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The Basic Conceptions of Love Presented in the Novels of Thornton Wilder

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The Basic Conceptions of Love Presented

in the Novels of Thornton Wilder

(TITLE)

BY

Susan Annette Champlin

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THESIS

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In the novels of Thornton Wilder three aspects of love are shown through his characters. There is the love where one can "love one another deeply but without passion." There is the love that is "love as passion." Then there is "the final, giving of self in love,"¹ this being the ultimate realization of life lived in love. Wilder has his main characters live in the constant giving of self in love, for it is only through this love that people can realize life while they live it, every, every minute. This can be the answer to Emily's questioning in Our Town, if "human beings realize life while they live it? --every, every minute?"² This is the way through which human beings learn the importance of life while living it.

People in Wilder's novels usually come to understand that to realize life and live it fully, they must first be able to give of themselves in love. This realization can occur through the teaching of others, and then changes will be seen in the life of the person affected, as Astree-Luce in The Cabala (1926); three of the five characters killed in the fall of The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927),

¹Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey (New York, 1965), pp. 79; 97; 113.

²Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1965), p. 105.

plua the actress, Camila Perichole; Pamphilus in The Woman of Andros (1930); George M. Brush in Heaven's My Destination (1935), and in his latest novel, The Eighth Day, this realization comes to most of the Lansings and the Ashley's. John and Roger Ashley are unusual because they have and live the final giving of self in love, but they do not realize consciously what it is that sets them apart until it is revealed to them through people. Then Wilder has a collection of characters who throughout the novel are conscious of this final giving of self: The Cardinal in The Cabala; The Abbess in The Bridge of San Luis Rey; Chrysis in The Woman of Andros; Caesar in The Ides of March (1948) and Eustacia Lansing in The Eighth Day. The difference between a conscious awareness and the sub-conscious unknowing comes when one becomes aware that this quality sustains life, and he can share this with others. This knowledge, this awareness, Wilder believes, can be discussed and hopefully, it can be spread verbally as well as by being lived.

Wilder reveals the depth of a character as he relates and interacts with others in the novel. In The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Camila Perichole can realize love only as passion. She is mistress to a Viceroy, has a son Jamie by him, yet courts other men. She leaves the theater and retires to the Viceroy's villa to raise her son. When left scarred from smallpox, she knows her life is ruined; no one could possibly care about her; her beauty--her self--is gone. When Uncle Pio, the man who educated her and trained her for the

stage, comes to her villa and asks for young Jamie for a year to educate, she consents out of duress. Uncle Pio and Jamie are killed on the bridge. It is one year after this occurrence, after one year of self pity and mourning, that Camila hears of an Abbess who lost loved ones on the bridge. She comes to the Abbess and is told:

But soon we shall die and all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even 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.³

Thus Camila Perichole realizes the value of the final giving of self in love. And as she learned this through the death and loss of ones who truly loved her before she could accept life as wonderful and live it, so those who died on the bridge had just found a new reason for life, a new hope to live for, and a realization that one must give of one's self to live. Uncle Pio had hoped to live, for he had Jamie and felt needed. Jamie had always been in ill health and for the first time in his young life he has a chance to "live" away from constant protection. For the first time since the death of his twin brother, Manuel Estaban has concern for someone, the Abbess, and leaves his self-pity behind. The Marquesa had found someone close to her who would return her love instead of wasting it on her daughter who was far away and unable to return love. Pepita

³Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, p. 68.

also realized there was someone near who needed her love and who can return love; this was the Marquesa. Thus the deaths of the people who are on the bridge "generate a love in the survivors that did not exist before. Love is indispensable if life is to have any meaning."⁴

Scholastica Lily Ashley of The Eighth Day is similar to Camila in that she too is one who knows love as passion, yet their difference is that Lily is totally of herself physically, while having a concern for others. These women are Wilder's expression of the person who gives of passion, yet one realizes life and one doesn't until it is revealed to her.

Wilder has life and the giving of self revealed in various ways in various characters. In The Cabala, Wilder has a young American in Greece as the narrator, and as he reports his relationship to various members of a group called the Cabala, we see that these people are viewed not only as they are, but as the narrator is, and they seem to change as he does. First handled is Marcantonio, a young aristocrat. The boy's mother and the Cardinal ask the narrator to help persuade this young man to change his ways, as Marcantonio is concerned with other men and seemingly has no interest in women. The narrator could not love him deeply without passion, nor could he tell or show to Marcantonio this love or the final giving of self in love. He could only be a companion and could only criticize

⁴Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder. (New York, 1961), p. 48.

when Marcantonio finally shared himself by expressing his sins.

