

1971

Thornton Wilder's Recurring Theme of Love

Bette L. Bails Johnson

Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in [English](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Bette L. Bails, "Thornton Wilder's Recurring Theme of Love" (1971). *Masters Theses*. 3967.
<https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/3967>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

PAPER CERTIFICATE

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates who have written formal theses.

SUBJECT: Permission to reproduce theses.

The University Library is receiving a number of requests from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow theses to be copied.

Please sign one of the following statements.

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university for the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

August 5, 1971
Date

Author

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University not allow my thesis be reproduced because _____

Date

Author

THORNTON WILDER'S RECURRING THEME OF LOVE

(TITLE)

BY

Bette L. Bails Johnson

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1971

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

5 August 1971

DATE

ADVISER

3 Aug 1971

DATE

DEPARTMENT HEAD

THORNTON WILDER'S RECURRING THEME OF LOVE

Thornton Wilder, American novelist, dramatist and three-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, develops the theme of love in his various works starting with the three-minute plays, The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays (1928), initiated when he was eighteen,¹ to his latest novel, The Eighth Day (1967), published when he was seventy. Like William Butler Yeats who explored the theme of old age throughout his poetic career, Thornton Wilder addresses himself to the theme of love throughout his plays and novels, emphasizing the effect of different kinds of love in the internal lives of his characters. Unlike many of his contemporaries who believe that modern literature must be a document exposing the social problems of the present, Wilder is consistently drawn to archetypal subjects, love being one of them, which writers have repeatedly considered throughout history. By telescoping history into another period of time, Wilder illumines the idea that everything that has happened might happen anywhere and will occur again. Thus, in reworking his theme of love throughout his works, Wilder shows that the kinds of love

¹In the Foreword to The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1928), Wilder states that his three-minute plays were collected in 1915, in Berkley, California, and added to particularly during the years that he was teaching French at Lawrenceville. These sketches were published under the above title in the fall of 1928.

man holds for man, for life, and for God are universal qualities found in all periods of history and are enduring. In Wilder's interest with the permanent, not the temporary, concerns of life and in his belief in a system of natural pieties which give dignity and purpose to a man's world, Wilder shares, Dayton Kohler notes, the temper of humanism without asserting its dogmas.² Wilder was first introduced to the humanistic school of thought while he attended Oberlin College under the instruction of Charles Wagner, a teacher whose passion for literature ranged beyond his field of nineteenth century English literature to include writers of antiquity and the Renaissance.³ Through Wagner's instruction, Wilder found a sense of the cumulative process in literary history; he incorporates into all of his writing Wagner's conviction "that it is reasonable and indeed inevitable for the writer to take what is valuable from his predecessors for the development of his own work and that national boundaries are of no importance in literary study."⁴ Also, while Wilder attended Yale, he undoubtedly was influenced in the humanistic school of thought by the leadership of Paul Elmer More of Princeton and Irving Babbitt of Harvard who, "impatient with the microscopic

²Dayton Kohler, "Thornton Wilder," The English Journal, XXVIII (January, 1939), 6.

³Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 7.

⁴Ibid.

naturalism of twentieth-century American literature,...urged upon the academic intelligentsia an attitude of Christian forbearance and optimism."⁵ These philosopher-critic's solution to mankind's problems was not an intense analysis in the manner of the naturalists, but was rather the submission to the authority of the Christian Church, which would induce moral values. Protected by his family from contact with either physical or emotional squalor and prepared by his family's religious faith to accept self-discipline as a moral necessity, Thornton Wilder responded to humanistic thought as evidenced by his early works.⁶ However, by the time Wilder wrote his plays of 1931, he was beginning to turn from the tenets of humanism to those of a limited existentialistic view and to lose some of the hyperliterary style of his early works.⁷ His concept of the universal eternal value of love, however, remains constant. Understanding Wilder's development of the theme of love can be approached from three different aspects: (1) a man's love for man, which incorporates his love for woman, his devotion to his family, and his love for his fellowman; (2) man's love for life on earth; and (3) man's love of God.

Thornton Wilder writes of man's love for his family and for his fellowman with greater depth than he depicts the love

⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 168.

between man and woman. Whenever Wilder attempts a scene of passionate love between man and woman or of a perverted love, his writing becomes stilted and ineffective. For instance, in his first novel, The Cabala (1926), he writes a scene of Marcantonio's sexual conquest of his own sister as told by the narrator of the story, Samuele, in the following manner:

The last thing I saw was an infuriated blow that Marcantonio directed at his sister's shoulder and the last sound I heard was the tremolo of her provocative laughter as they tussled on the carved wooden chest in the corner. I debated with myself on the stairs: surely I had imagined it; my poor sick head was so full of the erotic narratives of the week; surely I had imagined the character of mixed love and hate in those blows that were savage caresses, and that laughter that was half sneer and half invitation.

But I had not imagined it.⁸

In The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays (1928), Wilder again uses restrained language when writing of an extra-marital relationship in "Fanny Otcott." The actress, taking on the tone of one of her great tragic roles, rebukes her former lover, now the Bishop of Westholmsted, for naming their "grace of poetry"⁹ a sin. Wilder obscures the idea that love can serve as a stabilizing effect on man in epigrammatic phrasing in "The Angel That Troubled the Water." When the man who has loved and lost approaches the Angel to have his soul cured, the Angel

⁸Thornton Wilder, The Cabala (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1926), pp. 72-73.

⁹Thornton Wilder, The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1928), p. 38.

refuses and tells him: "In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve. Draw back." (p. 149) Wilder takes the idea of the humanizing effect of love and reworks it more effectively in The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927). Uncle Pio realizes that the Perichole, his actress protégée, had never known love except as passion. He hoped that, after she had become the mistress of the Viceroy and had borne him three children, she could better interpret certain passages in plays with a new rich wisdom. Uncle Pio divided people into two groups--those who had loved and those who had not. Uncle Pio, as Wilder relates,

...regarded love as sort of a cruel malady through which the elect are required to pass in their late youth and from which they emerge, pale and wrung, but ready for the business of living. There was (he believed) a great repertory of errors mercifully impossible to human beings who had recovered from this illness...they never mistook a protracted amiability for the whole conduct of life, they never regarded any human being, from a prince to a servant, as a mechanical object.¹⁰

Wilder succeeds in showing the importance of the experience of love to man's whole being, but he does so in retrospect. When he attempts the scene of passion between Pamphilus and Glycerium in The Woman of Andros (1930), he does so in formal evasive language and fails as is evidenced in the quote:

It was not at this meeting, not at their next, but at the third, beneath the dwarfed olive-trees, that those caresses that seemed to be for courage, for pity and for admiration, were turned by Nature to her own uses.¹¹

¹⁰Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey in Four American Novels, ed. by Edmund Fuller and Olga Achtenhagen (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1959), p. 637.

¹¹Thornton Wilder, The Woman of Andros (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1930), p. 72.

Thornton Wilder must have realized his limitations, for in his later works he avoids very skillfully any scenes that deal in ardent love. In Heaven's My Destination (1934), his central character is George Brush, a fundamental Baptist and a traveling textbook salesman, who tries to explain to another salesman and his "sister" that he is practically engaged. A few years before Brush had found himself stranded on a rainy night somewhere about twenty miles from Kansas City. He found a farmhouse and asked permission to sleep in the barn. The farmer and his wife were kind and gave him coffee and bread and butter. Brush could just barely see three or four beautiful daughters moving about out of reach of the lamplight.

