of millions of people (II, 46). Just before the marriage ceremony, in what the Stage Manager-Minister calls his sermon, he says that the ancestors are witnessing the wedding too: "Millions of them. Most of them set out to live two-by-two. Millions of them" (II, 58). Again we are given this idea that, special as this wedding is to its participants, it is really quite inconsequential in consideration of the millions of ancestors, the generations of relatives, who have gone before. The Stage Manager-Minister says as much in the concluding part of the ceremony: "I've married two hundred couples in my day. . . . M marries N. Millions of them. . . . Once in a thousand times it's interesting" (II, 64). The Stage Manager had said earlier that a marriage was "Nature's attempt to make a perfect human being"; a marriage might produce "another good Governor for New Hampshire" (II, 58). This might be that once in a thousand times. Whether or not it is, we are to remember that the wedding is important.

Even the dead express an understanding of the continuum of time. Immediately after Emily has died, she says life "seems thousands and thousands of years" and "a thousand years ago" (III, 73-74). Simon Stimson complains that live people waste time as though they had "a million years" (III, 84). Looking at the stars, one of the other men talks about the millions of years it takes "for that little speck o' light to git down to earth," and the Stage Manager refers to the "old, old criss-cross" of the stars (III, 85).

Along with these repeated references to large numbers, the

playwright speaks of time itself. This is perhaps not noticeable at a first viewing or a first reading of the play, but it is very obvious in a close study. These references to time help also to instill the idea of sameness which pervades the play, the idea that time has been, is now, and will be. For example, in only the first speech by the Stage Manager there are eleven references to time, using six different words: day, dawn, mornin', minute, years, and week (I, 2-4). These plus words such as night, tonight, hours, evening, Tuesday, and Sunday give immediacy to the speeches. There are also the many greetings used throughout: good morning, good evening, good night. If these are inconspicuous as a part of normal conversation, it must be admitted that Wilder has been exceedingly successful in his dialogue, for he has used a writing device which performs a task successfully without calling attention to the device itself.

Sometimes the time element is used in giving particular hours of the day, such as the "5:45 train for Boston," "Seven o'clock!" "By ten o'clock I got to know all about Canada," "It's only half-past eight, Pa," "It's two o'clock," "Now they'll be coming out of High School at three o'clock," and finally, "Eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners."

In addition to the dates given at the beginning of each act-- 1901, 1904, 1913--there are occasional references to other years. The Stage Manager tells us of the graves marked 1670-1680, Doc Gibbs' death in 1930, Constable Warren's recollection "In '84 we had a player

. . ." (II, 40), and the dating of Emily's return to her twelfth birthday, 1899 (III, 76). Once more it can be said that since these are not obvious references, but all within normal conversational speech patterns, they heighten the quality of universality in Our Town.

The name of the play and the repeating of that phrase "our town" invite the viewer or reader to apply the play and its themes to every person in every town. It is only in the first act that the phrase is used. "The first act shows a day in our town. . . . Well, now I'll show you how our town lies." The Stage Manager identifies "our town's richest citizen" (I, 2), comments on knowing the facts about everyone "in our town" (I, 4), and then proceeds to specific "information about our town . . ." (I, 16). After that, Wilder refrains from using the phrase. Those five usages have firmly voiced his invitation to make "our town" my town or anyone's town.

The idea of recurrence and repetition used by Wilder was fortified, if not inspired, by his friend, Gertrude Stein. In the introductions he wrote to two of her books, there are two statements which are interesting in connection with his use of those devices. In the introduction to Narration he said, "There is an almost terrifying exactness in Miss Stein's use of the very words that the rest of the world employs so loosely: everybody, everything, and every way."¹⁰ I find that there is an almost terrifying exactness in Wilder's use of the very words that the rest of the world employs so loosely: years, tomorrow, millions, dawn, Tuesday. Discussing

Miss Stein's writing style in the introduction to Four in America, Wilder said that one facet of her style "should not require discussion . . . her recourse to repetition."¹¹ I have found that study and discussion of Wilder's recourse to repetition have been highly revealing in identifying how the author accomplished the universal quality in Our Town.