The narrator's chastising resolves itself within Marcantonio by his first raping his half-sister and then committing suicide.

The narrator next meets Alix d'espoli.

She had achieved the mastery of a fine art, the art of conversation, under the impetus of love.⁵

Nature caused her to fall in love with the type of youth that could not be attracted to her. The cool and impersonal athletes, violinists, scientists.⁶

The narrator recognizes her as selfless, and as she loves his best friend, they become companions as his friend sees her only as a person called woman. The narrator falls in love with her, and he expresses it in this way: "I was trembling with a strange happy excitement, made up partly of my love and pity for her, and partly from the mere experience of eavesdropping on a beautiful spirit in the last reaches of its pride and suffering."⁷ He now experiences the relationship where one can love another deeply but without passion. This has been Alix's life and she has revealed it to him.

He experiences and learns about the final giving of self in a strange way. Marcantonio's mother, Astrée-Luce de Morfontaine, has been revealed as an extremely religious woman, who wanted the best for her son and her friend, the eighty-year-old Cardinal. Since

⁵Thornton Wilder, The Cabala (New York, 1928), p. 115.

⁶Ibid., p. 113.

⁷Ibid., p. 132.

the death of her son, she has decided to encourage the Cardinal to be the saviour of Europe, to see Europe through troubled times. The Cardinal is wise, and wants her to realize her show and affectacious display of emotion is unreal. On the day she offers him encouragement, he challenges her blind trust and faith in the church and in him.

Who can understand religion unless he has sinned?
 Who can understand literature unless he has suffered?
 Who can understand love unless he has loved without
 response?⁸

Living is fighting and away from the field the
 most frightening changes were taking place in his
 mind.⁹

It is perhaps now, when the Cardinal realizes he does not have the love and respect from all that he had in his youth, that he feels he must challenge the faith of Astrée-Luce. The narrator is asked to carry a message of reconciliation from the Cardinal to Astrée-Luce. Thus again, the final giving of self in love proves the master of life, and provides meaningful life to those who realize this love does truly exist. For as Wilder stated it at this point: "When they discovered that they were living in a world where such things could be forgiven, that no actions were too complicated but that love could understand, or dismiss them, on that day they began their lives all over again."¹⁰

⁸Ibid., p. 187.

⁹Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 212.

So it is that in The Cabala, Wilder's first novel, we have his unique style revealing characters through one person, while at the same time, we see the change being made in our main character as he enters the lives of three people and observes their changing. This novel begins a Wilder style, a tapestry of figures interwoven to reveal the ultimate of life--the giving of self. Just as he is later to end The Eighth Day with history as one tapestry of life, so in his novels, selfless love is a tapestry of life.

George Marvin Brush in Heaven's My Destination comes to the same realization as the narrator in The Cabala, but he is a man very different from the narrator. George is a loud-mouthed preacher who tells everyone he meets of the sins they are committing, yet he can't understand why he isn't accepted and loved. George could see no shades of grey in life. He wanted to convert everyone to Christianity, yet he seemed to lack the basic needs involved with Christianity--needs called love and compassion. He can't conceive of love as a vital force of life until he learns of the death of a priest he had admired, though never met. George heard of the priest's illness through the people who loved him. Here was a religious man who had lived his faith and preached and who was loved by his people in return. Brush lived his faith, but lied to himself about his faults and he couldn't accept people and love them for themselves.

Brush entered an intensely emotional period which ended in physical illness. The priest gave George's landlady a silver spoon

to give to George because he had shown concern. She brings it to him when he is ill and tells him of the death of the priest. George cries. He now knows compassion--the ultimate of giving and thinking of others. He can now live a life of love and truly preach.