Wilder continues the scene:

...Here Brush took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. 'From now on it's kind of delicate,' he said, 'and I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I guess you've both been married.'

'Yes,' said Blodgett, 'we know the worst.'

'I woke up in the pitch dark and heard a girl's voice laughing, and then later it was half laughing and crying. She asked me if I wanted something to eat. Well, I can always eat something--'

'Have an apple?' asked Mrs. McCoy.

'No, thank you, not now...We had a long talk. She said she wasn't happy on the farm. I asked her what her name was and she said, 'Roberta.' And that's important, because maybe it was Bertha. And one day in the newspaper I saw that there was a girl's name called Hertha. It might have been any one of those names.'

'What does it matter what her name was?' cried Mrs. McCoy.

'You'll see. Anyway, she cried and I tried to comfort her. So I decided she was the person I was going to marry.'

There was a pause; the others looked at him inquiringly.

He repeated with emphasis, 'So I decided she was the person I was going to marry.'

Blodgett leaned forward and asked in a low, shocked voice, 'You mean you ruined the girl?'

Brush turned pale and nodded.¹²

One can picture Mr. Blodgett and Mrs. McCoy stimulated by the promise of erotic details, offering food—anything—to hear the tale of lust, an emotion they both understand. However, Wilder has left them panting, and perhaps his readers, too, but he has done so in keeping with George Brush's character. The reader recognizes that, in Wilder's first novel in an American setting, he has enacted one of the most repeated jokes in the country. Also, for the first time in Wilder's fiction, he uses the colloquialisms and other inelegant phrases that are typical of ordinary people who do not compose graceful sentences. Wilder employs this same evasive technique in Our Town (1938), The Skin of Our Teeth (1942), The Ides of March (1948), and The Eighth Day (1967). The stage manager in Our Town interrupts a possible love scene between George and Emily; Sabina, the "other woman" character in The Skin of Our Teeth, refuses to act the scene in which she attempts to seduce Mr. Antrobus; the plot of The Ides of March is unfolded in a pseudo-documentary style, limiting the information to that which a man would reveal in his journal, letters, or state papers; and in The Eighth Day, the reader follows John Ashley's

¹²Thornton Wilder, Heaven's My Destination (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935, pp. 42-43).

courtship of Beata Kellerman under the watchful eyes of her parents, only to be told that the couple eloped two months later.

Thornton Wilder recognizes the value of love between a man and woman, intimating that neither is complete without the experience. After some unsuccessful attempts in depicting intimate scenes, he recognizes his limitations and, with increasing skill, avoids such passages.

Wilder is more effective when writing of the devotion a man feels for his family. He does not evade the scenes, but he does avoid sentimentality. Hermine I. Popper points out that Wilder, himself, was devoted to his family, particularly to his mother who "found in her second son a ready companion for her passionate explorations of language and philosophy, literature and the arts."¹³ Home for Thornton Wilder has always been wherever his family lived. Due to his father's appointment as American consul general to Hong Kong in 1906, Mrs. Wilder and her family journeyed twice to China, but in the interest of the children's education, lived in Berkley, California. In spite of the miles between them, Amos Wilder influenced his children. Thornton Wilder worshipped in his father's church and began a career of teaching, a profession his father had chosen for him.¹⁴ Moreover, as Malcolm Cowley asserts, Wilder never belonged to the rebellious youth who rejected the standards by which

¹³Hermine I. Popper, "The Universe of Thornton Wilder," Harper's Magazine, CCXXX (June, 1965), 73.

¹⁴Ibid.

their fathers lived.¹⁵ Secure in the love of his own family, Wilder is able to cut through the sentimentality of family affection, which tends to embarrass some and to repulse others, and to look for the universal qualities in members of a family with which a parent or a child can identify. For instance, in The Woman of Andros (1930), two Greek fathers in the pre-Christian era discuss the possible marriage between their son and daughter, each father vaunting the praises of his own sibling. On his way home, Simo thinks about their conversation:

This boasting about their children,--how vulgar, how unhellene. How unphilosophic. Yet that was true: there was something of the priest in Pamphilus. (p. 22)

Simo, seeing the priest-like qualities in his son, Pamphilus, is no different than an American father today seeing his son as a possible Babe Ruth, yet Wilder's point may be lost on some because of the formalized expression. The author depicts another aspect of family love in The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) in showing the "fatiguing love" (p. 591) with which D^{ña} Maria, Marquesa de Montemayor, persecuted her daughter, D^{ña} Clara. The Marquesa "loved her daughter not for her daughter's sake, but for her own." (p. 594) To her daughter living in Spain, the mother composed incredibly beautiful letters, "so necessary was it to her love that she attract the attention, perhaps the admiration, of her distant child." (p. 592) The types of love between family members are

¹⁵Malcolm Cowley, "The Man Who Abolished Time," The Saturday Review, XXXIX (October 6, 1956), 50.

universal, but Wilder's style of expression is almost patrician. Having been criticized by Michael Gold for "tailor-made rhetoric" and for ignoring America as a setting,¹⁶ Wilder proves that he can write the dialogue of Americans in The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act (1931), anticipating the style and universality of his Pulitzer Prize play, Our Town (1938).

In "The Long Christmas Dinner" (1931) Wilder continues his theme of family devotion by telescoping ninety years of a family saga in merging scenes. He catches the realism of a family's reiteration of clichés, each generation's mother saying approximately the same expressions as her mother before her. One idea, showing the mother's place in the family's love, recurs throughout the play and is expressed first by Gertrude after her mother dies: "I never told her how wonderful she was. We all treated her as though she were just a friend in the house. I thought she'd be here forever."¹⁷ This speech anticipates that of Dr. Gibbs in Our Town (1938) when he admonishes George for not cutting wood for his mother:

She just gave up and decided it was easier to do it herself. And you eat her meals, and put on the clothes she keeps nice for you, and you run off and play baseball,— like she's some hired girl we keep around but that we don't like very much...¹⁸

¹⁶Popper, p. 77.

¹⁷Thornton Wilder, The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act, Harper Colophon Books (New York: Harper and Row, 1931), p. 16.

¹⁸Thornton Wilder, Three Plays by Thornton Wilder: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker, A Bantam Book (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), Act I, p. 24.

Again in "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden," Wilder emphasizes the devotion between family members. The Kirbys are on their way to visit an older daughter, Beulah, who is convalescing from the dangerous delivery of a stillborn child. Wilder captures the warm intimacy of the family, particularly in the character of Mrs. Kirby whose austere evangelical fervor conceals the depth of her love for her children; permitting her to discipline them lest she spoil them.¹⁹ One hears Ma Kirby, as she views the homes of Trenton, say with fierce pride:

If people aren't nice I don't care how rich they are.
I live on the best street in the world because my
husband and children live there! (p. 106)

The growing sense of warmth, generated by the simplicity of the dialogue, reaches its climax in the question Beulah asks her father: "Are you glad I'm still alive, pa?" (p. 108) Into these few words, Wilder packs man's basic feelings: the desire for love, the fear of rejection, and the fear of death.²⁰

Before Wilder wrote Our Town (1938), his classic picture of family life and devotion, he had met Gertrude Stein to whom he is indebted for her encouragement. In her book, The Making of America, Gertrude Stein emphasizes the vital importance of the family bond in the middle class from which "has always sprung...the very best

¹⁹Goldstein, p. 81.