Another technique contributing to the achievement of universality is Wilder's use of the stage. Normally, plays use curtains, scenery, and properties in order to make the imaginary world real. However, Wilder's purpose was not to make a "real" Grover's Corners come alive on the stage. As he says in the preface to Three Plays, "Emily's joys and griefs, her algebra lessons and her birthday presents--what are they when we consider all the billions of girls who have lived, who are living, and who will live?"¹² Thus, we are not to think of particular people in a particular place at a particular time; we are to generalize, to see any person in any place at any time. Wilder believes that "when you emphasize place in the theatre, you drag down and limit and harness time to it."¹³ The events of 1901 or 1904 or 1913 must become "our" events. Grover's Corners must become "our" town. Wilder also says, "On the stage it is always now; the personages are standing on that razor-edge, between the past and the future, which is the essential character of conscious being; the words are rising to their lips in immediate spontaneity. . . . The theater is supremely fitted to say: 'Behold! These things are.'¹⁴ In order to show the now, the razor-edge between past and

future, Wilder dismissed the walls of a box set, avoiding the confinements of a particular room or street. That idea is not a new one, nor does Wilder claim that it is. Both Chinese and Elizabethan drama employed it, and Wilder refers to both in the preface to Three Plays. In an interview Wilder said, "I'm no innovator. I am a re-newer."¹⁵

Thus, the audience enters the theater to find a bare stage and no curtain. The Stage Manager sets in place two sets of tables and chairs, a bench, and two trellises. These constitute both the inside and outside of the Gibbs and Webb homes. Wilder, in "Some Suggestions for the Director" in the 1939 acting edition of Our Town, says, "It has already been proven that absence of scenery does not constitute a difficulty and that the cooperative imagination of the audience is stimulated by that absence" (iv). Therefore, there are no real stoves with real grates to shake; there are no real coffee-grinders; there are no real breakfasts served; there is no real soda fountain in the drugstore; there is no real pulpit in the church; there are no real tombstones in the cemetery. The setting subsequently imagined by each member of the audience is far more realistic to each person than an attempt at staged realism would make it.

For as Wilder says in the preface to Three Plays, "Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind--not in things, not in 'scenery.'"¹⁶

This openness is useful, also, because many short scenes occur in several places: the two kitchens, the garden and entryways to the homes, Main Street, Mr. Morgan's drugstore, the church, and the

cemetery. The open stage lends itself well to such movement.

It also allows the time changes which Wilder makes, for the play opens in 1901, goes to 1904, then back to 1902 for the courtship scene, returns to 1904 for the wedding, advances to 1913, then back to 1899 for Emily's twelfth birthday, and finally ends in 1913 with Emily's death. A realistic box set complete with scenery and properties would have hampered such movements in time.

All of this fluidity in time and place is necessary in order for the audience to apply the scenes, the characters, and the happenings to themselves. While the play moves generally from 1901 to 1913, it is, as Francis Fergusson has said, a "narrative sequence from morning to night, from the cradle to the grave, through the marriage to the funeral" ¹⁷ This is easily traced. Act I does begin "May 7, 1901, just before dawn" (I, 2). The "cradle" portion of Fergusson's description comes from the birth referred to several times in Act I. To begin, the Stage Manager's description of Grover's Corners includes the explanation that "The only lights on in town are in a cottage over by the tracks where a Polish mother's just had twins" (I, 3). The event is casually woven into later references. "There's Doc Gibbs comin' down Main Street now, comin' back from that baby case" (I, 4). When he is asked by Joe Crowell, the newspaper boy, if anyone has been sick, Dr. Gibbs replies, "No. Some twins over in Polish Town" (I, 5). Following this, he explains to Howie Newsome, "Pair of twins over to Mrs. Goruslawski's" (I, 8). At breakfast, when Mrs. Gibbs asks if everything

went all right, the doctor assures her, "Yes, I declare. Easy as kittens" (I, 9). These twins are important in Act I, and they are important in the ever-continuing cycle of life. The remainder of the act progresses through the children's departure for school, the mothers' stringing beans, some afternoon activity, evening choir practice and homework, and finally the good nights. The Stage Manager has, however, in this first act, indicated what the entire play will include, for he has said, "This is the way we were--in our growing up and in our marrying, and in our living, and in our dying" (I, 25).