Again Wilder has his main character learn the total meaning of life through a cleric who isn't formally preaching but who lives what he believes. Perhaps this is a subtle Wilder giving advice to religious leaders as well as advice to men of society. Perhaps Wilder is telling us we are all men who can learn the art of giving. If Wilder's novels are approached chronologically, we can see that The Cabala stresses one man, its narrator, who is influenced by three others, one of which changes. In The Bridge of San Luis Rey five people are discussed and their lives revealed, but there is no plunging into their souls or probing the "why" of their actions in order to discover the reason for their state before they change and realize the value of life. The Woman of Andros deals with one woman, Chrysis, and the effect she has on her student Pamphilus. Heaven's My Destination deals with George Brush. The Idea of March deals with Julius Caesar. Most of these novels deal with this realization as it enters the lives of few people. It is only in his latest novel, The Eighth Day, Wilder plunges into the souls of two families. Wilder has them suffer at the hands of one another and learn consciously what others have known about them all along. This learning comes only after they have left their families. Wilder seems to be telling society that

not only can the wonder of life and giving be realized by a few people whose lives intertwine, but it can be realized by many. Eleven members of two families are taught not only by one another but they are taught by others who have realized this total giving of self and who are anxious that others should learn.

Wilder is a philosopher and a story teller. Both sides of Wilder are presented in his novels and particularly in The Eighth Day; perhaps it is this combination of story telling and philosophy which makes this novel his longest. John Ashley, and the type of person he is, and the type of people his children turn out to be, and the type of people the Lansing family individuals turn out to be, are presented to us at one point in the novel in the representative style of Wilder philosophy:

We did not choose the day of our birth nor may we choose the day of our death, yet choice is the sovereign faculty of the mind. We did not choose our parents, color, sex, health, or endowments. We were shaken into existence, like dice from a box. Barriers and prison walls surround us and those about us--everywhere, inner and outer impediments. These men and women with the aid of observation and memory early encompass a large landscape. They know themselves, but their self is not the only window through which they view their existence. They are certain that one small part of what is given us is free. They explore daily the exercise of freedom. Their eyes are on the future. When the evil hour comes, they hold. They save cities--or, having failed, their example saves other cities after their death. They confront justice. They assemble and inspire the despairing.

But what do these men and women have faith in?

They are slow to give words to the object of their faith. To them it is self-evident and the self-evident is not easily described.

There is no creation without faith and hope.

There is no faith and hope that does not express itself in creation. These men and women work. The spectacle that most discourages them is not error or ignorance or cruelty, but sloth.

John Ashley was of this breed. He was late maturing. He was a link in a chain, a stitch in a tapestry, a planter of trees, a breaker of stones on an old road to a not yet clearly marked destination.¹¹

John Ashley was late in maturing only in being aware that he was a person who gave of himself to others and in all that he did. He said he had no friends. He said he had done nothing. It is only after he is separated from his family and living in South America that he becomes aware of the type of person he is. It is because he is that type of person he can live his life, every minute of it.

Maria Icaza is one who helps John Ashley himself. "When God loves a creature He wants the creature to know the highest happiness and the deepest misery--then he can die. He wants him to know all that being alive can bring. That is His best gift. There is no happiness save in understanding the whole. You are a creature whom God loves--particularly loves. You are being born."¹²

¹¹Thornton Wilder, The Eighth Day. (New York, 1967), pp. 107-108.

¹²Ibid., p. 135.

Mrs. Wickersham expresses to John his drive and desire to improve the living conditions of others, by comparing his action to her ideas, which she is now too old to see fulfilled. He is the person who could see them become reality.

Life is a series of promises that come to nothing. Cities come and go like the sand castles that children build upon the shore. The human race gets no better. Mankind is vicious, slothful, quarrelsome, and self-centered. If I were younger and you were a free man, we could do something here--here and there. You and I have a certain quality that is rare as teeth in a hen. We work. And we forget ourselves in our work. From time to time everyone goes into an ecstasy about the glorious advance of civilization--the miracle of vaccination, the wonders of the railroad. But the excitement dies down and there we are again--wolves and hyenas, wolves and peacocks.

Yes, everything's hopeless. but we are the slaves of hope.¹³

The final giving of self, as seen in John Ashley, is brought to the reader through Ashley's son, Roger. Roger has been working in Chicago for three years and returned home. Wilder has revealed Roger as a man like his father, a person who gives of himself in all he does for the betterment of others, yet a person who does not realize this is a unique quality that gives one friends. Roger discovers he is like this during his return to Coaltown, Illinois, when he is handed a letter his father wrote to the Deacon of the church on Herkomer's Knob. "I leave a son behind me. I know no older men who could counsel, encourage, or rebuke him. I go to Joliet with my grandmother's prayer in my mind. She asked that our lives be used in

¹³Ibid., pp. 197-198.

the unfoldment of God's plan for the world. I must trust that I have not totally failed."¹⁴

"Roger was aware of a stab of longing: to look at his father, as one would look at a stranger whom one had heard highly commended."¹⁵

Porky's grandfather continued:

The people of Coaltown walk in despair. If we were to describe what is Hell it would be the place in which there is no hope or possibility of change: birth, feeding, excreting, propagation, and death--all on some mighty wheel of repetition. There is a fly that lives and lays its eggs and dies--all in one day--and is gone forever.