²⁰Ibid., p. 82.

the world can ever know, and everywhere we always need it."²¹ To these ideas, Thornton Wilder subscribes, and he incorporates them in Our Town (1938), showing the Webbs and the Gibbs as representative middleclass families of any country in any era. True, Wilder starts his play in a New England setting during the time span of 1901-1913, but the town is only a focal point. He extends the scope of the play through the centuries by having the Stage Manager refer, for instance, to the vast numbers of ancestors of both Emily and George, or by moving the action of the play into the future and back again, or by implying that Grover's Corners is a speck in the cosmos and, at the same time, is a representation of the universe. The result is that the audience or the readers, regardless of the century or the country to which they belong, can identify with the dialogue of the characters. If the characters' names were omitted, one would find it impossible to detect whether it were Mrs. Webb or Mrs. Gibbs or, indeed, one's own mother speaking. However, the message of love, concern and pride are identifiable.

Children! Now I won't have it. Breakfast is just as good as any other meal and I won't have you gobbling like wolves. It'll stunt your growth,--that's a fact. Put away your book, Wally. (Act I, p. 11)

I've already told you, yes. Now that's enough of that. You have a nice pretty face. I never heard of such foolishness. (Act I, p. 20)

²¹Donald Haberman, The Plays of Thornton Wilder: A Critical Study (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 103.

Now, George! Put on your overshoes. It's raining torrents. You don't go out of this house without you're prepared for it. (Act II, p. 35)

Throughout Our Town are evidences of family love, all stated in an undertone to avoid sentimentality: Wally giving Emily a gift that he had made in manual training class; Mrs. Gibbs selling Grandmother Wentworth's highboy with plans to get her husband to take her to Paris, yet giving the money to Emily and George for a wedding present; Mr. Webb helping Emily over her doubts on her wedding day and Mrs. Gibbs doing the same for her son. Wilder is asserting that in every family everywhere, these same acts of love have occurred and will occur again. Every husband has expressed his love for his wife in the same unromantic, flat tone that Dr. Gibbs used in his words which revealed his pride in his wife and his lonesomeness: "I don't know why she's in that old choir. She hasn't any more voice than an old crow...Traipsin' around the streets at this hour of the night..." (Act I, p. 24)

Thornton Wilder reemphasizes his theme of family devotion in The Skin of Our Teeth (1942), widening the range in the play to show the Antrobus family surviving catastrophe after catastrophe: the Ice Age, the Flood, and a World War. Although the family has a home address in Excelsior, New Jersey, George and Maggie Antrobus represent Adam and Eve. Their son Henry, renamed after he killed his brother, is the source of worry for his parents, yet they never give up hope for him, particularly his mother who cherishes him.

Sabina, the maid, succinctly sums up Mrs. Antrobus when she says that she

...lives only for her children; and if it would be any benefit to her children she'd see the rest of us stretched out dead at her feet...If you want to know anything more about Mrs. Antrobus, just go and look at a tigress, and look hard. (Act 1, p. 71)

In his latest novel, The Eighth Day (1967), Wilder creates a different type of hero and heroine in John and Beata Ashley who reject their own parents, have their four children out of wedlock, yet rear a family, each independent and selfless in love. The Ashleys are not the typical American family. In this respect, Wilder is departing from his universal-man theme but for a purpose as the unfolding of the plot reveals. John Ashley refuses to dictate to his children and he is faithful to his wife. After Ashley has been accused of killing his friend, sentenced to die, rescued from his guards by unknown persons, and has finally reached Chile, he realizes that his life means little to him without his family, that he is a family man and little else. When Dr. MacKenzie suggests that Ashley take a hillwife, he blundered worse than he knew, for Ashley feels that unless he remains faithful to his wife "the walls of 'The Elms' would sway, totter, and collapse."²² Although Ashley has failed to save money for his family's future, each child possesses or gains the grit to provide for himself, particularly the youngest, practical child, who saves the "Ashley

²²Thornton Wilder, The Eighth Day (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 151.

family through the exercise of hope," (p. 56) though she sacrifices her physical and mental health in doing so. Wilder wraps the plot of his latest novel in the blanket of family devotion.

The warmth with which Thornton Wilder depicts family love in his writing is indicative of the depth of feeling he has for his own family. In looking for the universal expression of love between family members, Wilder captures the clichés in family conversation which are not trite because the members intuitively grasp the unspoken emotion.

One cannot read Thornton Wilder's plays and novels without feeling Wilder's belief that the love man holds for his fellowman is a solution to the problems which have plagued the world throughout history, that the survival of mankind will rest upon man's ability to love and to live with his fellowman. As he stated in an interview with Flora Lewis: "I have no patience with people who say they love nature and go out to look at a field on Sunday afternoons. Our families, the way we live with our fellowmen, are a part of nature, too."²³ In The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927), Wilder creates the Abbess Madre Maria del Pilar who is caught up in a desire to raise the dignity of women in Peru. Although her obsession is a selfless one, she was ready to sacrifice the young orphan Pepita to care for the Marquesa in order to bend the older

²³Flora Lewis, "Thornton Wilder at Sixty-five Looks Ahead and Back," New York Times Magazine, April 15, 1962, p. 50.

woman's attention and money toward the project as well as to give Pepita a worldly experience that she would need as the Abbess' chosen successor to the project. After Pepita's death on the bridge, the Madre knows that her life's work will not continue; but more than this, she realizes the capacity of Pepita's love for her and, too late, the depth of love she has for Pepita:

...the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even the memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning. (p. 653)

In The Woman of Andros (1930), Wilder initiates the Christian concept of love in the character of Chrysis who befriends the old and the sick but, in her innermost monologues, refers to them as her sheep. She reminds herself that she must love them, not just tend to them: "If I love them enough, I can understand them." (p. 47) Chrysis recognizes a kindred spirit in Pamphilus and worries about his compassion:

He thinks he is failing. He thinks he is inadequate to life at every turn. Let him rest someday, O ye Olympians, from pitying those who suffer. Let him learn to look the other way. This is something new in the world, this concern for the unfit and the broken. (p. 77)

Wilder, in giving Christian-like qualities to his pre-Christian character, suggests the Herculean task man must face in order to love the "unfit and the broken" in Chrysis' words: "It is true that of all forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age." (p. 55) Hermine Pepper points out that in his earlier works,

Wilder views man's ability to love his fellowman as a disinterested generosity, an expression of the spirit, remote from and, indeed, opposed to the body, the self.²⁴

Wilder moves toward man's active involvement in loving mankind in Heaven's My Destination (1934). As the epigram to his novel, he uses Chrysis' speech about goodness which epitomizes his character, George Brush. Brush tries to live by the words of Christ: helping the needy, turning the other cheek, and giving away worldly gains. However, society is not ready for the Christ-fool: he is thrown in jail or denounced as an enemy of the people. According to Dayton Kohler, Wilder, in this gently satiric novel, is suggesting America in its awkward age, making itself ridiculous with acts of innocent, well-intended goodness. Furthermore, George Brush represents two aspects of the national image; the Yankee peddler and the Puritan idealist.²⁵ Perhaps Wilder is hinting that the American national policy of feed-the-world, save-the-world-for-democracy, and everyone-must-be-our-friend should heed Judge Carberry's sage suggestion to George Brush: "Go slow; go slow. The human race is pretty stupid...Doesn't do any good to insult 'm. Go gradual." (p. 247)

Man's ability to survive in spite of all his mistakes is the theme of The Skin of Our Teeth (1942). Mr. Antrobus, wishing to

²⁴Popper, p. 78.