Act II opens. "It's early morning again" (II, 38). The Stage Manager tells us that "The First Act was called The Daily Life; this Act is called Love and Marriage" (II, 38). Since Act II culminates with the wedding, we are forced to recall the Stage Manager's statement about our growing up and marrying and living and dying; the title of Act III seems inevitable--Death. We have had another hint; as the Stage Manager introduced the Love and Marriage act, he made the remark that "Most everybody climbs into their grave married" (II, 38). Several connections between marriage and death are made in the opening scene in the Gibbs home in Act II. Casual and conversational, these remarks are not meant literally, but the suggestion of death remains. Mrs. Gibbs fears that George will "catch his death-a-cold within a week," and she tells him this when he tries to go over to the Webb home without his rubbers. She emphasizes it by saying, "From tomorrow on you can kill yourself in all

weathers" (II, 43, 45). Even George uses a reference to death. He comes down the stairs cheerily and says, "Only four more hours to live!" after which the stage directions indicate that he "gestures cutting throat with 'K-k-k-z-t' sound" (II, 45). One final hint of the subject for Act III is given as George and Emily embrace after the exchange of vows in the marriage ceremony. The Stage Manager says, "The cottage, the go-cart, the Sunday afternoon drives in the Ford--the first rheumatism--the grandchildren--the second rheumatism--the deathbed--the reading of the will" (II, 64). Act II ends in the afternoon with George and Emily's joyous wedding.

Act III begins without the Stage Manager's giving the act a name, but we find that our assumptions are correct, for he identifies the site as "certainly an important part of Grover's Corners" (III, 66). Then he points out our acquaintances among the dead. Although the time is nine years later than the previous act, the time of day seems almost a continuation, for this act begins in the afternoon. This is Emily's burial day. After her burial, Emily returns to her twelfth birthday, thus allowing us once more to see a morning scene, a beginning. When Emily returns to the dead, the stars are out and the Stage Manager brings the day and the play to a close: "Eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners" (III, 86). The play has gone from morning to night, from cradle to grave, through marriage to funeral. An open stage which does not limit time and place has allowed Wilder to do this. And we are once more reminded of the universality in all this just before the Stage Manager bids us good night, for he

says, "Tomorrow's going to be another day" (III, 86). The cycle will continue: morning, afternoon, evening; birth, marriage, death. Emily's death in childbirth is part of the cycle. This cycle is one of many which have been, are, and will be in progress, thus illustrating Wilder's idea that "the action on the stage takes place in a perpetual present time."¹⁸ In fact, the whole of Our Town illustrates that idea.

The fourth and final facet of Wilder's means of attaining universality is his use of underdeveloped characters revolving about the Stage Manager. Normally, plays are concerned with particular people involved in particular problems and triumphs. A reconsideration of Wilder's stated purpose of Our Town, to find a priceless value for the smallest events in our lives, brings the realization that particular, identifiable, well-defined characters would not universalize that idea. Wilder states that the theater "has one foot planted firmly in the particular, since each actor before us . . . is indubitably a living, breathing 'one'; yet it tends and strains to exhibit a general truth" ¹⁹ Since each character is a living, breathing person before us, Wilder has created character clichés. Alexander Cowie calls them "pallid figures slightly misted over and blurred."²⁰ They are like photographs; they have form but one cannot tell very much about them. Except for the Stage Manager, they have names attached to them, but the principal figures, the Gibbses and the Webbs, are hardly distinguishable from each other. Playwright Arthur Miller, writing in The Atlantic Monthly, says he

does not believe "that we can think of the brother in this play, or the sister or the mother, as having names other than Brother, Sister, Mother. They are not given that kind of particularity or interior life. They are characterized rather as social factors, in their roles of Brother, Sister, Mother, in Our Town."²¹ The mothers do similar things: cook, string beans, discipline their two children, sing in the same church choir, enjoy each other as neighbors and friends. These mothers are mothers anywhere. Dr. Gibbs and Editor Webb are college-educated, have hobbies, show concern for Grover's Corners, sympathize with Simon Stimson, and exhibit a sense of humor. Malcolm Goldstein offers an explanation of Wilder's creation of these two men as professional men. He says it was "only to confer upon them a degree of familiarity with human problems, and this they are able to communicate to the audience."²² I think this is an accurate explanation, for Dr. Gibbs can comment on the birth of twins, Joe Crowell's knee, and Simon Stimson's troubles. These are necessary items in the daily life routine of Grover's Corners. Mr. Webb, editor of The Grover's Corners Sentinel, can supply background information for us concerning city politics, drinking, social differences, and cultural tastes. Otherwise, these fathers are fathers anywhere.

George and Emily are approximately the same age, grow up as neighbors, and attend the same school. Their relationships with their siblings, a sister for George and a brother for Emily, are the normal teasing and rivalries. Their interest in each other is

also normal; George prefers baseball until he matures enough to realize how important Emily is to him. Their love is young love anywhere.

Wally Webb and Rebecca Gibbs are typical. Their parts are small. However, it is Rebecca who expresses the universal theme intended in the play. Toward the end of Act I, she is trying to share George's window with him. She asks George if the moon is "shining on South America, Canada and half the whole world" (I, 34). It is an innocent question, typical of a younger sister or brother, but one which carries great implications, "half the whole world." She later tells George about the letter Jane Crofut received from her minister. The envelope was addressed this way: "Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm, Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America. . . . Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God . . ." (I, 36). Rebecca, apparently impressed with the size of existence, exclaims over the fact that the letter was delivered. As Rebecca recites this long address, we, the audience, may chuckle quietly, thinking this is also typical little-girl awe. At the end of the play, however, we find ourselves thinking back to this address. How carefully and subtly Thornton Wilder has universalized Jane Crofut, for as we think about this we wonder two things: Is Jane Crofut in the middle of that concentric circle with the mind of God in the farthest circle? Or is the mind of God at the center, with Jane Crofut--and us--in the farthest circle? Wilder lets us decide, for the routines

of life will continue despite our view. And it is not Rebecca who is memorialized by this address; it is the Jane Crofut in all of us. Rebecca remains an underdeveloped character.

Among the minor characters, Mrs. Soames is truly a cliché in action and speech. She is the typical gossip, nosily interested in Simon Stimson's troubles for their merit as gossip: "Really, it's the worst scandal that ever was in this town!" (I, 30). She is the typical gusher at weddings, noisily attracting attention: "Perfectly lovely wedding! . . . Doesn't she make a lovely bride? . . . But I always cry. . . . I'm sure they'll be happy" (II, 63-64). Sitting among the dead, she is still the typical gossip as she generalizes from one extreme to the other. "My, wasn't life awful--and wonderful" (III, 71). With the detached understanding she now has of the living, she sweepingly terms life as "awful" when she learns that Emily has died in childbirth. Then she sighs and adds "wonderful." That word causes her to gushingly recall the "lovely wedding," Emily's poetry reading, and the "perfectly beautiful farm" Emily and George lived on (III, 71-72).

Another stereotype is Simon Stimson, the drunken church organist and choir director. Bitter even among the dead, he represents those people who cannot cope with life. The play does not give an explanation for Simon's attitude, but the audience is arrested by one statement Simon begins to make and does not really finish. "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" (III, 84). What was Simon going to say? The feelings of those--who? Of those who try to understand, such as Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, Dr. Gibbs, the head of the church, Mr. Webb, Constable Warren? When Mrs. Soames criticizes Simon, Mrs. Gibbs speaks compassionately, "We all know about Mr. Stimson, and we all know about the troubles he's been through, and Doctor Ferguson knows too, and if Doctor Ferguson keeps him on there in his job the only thing the rest of us can do is just not to notice it" (I, 31). Mrs. Soames continues her attack, insisting that the situation is getting worse. Then Mrs. Webb joins in the defense by saying, "No, it isn't, Louella. It's getting better" (I, 31). Dr. Gibbs sympathizes also: "I guess I know more about Simon Stimson's affairs than anybody in this town. Some people ain't made for small town life. I don't know how that'll end; but there's nothing we can do but just leave it alone--" (I, 32). Mr. Webb kindly offers to "walk along a ways" with Simon after choir practice, and Constable Warren ponders, "I don't know how that's goin' to end...." (I, 35). Maybe Simon was one of the saints or poets that the Stage Manager said may realize life while they live it. Maybe that caused his bitterness and his drinking.