²⁵Kohler, p. 9.

preserve human knowledge and dignity in the face of disaster, offers food, drink, and shelter to the refugees who are, in truth, Moses, Homer, and the Seven Muses. Mrs. Antrobus objects to his taking food out of his children's mouths, but her husband points out:

Who've we got in the house, but Sabina?...Whose spirits can she keep up? Maggie, these people never give up. They think they'll live and work forever. (Act I, p. 87)

Wilder suggests the dangers of race hatred when Henry in ungovernable rage picks a fight with a Negro and his mother tries to control him. Henry, also representing the enemy of the World War, is played by a young actor who confesses the part has had harrowing effects on his own character. In the scene where he is threatening to strangle Mr. Antrobus, he loses himself in the part and, all at once, Mr. Antrobus becomes his father who has locked him in his room and put rules in the way of everything he wants to do. Wilder is getting at the basics of man's antisocial drives, but at the same time he offers, through Harry, a plea for sympathetic understanding. In this play, Wilder intimates that although mankind has survived the catastrophes of the Ice Age, the Flood, and a World War, he must still learn to live with his fellowman if he wishes to survive.

By the time Wilder writes The Ides of March (1948), he has broadened his theme of love: no longer were "pleasure, passion, and self-interest inimical to true love."²⁶ Wilder reflects his changing

²⁶Popper, p. 78.

concepts in Julius Caesar's letter to Lucius Mamilius Turrinus:

The erotic--have we not explained away too easily all that accompanies the fires that populate the world?... I seem to have known all my life, but to have refused to acknowledge that all, all love is one, and that the very mind with which I ask these questions is awakened, sustained, and instructed only by love.²⁷

In this same novel, Wilder shows that love and hate are closely related in the incident when a prowler with a dagger is caught in Caesar's palace. The man is incoherent but not with fear: he had wanted one drop of Caesar's blood with which to sanctify himself. Now he asks the honor of being killed by Caesar's own hand. Caesar has the man released and remarks to bystanders: "It is often difficult to distinguish hate from love." (p. 135)

In a vastly different style and form from his previous plays, Wilder writes The Matchmaker (1955), a spoof on the sentimental plays of the past. Dolly Levi loves people and wants to see them happy and secure, herself included. She sees the young and the old chained to their jobs, the employees fearing and hating their employers, and Mr. Vадergelder, representing the employers, deluded into thinking money is power. Dolly Levi is "a fixer of lives" and through her efforts, the people around her begin to see that money is not the important thing but loving others is. As Dolly says: "Money is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around encouraging young things to grow." (Act III, p. 222)

²⁷Thornton Wilder, The Ides of March (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), p. 37.

In a serious approach, Wilder incorporates this disregard for accumulating money and a compassion toward his fellowman into his character, John Ashley, in The Eighth Day (1967). Roger Ashley is told that his father had given one hundred and fifty dollars to the members of the Covent Church to rebuild their church after it had slipped off the hill during a cloud burst. Little by little the members repay the debt, but Ashley always used the money to help their children in some way. In this novel, Wilder demonstrates that sometimes men choose to misunderstand acts of kindness and love. Ashley had worked long hours to improve the safe working conditions of the miners in Coaltown, Illinois, yet during Ashley's trial not one of these miners testify in his behalf. Some insinuate that Ashley had made the improvements in an effort to take over the job of the supervisor, the murdered man. Wilder's view of man's ability to love his fellowman evolves through an earlier optimistic, generous spirit to a more realistic, sometimes slightly pessimistic, concept that man finds loving another a difficult task. His personal doubts are revealed in an interview in 1962, speaking of the suggestion of writing an Act IV for The Skin of Our Teeth:

But how can I say if we'll get by again?...There's a long race to develop our culture. The whole story of a boy growing up, learning to straighten his shoulders. But we haven't learned enough yet to live side by side.²⁸

²⁸Lewis, p. 54.

Yet in spite of these doubts expressed in this interview, Wilder, in his latest novel, The Eighth Day (1967), continues to show his hope for man's survival through an all-encompassing love for mankind.

Another aspect of the love theme that Wilder develops throughout his range of novels and plays is that man loves his life on earth yet often fails to appreciate it. While he was still a young man, Wilder wrote in the Foreword to The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays (1928): "An artist is one who knows how life should be lived at its best and is always aware of how badly he is doing it." (p. xi) In his various works, Wilder repeats his praise of life and illustrates men's failure to appreciate it and to live it to its fullest. In his first novel, The Cabala (1926), he introduced the thought of the efficacy of praising life to the dying who find comfort in the fact that their struggles through life have been worth the effort. However, one has difficulty grasping the full import of the idea as he expresses it for the first time:

Apparently for weeks together in that wretched atmosphere of the sick-room Francis had neglected to speak highly of anything and the poet wanted before he left the strange world to hear some portion of it praise. (p. 32)

Some twenty years later, Wilder reworks this idea in The Ides of March (1948) in the scene where Caesar comforts the dying poet Catullus in much the same manner. Caesar, at the bedside of Catullus, writes his friend Turrinus of his thoughts:

He is sleeping.

Another hour has gone by. We talked. I am no stranger to deathbeds. To those in pain one talks about themselves; to those of clear mind one praises the world that they are quitting. There is no dignity in leaving a despicable world and the dying are often fearful lest life was not worth the effort it had cost them. I am never short of subjects to praise. (p. 145)

One can see that in the interim of years Wilder has come to grips with the idea in this later work.

Another avenue to appreciating life is by contemplating death. Some people think that they enhance the savor of life by evading the thoughts of death. That Wilder believes the reverse is true is shown by Chrysis in The Woman of Andros (1930), herself a dying woman, who can say: "...that I have known the worst that the world can do to me, and that nevertheless I praise the world and all the living." (p. 107) Wilder restates the worth of contemplating death in The Ides of March (1948) when Caesar writes his friend: "Only those who have grasped their non-being are capable of praising the sunlight." (p. 144) And again, feeling that his death is imminent, Caesar writes that "...each year I say farewell to the spring with a more intense passion." (p. 144)

Wilder also believes that a busy, self-centered, or driven life is not necessarily a fulfilled one. The extraordinary group of people who represent reincarnations of the Olympian gods in The Cabala (1926) have kept themselves alive "through sheer self-absorption in their preoccupations with futile or foolish affairs,"²⁹

²⁹Goldstein, p. 47.

ignoring the twentieth-century life around them. The Cabalists have failed to gather new worshippers, to reproduce themselves, and to broaden their powers. Young Samuele must learn, Wilder intimates, a lesson from the Cabalists whose neurotic drives for unattainable goals have kept them from the pleasant and useful activities of a good life. Wilder reaffirms this idea more explicitly in The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) when the Madre realizes that her absorption in her humanitarian project for the women of Peru and in her attentiveness to the affairs of the convent has sacrificed the orphans, Pepita, Estehan and Manuel, who looked to her as a mother. Nevertheless, her consecration to a life work for the good of all puts to shame the self-centered absorption of the Marquesa. Feeling that she might never claim the love of her daughter, the Marquesa lost first her religious beliefs and next her belief in the sincerity of those about her. She secretly refused to believe that anyone, except herself, loved anyone and that all families

...loved in a wasteful atmosphere of custom and kissed one another with secret indifference...She saw that other people of this world moved about in an armor of egotism, drunk with self-gazing,...unmoved by the accidents that befell their closest friends, in dread of all appeals that might interrupt their long communion with their own desires. (p. 593)

Wilder repeats this idea of wasting life on self-centered passions in the speech of Simon Stimson, the alcoholic in Our Town (1938), who says to Emily when she returns to the dead:

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. (Act III, p. 63)

In her painful return to the living, Dolly has found this blindness in the lives of her family as they scurry through the motions of living without stopping to cherish what life has to offer. Her poignant plea to her mother is evidence of her awareness:

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. (Act III, p. 62)

"Make the most of life while you are living it" seems to be Wilder's urgent plea. He introduces the idea in his first novel, The Cabala (1926), when Virgil appears to young Samuele, who was torn between lingering with the past and longing for the present, and says: "Seek out some city that is young. The secret is to make a city, not to rest in it. When you have found one, drink in the illusion that she too is eternal." (p. 166) Seizing life by joining the human race is Dolly Levi's philosophy in The Matchmaker (1955). After her husband died, Dolly retired into herself. After two years of this kind of existence, one night an oak leaf, given to her the day Mr. Levi had proposed, fell out of her Bible. The leaf was in good shape but drab and lifeless. Suddenly Dolly realizes

that she is like that oak leaf and decides to rejoin the human race. After she has opened her eyes, she finds many others whose drab lives need her well-intended interference to get them on the road to living. As 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." (Act IV, p. 221)

Wilder restates the idea of living in the present, not the past, in The Eighth Day (1967) in the scene where John Ashley, thinking about the hardships and the opprobrium to which his family is being subjected, prays: "Forget me. Put me out of your minds and live. Live. Amen!" (p. 145) Again, Wilder emphasizes the zest in living life to its fullest in Caesar's words in The Ides of March (1948):

I wish to cry out to all the living and all the dead that there is no part of the universe that is untouched by bliss...Let me not be the dupe of well-being or content, but welcome all experience that reminds me of the myriad cries of execration [sic] and of delights that have been wrung from men in every time...(p. 179-180)

As Barnaby in The Matchmaker (1955) sums up the idea: "The sign that something's wrong with you is when you sit quietly at home wishing you were out having lots of adventure." (Act IV, p. 224-5)

Wilder employs still another technique in restating the value of everyday life by having the dead return to earth for a last experience with the life they have failed to appreciate while living it. The author initiates this idea in his first novel, The Cabala (1926), when Virgil appears in response to Samuele's plea, and while he is talking, the poet becomes aware of the

Mediterranean. Both the agony and the ecstasy he felt about living is expressed in his words: "Oh, beautiful are these waters. Behold! For many years I have almost forgotten the world. Beautiful! Beautiful!--But no! what horror, what pain!" (p. 166) Wilder reworks the idea in The Woman of Andros (1930). As an indirect criterion on how to enjoy the most simple to the most complex experiences in life, Chrysis tells the assembled company the story of the hero who was granted permission by Zeus to return for one uneventful day in his past with the condition that he be the participant and the onlooker: "the participant who does the deeds and says the words of so many years before, and the onlooker who foresees the end." (p. 35) The hero agrees and chooses a day in his fifteenth year. He sees that the living, too, were dead, that people can only be said to be alive when they realize every moment of living. He calls for Zeus to relieve him of the pain of seeing his life and that of his loved ones being wasted. But before he returns to the dead, he kisses the soil of the world "that is too dear to be realized." (p. 36) Wilder revives this notion in the one-act play, "Pullman Car Hiawatha" (1931), and perfects it in Our Town (1938). Harriet, one of the passengers on the pullman, dies. Before she leaves with Gabriel, she turns and says goodbye to her husband, their home, the grammar and high schools, her favorite teachers, her church and the minister's family, and last, her parents. In Our Town (1938), Wilder employs

the same idea in having Emily's goodbyes said to the world, Grover's Corners and her parents. Hermine I. Popper, in comparing Wilder to contemporary writers, sheds light on Wilder's order: the world, the town, the person:

In the past twenty years, when both the predominant writers and the most influential critics have been shaping their images of life by moving, so to speak, from themselves as center out toward the universe, Wilder works from the universe in toward the self.³⁰

The hero in Chrysis' story, kissing the soil of the world "that is too dear to be realized," (p. 36) anticipates Emily's words; "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you." (Act III, p. 62) That Wilder believes far too few realize life while they are living it is evident when Emily asks the Stage Manager if anyone does and he answers, "No. The saints and poets, maybe--they do some." (Act III, p. 62) Wilder reworks this idea slightly in The Ides of March (1948) when Caesar ponders over similar thoughts:

Can other men weave past joy into their thoughts in the present and their plans for the future? Perhaps only the poets can; they alone use all of themselves in every moment of their work. (p. 22)

In restating his theme of the values of life on earth and man's tendency to wrap himself in self-centered passions, to involve himself in the tasks of living rather than in the beauty of the experience, and to appreciate life most when he is losing it, Wilder is consistent from his earliest work to his later ones.

³⁰Popper, p. 77.

The third aspect of the theme of love that Wilder develops throughout his works is man's need and love for God. Although a religious tone permeates Wilder's writing almost without exception, he does not seem to be concerned with the Hereafter or with the tenets of any one religious sect; however, he is interested in the dignity and wholeness of man which is achieved only when man can overcome his selfishness and respond to his innate goodness. In this sense, Wilder's conception of man's love of God is presented as the "highest and most basic religious principles of humanity without falling into a repellent didacticism."³¹ In the Foreword to the three-minute plays, Wilder explains his position:

Almost all of the plays in this book are religious, but religious in that dilute fashion that is a believer's concession to a contemporary standard of good manners... It is the kind of work that there has seldom been an age in literature when such a vein was less welcome and less understood. (Foreword xv)

Thornton Wilder's interest in religion is not difficult to understand. His parents, devout Protestants, were actively involved in church education; his older brother Amos, who has written religious poetry, became a teacher of theology at Harvard; Wilder's father, thinking his own alma mater, Yale, too worldly for his son, chose Oberlin which was then emphatically religious in its undergraduate life and curriculum.³² Also, as previously mentioned, while he

³¹Donald Heiney, Recent American Literature, Vol. IV: Barron's Essentials (Woodbury, New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1958), p. 305.