Like a child who reserves the frosting until after he has eaten the cake, I have reserved the Stage Manager for special considerations. He, like the other characters, is not developed as a "real" person. However, it is chiefly through his omniscience and omnipresence that the play attains its universality. He begins Our Town

by setting up the stage, Chinese drama fashion, as the audience watches. He talks directly to the audience, Greek chorus fashion, as he describes Grover's Corners, thus almost involving them in what occurs on stage. His outstanding quality is timelessness; he is both inside and outside the town. He existed in 1901, and he exists in our time. Winfield Townley Scott, labelling this quality a "double point of view," says, "It is as though the golden veil of nostalgia, not stretched across stage for us to see through, bisects the stage down center: it glows left and right upon past and present, and the players come and go through its shimmering summer haze, now this side of it, now that; but the audience sees both sides of it."²³ And that is precisely what the audience feels: being involved and yet standing aside just looking. The Stage Manager's fluidity in time is best expressed in two lines from his opening speech. Describing Main Street in Grover's Corners, he says, "First automobile's goin' to come along in about five years--belonged to Banker Cartwright, our town's richest citizen. Lives up in the big white house up there on the hill" (I, 2). He speaks of a future event, makes a past tense remark about it, then comments in present tense, and the syntax is perfectly acceptable.

In his timeless way, the Stage Manager occupies the stage as seer, director, actor, commentator, and "provoker." Some examples of his role as seer point out the poignancy in the everyday routines of people. Joe Crowell's delivering the paper is one of those routines. As Mary McCarthy, reviewing the play for Partisan Review

in 1938, said, "The little boy delivering papers . . . becomes more touching, more meaningful and important" when we are told that he is killed in the war; "the unconsciousness of the character has heightened the consciousness of the audience."²⁴ Dr. Gibbs routinely comes home from a house call as Mrs. Gibbs routinely prepares breakfast. The Stage Manager watches them and says "Doc Gibbs died in 1930. New hospital's named after him. Mrs. Gibbs died first--long time ago, in fact. She went to visit her daughter Rebecca, who married an insurance man in Canton, Ohio, and died there--pneumonia--but her body was brought back here" (I, 4). In Act III the Stage Manager tells Emily that in returning to the living she will not only live it, but watch herself living it. She persists, and the audience realizes, at least momentarily, what Emily realizes just then; that "all that was going on and we never noticed!" (III, 83).

As a director, the Stage Manager starts scenes, stops them, and engineers the unique scene in which Emily returns to the living. He sets things in motion with "There's Doc Gibbs comin' down Main Street now . . . And here's his wife comin' downstairs to get breakfast. . . . There's Mrs. Webb comin' downstairs to get her breakfast too" (I, 4). After the flashback to George and Emily's courtship, he moves the action by saying, "We'll get on to the wedding" (II, 57). He politely stops Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb's conversation with "Thank you very much, ladies" (I, 16). When the learned professor has given an adequate explanation of geological conditions, the Stage Manager halts him with "Thank you very much, Professor Willard.

I know we're all very much obliged to you" (I, 17). The discussion at the Webb home on the morning of the wedding is stopped with "Thank you very much, Mr. and Mrs. Webb. Now I have to interrupt again here" (II, 49). To the ballplayers who have come to harrass George on his wedding day, he says, "All right! All right! That'll do. That's enough of that" (II, 60).

The Stage Manager is completely in charge of Emily's return to the living, telling her three times what to expect. After she chooses the particular day, he asks if she wants a special time of day, being able to manipulate that too. He then provides background information; it had been snowing for several days and her father had been gone for a few days. He gives Emily permission to enter the "house." Her plea to him to return to the dead confirms his ability to move timelessly.

As an actor, the ageless Stage Manager is a jack-of-all-trades. When George is playing catch with a baseball on Main Street, he runs into the Stage Manager impersonating Mrs. Forrest. "She" reprimands him. The Stage Manager dons a pair of glasses for a more important role; he becomes Mr. Morgan at the drugstore. In the wedding scene he is the minister who marries George and Emily. Here, he is not to portray the minister realistically, for Wilder writes in "Some Suggestions for the Director," that the speech by the Stage Manager-Clergyman "is not delivered to the village congregation before him, but across their heads, an almost dreamy meditation, during which the tableau on the stage 'freezes'" (v). Thus, as the audience

watches, the Stage Manager remains just "outside" the personality, while being "inside" enough to suggest a different person.

As an observer himself, the Stage Manager is most like the Greek chorus, commenting on what he sees and participates in. His biased but concerned comments range from simple topics, such as mowing a lawn and filling a cornerstone, to involved philosophies pertaining to eternity and the role of Nature.