³²Heinerman, pp. 28-29.

attended Yale, Wilder was influenced by the More-Babbitt humanistic school of criticism which advocated Christian morality. It was not easy for Wilder to depart from the devout Protestantism of his early training.

The three-minute plays in The Angel That Troubled the Water and Other Plays (1928), some of which Wilder composed as early as 1915, are in the exegetical tradition of a sermon which expounds upon a Biblical text, examining some of its implications for Christian life. Two plays which illustrate these implications are "How the Servant's Name Was Malchus" and "The Flight into Egypt." Malchus in heaven complains to the Lord that when people on earth think of him they do so unpleasantly, for he had held the horse of the High Priest who arrested the Lord in the garden. In retribution, Peter had lopped off his ear. Malchus asks that his name be erased from the Good Book so that he will not be remembered as ridiculous. The Lord reminds Malchus that He, too, was ridiculous because He suffered from the delusion that after His death, He could be useful to men, that in truth, He has deceived and cheated millions of souls who called on Him for aid. "My promises were so vast that I am either divine or ridiculous. Malchus, will you stay and be ridiculous with me?" (p. 112) Malchus agrees but confesses that the Book doesn't tell the truth: it was his left ear and not his right which was cut off. The Lord responds, "Yes, the book isn't always true about me, either." (p. 112) In "The Flight into Egypt" a talkative donkey,

Hepzibah, bearing the Holy Family as they flee into Egypt, reflects, "It's a queer world where the survival of the Lord is dependent upon donkeys." (p. 140) Upon Hepzibah's request for some answers to puzzles concerning faith and reason, Our Lady replies that perhaps the answers will be revealed someday but "for the present just do as I do and bear your master on." (p. 140) One notes the didactic, unquestioning faith that Wilder reveals at this period of his life.

In The Cabala (1926), which Wilder began when he was in Rome on a post-graduate year of study in archaeology under the auspices of the American Academy at Rome, Wilder may be giving an unflattering self-portrait in Samuele, a young man of Calvinist upbringing who is intolerably stubborn and aloof.³³ It is Samuele's task to save the Cabalists, either by guiding them toward normality or by changing the world so that the Cabalists' behavior seems normal. Samuele attempts these onerous duties, but his inherent Puritanism renders him too insensitive to serve as counselor or god; instead of helping them he aids in their destruction. Wilder seems to be cautioning the inexperienced to find themselves before dabbling with the souls of others. His portrait of the Cardinal, who had been so successful in converting Chinese, shows a man losing his faith in the confines of Rome and unable to help others needing spiritual guidance.

Wilder, then, does not hesitate to show the two sides of his religious characters. Wilder's sketch of the Archbishop of Lima

³³Goldstein, p. 35.

in The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) pictures a worldly man, aware that most of the priests are corrupt. Once, when the archbishop heard the price charged for absolutions, he trembled with rage and announced his intentions of writing an edict. But there was no ink in the inkwell or indeed in all the palace. He became so upset that he fell ill and "learned to guard himself against indignations." (p. 636) In the same novel, Brother Juniper, resembling Samuele in his presumptuousness, sets out to prove that the death of the five on the bridge was by divine plan in an effort to present scientific proof to his Indian converts. In his investigations Brother Juniper did not discover the central passions of the lives of the five. Burned at the stake for heresy, Brother Juniper died thinking that no one believed in his good intentions. The novel offers no promises of earthly rewards nor does it speak out against active participation in this life in favor of passively waiting for life in the Hereafter. Conscious of being misinterpreted, Wilder writes: "Only one reader in a thousand notices that I have asserted a denial of the survival of identity after death."³⁴

Wilder continues his religious theme in The Woman of Andros (1930), based on Terence's Andria. Dayton Kohler sums up the theme of the novel as "man's blundering impulses toward truth in a pre-Christian age that awaited the light of a great faith."³⁵ Wilder's

³⁴Ibid., p. 61.

³⁵Kohler, p. 8.

opening paragraph, suggesting nature's response to these impulses, is poetry:

The earth sighed as it turned in its course; the shadow of night crept gradually along the Mediterranean, and Asia was left in darkness...Triumph had passed from Greece and wisdom from Egypt, but with the coming of the night they seemed to regain their lost honors, and the land that was soon to be called Holy prepared in the dark its wonderful burden. (p. 7)

Wilder shows that in her pagan world Chrysis has progressed as far as she can in helping others. She receives no help from the gods and whispers: "I suppose there is no god. We must do these things ourselves. We must drag ourselves through life as best we can." (p. 81) As admirable as these passages may be, they are not sufficient to overcome the didacticism of the novel. According to Malcolm Goldstein, after The Woman of Andros (1930) was published, rumblings of adverse criticism began to be heard, sparked by a hostile review by the veteran Communist journalist, Michael Gold.³⁶ Gold complained that he found only "a pastel, pastiche, dilettante religion"³⁷ in Wilder's rhetoric. Although Gold had angry replies to his accusation about Wilder, he found many supporters. The result was, as Donald Haberman puts it, "an official hands-off attitude by the critics--wilder was somehow not respectable."³⁸ Mary McCarthy is completely candid as she recalls her experience:

³⁶Goldstein, p. 69.

³⁷Michael Gold, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ," New Republic, LXIV (October 22, 1930), 266.

³⁸Haberman, p. 35.

How uneasy I felt when I decided that I liked Thornton Wilder's Our Town. Could this mean that there was something wrong with me? Was I starting to sell out? Such haunting fears, like the fear of impotence in men, were common in the avant-garde in those days.³⁹

Mary McCarthy's comment concerning Our Town was made some years after Gold's attack, showing the period of years this "hands-off" attitude prevailed. Wisely, Wilder made no reply to Gold's criticism; nevertheless, The Woman of Andros (1930) marks the close of his early works. Already Wilder was busy on two works, The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act (1931) and Heaven's My Destination (1934), works that were vastly different from his first, written during 1930-1936 while lecturing on comparative literature at the University of Chicago. Not only had he abandoned the preciousness which marred his earlier work, but he left the antiquity and distant romantic scenes and began investigating American life in its least sensational aspects.⁴⁰ Wilder's one-act plays of The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act (1931) are a transition from his early religious views to the more effective methods of expressing them in his later mature works. In "Pullman Car Hiawatha" Wilder locates the car first in terms of its passengers, then geographically (Grover's Corners, Ohio), meteorologically, astronomically, and finally, theologically. Wilder emphasizes the same idea that all petty, everyday actions of everyone

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Goldstein, p. 73.

are contained in God's mind in Our Town (1938) when Rebecca tells of Jane Crofut receiving a letter from her minister addressed: "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." (Act I, p. 28-9) Robert McNamara, comparing Willa Cather's and Thornton Wilder's phases of religion shown in their writing, asserts that both writers agree that America, founded by units which were intensely religious, has "grown more and more to disregard religion, first to separate God from life, and then to live entirely without him."⁴¹ Perhaps, Wilder is showing this non-religious American trend in "Pullman Car Hiawatha" when the dying woman cries out to Gabriel: "I'm ashamed to come with you. I haven't done anything. I haven't done anything with my life... I'm just a stupid and you know it. I'm just another American." (p. 667) In Heaven's My Destination (1934), Wilder demonstrates that he understood the difficulties in his earlier religious expression. The novel is linked to The Woman of Andros (1930) by its epigraph, "Of all the forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age." which comes from this earlier novel. Wilder seems to be acknowledging his own ineptness in portraying a religious experience. When Richard H. Goldstone in 1957 asked whether George Brush resembled

⁴¹Robert McNamara, "Phases of American Religion," The Catholic World, CXXIV (September, 1932), 641-642.

his creator, the author asserted the following:

I came from a very strict Calvinistic father, was brought up partly among missionaries in China, and went to that splendid college at Oberlin at a time when classrooms and student life carried a good deal of the pious didacticism which would now be called narrow Protestantism. And that book Heaven's My Destination is, as it were, an effort to come to terms with those influences.

The comic spirit is given to us in order that we may analyze, weigh and clarify things in us which would nettle us, or which we are outgrowing, or trying to reshape. That is a very autobiographical book.⁴²

Wilder has observed privately that Brush is developed not only from his own life, but from the personalities of his father and brother and Gene Tunney, another seeker after the light.⁴³ For instance, Wilder became a good friend of Gene Tunney, the heavy-weight boxing champion who stunned both the literary and sporting worlds by his announcement that he was giving up the ring to read Shakespeare.⁴⁴ In the novel George Brush carried a copy of King Lear with him, but "he had read the play ten times without discovering a trace of talent in it." (p. 119) Nevertheless, we find enough of Wilder in the character to imagine that it might be he who turns his face away from Dr. Bowie of the First Methodist Church and murmurs, "I made the mistake of thinking that you could get better and better until you were perfect." (p. 299)

⁴²Richard H. Goldstone, "Thornton Wilder," in Writers at Work: The Paris Review, ed. by Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Compass Edition, 1957), p. 104.

⁴³Goldstein, p. 83.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 11.

Just as George Brush in the hospital lashes out at the minister and asks him to leave, so in The Eighth Day (1967) Philip Ashley "when he was in jail asked Dr. Benson not to visit him again." (p. 372) The bequest of a silver spoon from Father Pasziewski, whom Brush has never met but has admired through hearing of his tireless good works, is the instrument which frees George Brush from his darkest despair. From these few instances taken from many others, Wilder seems to be saying that it is not the Bible, or the minister, or any special faith but the man himself and his own religious feeling that are important.

The change both in Wilder's understanding of religion and his expression of that feeling was, according to Donald Haberman, undeniably aided and clarified by his friendship with Gertrude Stein, who had come to the University of Chicago on a lecture tour in the winter of 1935 while Wilder was teaching there. They became close friends and that summer Wilder visited her in Europe.⁴⁵ Wilder was not the first American writer to come under the influence of Miss Stein, but she and Wilder became so remarkably close that they talked about writing a book together, she the plot and Wilder the dialogue, certainly an evidence of mutual artistic and personal admiration.⁴⁶ Wilder had shown throughout his writing career his conception of history telescoped into another period of time as well

⁴⁵Haberman, p. 37.

⁴⁶Ibid.

as of the repetition of events throughout history. Miss Stein corroborates these ideas. She believes that because Americans live on a vast mainland which can easily be crossed due to modern transportation, they have developed a powerful time-space sense as well as a sense of mobility; therefore, they tend to view themselves in relation to the world, even the universe, not in isolation from it, and their literature reflects this sweeping quality of thought.⁴⁷ Thornton Wilder found these ideas harmonious with his own. At her request, Wilder wrote the introduction to her book, Four in America (1947), in which he states the following:

Religion, as Miss Stein uses the term, has very little to do with cults and dogmas, particularly in America... Religion is what a person knows--knows beyond knowing, knows beyond anyone's power to teach him--about his relation to the existence in which he finds himself.⁴⁸

Religion for Miss Stein, as for other American authors, particularly Thoreau and Whitman, was an intensity of living, an awareness by man of his surrounding life as well as of his own self.⁴⁹ Instances have already been cited throughout Wilder's works illustrating his awareness of the value of living life to fulfillment, an awareness which sharpens in intensity in his later works and becomes a part of his religious concept. However, his expression of the eternal, of the "knowing beyond knowing...or anyone's power to teach him" is in evidence, also. The Stage Manager in Our Town (1938), in preparation for the wedding of George and Emily expresses the idea:

⁴⁷Goldstein, pp. 99-100.

⁴⁸Haberman, p. 38.

⁴⁹Ibid.

The real hero of his scene isn't on the stage at all, and you know who that is. It's like what one of those European fellas said: every child born into this world is nature's attempt to make a perfect human being. Well, we've seen nature pushing and contriving for some time now. We all know that nature's interested in quantity; but I think she's interested in quality, too—that's why I'm in the ministry. (Act II, p. 45)

Wilder avoids sermonizing in the Stage Manager's speech by having him refer to the Creator as nature, striving for a perfect human being. Concerning immortality, the Stage Manager, speaking Wilder's beliefs, observes the following:

Now there are some things we all know but we don't take'm out and look at 'em very often. We all know that some-thing is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth...everybody knows...that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings...You know....that the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long...They're waitin' for something that they feel is comin'... Aren't they waitin' for the eternal part of them to come out clear? (Act III, p. 52.)

In The Skin of Our Teeth (1942), Wilder implies that God has created men whose impulses of goodness and wisdom remain suspended in eternity for others to live by. Mr. Antrobus reflects these thoughts:

Oh, I've never forgotten for long at a time that living is a struggle. I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for...All I ask is the chance to build new worlds and God has always given us that. And has given us voices to guide us; and the memory of our mistakes to warn us...(Act IV, p. 136)

Just as in "The Pullman Car Hiawatha," the complete cast, including the solar system, begins to hum along with the murmurs of the

thoughts of the passengers as the pullman car pulls into its destination, so as Mr. Antrobus ends his speech, Spinoza, Plato, Aristotle, and, finally, the unknown writer of Genesis move across the stage speaking one after another, giving in a cumulative effect the meaning in life.

Another influence on Wilder's religious philosophy which is evident in his development of the love theme, was that of Jean-Paul Sartre, at least the part that was derived from Sren Kierkegaard.⁵⁰ During Sartre's postwar lecture tour of American universities, Wilder made his acquaintance and was stirred by his commentary on existentialism. Later, as a personal favor to Sartre, Wilder translated one of Sartre's plays which was produced in Greenwich Village late in 1948.⁵¹ Although the atheistic implication of Sartre's philosophy was repugnant to Wilder, the commitment to life and the "demand upon the human spirit to proceed directly upon the path indicated by circumstances"⁵² was harmonious to Wilder's belief. One can note a modified existentialism in The Idea of March (1948) as Julius Caesar, the unbeliever, struggles with absorbing, torturing thoughts that perhaps there is a superior Mind which shapes and influences men's minds and actions. Caesar cannot resolve the problem. However, he hears a possible answer in the poet Catullus' legend of Alcestis, suggesting that it is impossible to distinguish between the spirit of gods and the spirit of

⁵⁰Goldstein, p. 142.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 22.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 21-22.

man. Upon hearing this, Caesar falls into an epileptic seizure, for him a kind of ecstasy. Caesar writes of his doubts to his friend:

...that Jupiter himself had never existed; that man was alone in a world in which no voices were heard than his own, a world neither friendly nor unfriendly save as he made it so.