Finally, this grand master is a provoker; he nudges us, the audience, to see things as he sees them. He asks us to think about those things we see and hear, rather than respond emotionally. He invites us to agree with him that a cornerstone should contain more than treaties and historical data. He invites us to remember "what it was like when you were very young, and particularly the days when you were first in love; when you were like a person sleep-walking, and you didn't hear everything that was said to you. You're just a little bit crazy" (II, 50). He invites us to think of marriage in the continuum of time by remembering "the other witnesses at this wedding: the ancestors. Millions of them. Most of them set out to live two-by-two" (II, 58). He invites us to determine what is eternal (III, 68). His final invitation, as he winds his watch, bids us get a good rest (III, 86). From sitting? From thinking? From living? The Stage Manager has done his job well, for by the time he says a final good night, we in the audience have also developed a keen "double point of view," seeing things from within finite time and from outside of it. Plying his many trades, he has started

action, arrested time, turned it backward and forward--sometimes by hours, sometimes by years, explained what he thinks needs explaining, expounded lengthily on some topics, changed the setting and sometimes the simple stage properties, and was in command of the whole performance. Yet the Stage Manager has not become a distinct personality. Rather, this ubiquitous character who is almost constantly before us keeps us from over-identifying with him or any of the characters. This is in keeping with Wilder's belief that when drama "tries to assert that the personages in the action 'really are,' really inhabit such and such rooms, really suffer from such and such emotions, it loses rather than gains credibility."²⁵ This is the guiding theory on which the Our Town characters have been developed, or more accurately, "underdeveloped."

These are not individual lives which Wilder shows; they are life. These are not individual homes; they are home. These are not the years from 1901 to 1913; they are time--any time, all time. These are not unusual happenings in Grover's Corners; they are small events in "our" town. Because Our Town is life at home, anytime, anywhere, it is universal in its appeal. The critic John Mason Brown, in his 1938 review of Our Town, said it "burrows into the essence of the growing up, the marrying, the living, and the dying of all of us who sit before it and are included by it."²⁶

On May 4, 1965, Thornton Wilder received the National Book Committee's first Medal for Literature. At a White House ceremony, Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson presented the award, saying, "You have made

the commonplaces of living yield the gaiety, the wonder, and the vault of the human adventure."²⁷ Although Mrs. Johnson was speaking of Wilder's total contribution to American literature, her statement accurately describes Our Town.

Notes

¹In Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 113.

²Thornton Wilder, Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker (New York: Bantam Books, 1957), p. xi.

³Thornton Wilder, Our Town: A Play in Three Acts, Acting Edition (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1939), Act III, p. 74. All subsequent quotations from Our Town come from this edition and will be indicated by act and page number within the text of this study.

⁴Three Plays, pp. ix-x.

⁵Ibid., p. x.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., p. xi.

⁹Ibid., p. x.

¹⁰Thornton Wilder, "Introduction," in Narration by Gertrude Stein (New York: Greenwood Press, 1935), p. vi.

¹¹Thornton Wilder, "Introduction," in Four in America by Gertrude Stein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. vi.

¹²Three Plays, p. xi.

¹³Ibid., p. x.

¹⁴In Writers at Work, p. 108.

¹⁵"The Quick and the Dead," Newsweek, 22 Jan. 1962, p. 51.

¹⁶Three Plays, p. xi.

¹⁷Francis Fergusson, "Three Allegorists: Brecht, Wilder, and Eliot," Sewanee Review, 64 (1956), 556.

¹⁸Thornton Wilder, "Some Thoughts on Playwriting," American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 60.

¹⁹Three Plays, p. x.

²⁰Alexander Cowie, "The Bridge of Thornton Wilder," Essays in American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell, ed. Clarence Gohdes (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1967), p. 324.

²¹Arthur Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama," The Atlantic Monthly, 197 (April 1956), 39.

²²Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 101.

²³Winfield Townley Scott, "Our Town and the Golden Veil," The Virginia Quarterly Review, 29 (1953), 105.

²⁴Mary McCarthy, "Class Angles and a Wilder Classic," Sights and Spectacles 1937-1956 (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1956), p. 28.

²⁵"Some Thoughts on Playwriting," p. 59.

²⁶John Mason Brown, "Thornton Wilder's Our Town," Two on the Aisle: Ten Years of the American Theatre in Performance (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1938), p. 190.

²⁷Hermine I. Popper, "The Universe of Thornton Wilder," Harper's Magazine, 197 (June 1965), 78.

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