And having reread what I wrote I destroyed it.... Am I sure that there is no mind behind our existence and no mystery anywhere in the universe?...If I acknowledge the possibility of one such mystery, all the other mysteries come flooding back: there are Gods who have taught us what is excellent and who are watching us; there are our souls which are infused in us at birth and which outlive our death; there are the rewards and punishments which furnish a meaning to our slightest action. (p. 169)

Unlike Wilder's former characters, Caesar realizes the value of life but finds sorrow in living life fully, a slight departure from his other themes.

John Ashley of The Eighth Day (1967) matured in his realization of life too late, he thought, for the welfare of his family; therefore, each new value in life that he found or any accomplishment of goodness was done in the name of one of his family. Wilder is suggesting that it is man's responsibility to find his own religious or moral values and proceed on that path. In this same novel, Deacon O'Hara, telling Roger Ashley of his father's benevolence, explains his theory that the Ashleys might be marked as a family that will bring forth a Messiah:

It is said that on the ocean every ninth wave is larger than the others. I do not know if that is true. So in the sea of human life one wave in many hundreds of thousands rises, gathers together in strength--the power--of many souls to bear a Messiah. At such times the earth groans; its hour approaches. (p. 376)

Wilder's cycle has again met itself; the last phrase of the preceding quote is reminiscent of the opening paragraph of The Woman of Andros (1930) foretelling the birth of Christ: "The earth sighed as it turned in its course...and the land that was soon to be called Hely prepared in the dark its wonderful burden." (p. 7) The Stage Manager expresses a similar thought in Our Town (1938) in the closing speech of the play:

There are the stars--doing their old, old criss-cross journeys in the sky. Scholars haven't settled the matter yet, but they seem to think there are no living beings up there. Just chalk...or fire. Only this one is straining away, straining away all the time to make something of itself. (Act III, p. 64)

Edmund Fuller sums up Wilder's religious philosophy succinctly when he states that Wilder's work "is permeated by a profound mystical and religious sensibility--too mature to war upon or sneer at orthodoxy, too creative to fit snugly in its confines."⁵³

Thornton Wilder, in his unfashionable moral stance and refusal to indulge in the sensational, has been swimming against the tide in the twentieth-century literary thought. However, Edmund Fuller points out that Thornton Wilder is "a conspicuous exception to the commonest generalization that American writers tend to be youthful, writing of and from youth and immaturity, failing to mature in art as they age in years."⁵⁴ Wilder's range

⁵³Edmund Fuller, "Thornton Wilder: The Notation of the Heart," American Scholar, XXVIII (Winter, 1959), 212.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 211.

in a mature vision of life and characters is, Fuller asserts, greater than that of those established men who are most nearly his peers.⁵⁵ From his first novel to his latest one, Wilder has been searching for the enduring qualities of love that are found in any era and in any man. Wilder crystalizes his ideas of the repetitive cycle in history in an article on drama:

I began writing one-act plays that tried to capture not versimilitude but reality...Every action which has ever taken place--every thought, every emotion--has taken place only once, at one moment in time and space. 'I love you,' 'I rejoice,' 'I suffer' have been said and felt many millions of times, and never twice the same.⁵⁶

In developing his love theme, Wilder demonstrates the variety of ways that he can emphasize or rework the same idea. His early works reveal that Wilder had his basic concepts of love: he esteems the love between man and woman; he values the love that binds a family; he has hope for mankind if man can love his fellowman; he warns man to live his life to its ultimate fulfillment; and he persists that "religious impulses in man are enduring."⁵⁷ Wilder repeats or reworks these ideas, often using the same situation or phrasing, moving from settings in foreign countries and past centuries, to the present American scene and the middleclass, and back again to Rome in The Ides of March in which he presents probably the most

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Thornton Wilder, "A Platform and a Passion or Two," Harper's Magazine, CCXV (October, 1957), 49-50.

⁵⁷Haberman, p. 52.

complete, fictionalized portrait of Julius Caesar, the man, in literature. True, Wilder does avoid romantic love scenes between man and woman, but he does so with an increasingly skillful evasion, emphasizing only the wholeness of a love experience. All other aspects of love that man undergoes, Wilder explores and, thereby, deepens his readers' perception of the meaning of life. Wilder's convictions that love is all-important to man's existence have not changed through his writing career, but they have broadened to become less didactic and more inclusive due, in part, to the influence of Gertrude Stein and Jean-Paul Sartre. In his later works, Wilder emphasizes that existence may be painfully difficult but yet better than most realize. He also shows that religious impulses in man may take different forms at different times and different places, but in man's attempt to clarify his relation to the unknowable, the divine, he gains the meaning behind living.⁵⁸ Thornton Wilder, dramatist and novelist, with his time-space manipulation in his various works, consistently stresses the importance of love to man in his relation to life, to others, and to God.

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 52-53.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cowley, Malcolm. "The Man Who Abolished Time." The Saturday Review, XXXIX (October 6, 1956), 13-14, 50-52.
- Fuller, Edmund. "Thornton Wilder: The Notation of the Heart." American Scholar, XXVIII (Winter, 1959), 210-17.
- Gold, Michael. "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ." New Republic. LXIV (October 22, 1930), 266-7.
- Goldstein, Malcolm. The Art of Thornton Wilder. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965.
- Goldstone, Richard H. "Thornton Wilder." in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interview. Edited by Malcolm Cowley. New York: Viking Compass Edition, 1957.
- Haberman, Donald. The Plays of Thornton Wilder: A Critical Study. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967.
- Heiney, Donald. Recent American Literature, Vol. IV: Barron's Essentials. Woodbury, New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1958.
- Kohler, Dayton. "Thornton Wilder." The English Journal. XXVIII (January, 1939), 1-11.
- Lewis, Flora. "Thornton Wilder at Sixty-five Looks Ahead and Back." New York Times Magazine. April 15, 1962, pp. 28, 54, 56, 58.
- McNamara, Robert. "Phases of American Religion." The Catholic World. CXXXIV (September, 1932), 641-9.

- Popper, Hermine I. "The Universe of Thornton Wilder." Harpers' Magazine. CCXXX (June, 1965), 72-81.
- Wilder, Thornton. The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1928.
- Wilder, Thornton. The Bridge of San Luis Rey in Four American Novels. Edited by Edmund Fuller and Olga Achtenhagen. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1959.
- Wilder, Thornton. The Cabala. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1926.
- Wilder, Thornton. The Eighth Day. Popular Library. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.
- Wilder, Thornton. Heaven's My Destination. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935.
- Wilder, Thornton. The Ides of March. New York: Harper and Row, 1950.
- Wilder, Thornton. The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act. Harper Colophon Books. New York: Harper and Row, 1931.
- Wilder, Thornton. "A Platform and a Passion or Two." Harpers' Magazine, CCXV (October, 1957), 48-51.
- Wilder, Thornton. Three Plays by Thornton Wilder: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker. A Bantam Book. New York: Harper and Row, 1958.
- Wilder, Thornton. The Woman of Andros. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1930.