Can it be that this country is singled out for so high a destiny--this country which so greatly wronged my ancestors? God's ways are mysterious. I cannot answer these questions.

It may be that I am deceived in these matters. It may be that I am guilty of the sin of impatience.

It may be that this family and this America are mirages of my old eyes.¹⁶

Roger felt as though he had walked all his life in ignorance of abysses and wonders, of ambushes, of eyes watching him, of writing on clouds. It came to him that surely life is vaster, deeper, and more perilous than we think it is. He was suddenly filled with fear that he would go through life ignorant--stump ignorant--of the powers of light and the powers of darkness that were engaged in some mighty conflict behind the screen of appearances--fear, fear that he would live like a slave, or like a four-footed thing with lowered head.¹⁷

¹⁴Ibid., p. 428.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 426

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 431.

Thus John Ashley gave of himself to his son, through his friends, those men to whom he gave of himself. And it was in this same way that he gave new hope, new life to Eustacia Lansing and her son, George. It was because of her awareness of life and her renewed giving that Eustacia could ultimately give new hope of a new and different life to her husband, Breckenridge.

Some members of these families were fortunate in that they always were aware of the concept of the giving of self for an awareness of life. Constance Ashley and Félicité Lansing are these people. So was Sophia Ashley, but the burden of total responsibility for her family after Roger and her father left drained her. She gave, and at the time, no one was there to return her giving with thanks or love.

In two of Wilder's earlier novels we also have people who are always aware of the concept of giving in order to be aware of life. Though Wilder has the settings in similar backgrounds, the ways in which the people act differ.

Julius Caesar in The Ides of March has the ability to love various individuals deeply, some with passion and some without, but he also loves Rome and will strive to do what is best for her, for her strength and endurance. He realized he was but a man, and that life could only be realized through the giving of self, but a Caesar could not be as other men.

I not only bow to the inevitable; I am fortified by it. The achievements of men are more remarkable when one contemplates the limitations under which they labor.

The type of the Inevitable is death. I remember well in my youth I believed that I was certainly exempt from its operation. First when my daughter died, next when you were wounded, I knew that I was mortal; and now I regard those years as wasted, as unproductive, in which I was not aware that my death was certain, nay, momentarily possible. I can now appraise at a glance those who have not yet foreseen their death. I know them for the children they are. They think that by evading its contemplation they are enhancing the savor of life. The reverse is true: only those who have grasped their non-being are capable of praising the sunlight.¹⁸

In another letter to his friend, Lucius Mamilius Turrinus, a man who knew Caesar better than any other person, Caesar said this:

I am a man and a most fallible one, for there is no human weakness equal to that of trying to inculcate the notion that one is a God.

The older I grow, dear Lucius, the more I rejoice in being a man--mortal, mistaken, and unabashed. Today my secretaries timidly brought me a succession of documents on which I had made various kinds of errors. I corrected them one after one another, laughing. My secretaries frowned. They could not understand that Caesar would be delighted at his mistakes. Secretaries are not exhilarating companions.¹⁹

When Caesar is stabbed by Brutus, Wilder has an implied feeling behind Caesar's statement: "You, too, my son?" I feel Caesar recognizes Brutus as a man who has given of himself, but because of his position and his ambition he covers this aspect of his character feeling great men of state can not be this way, just as Caesar often felt tied down by his position.

¹⁸Thornton Wilder, The Ides of March (New York, 1948), p. 184.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 171.

Opposed to Caesar in that she was free to live in life giving of herself and her ideas of life, we have Chrysis, the woman of Andros. She leads discussions for young men of the village as they search for the meaning of life. She teaches the young scholars to "enjoy each event as it happens. Make the effort to realize the world."²⁰ "The living too are dead. We only are alive when our hearts are conscious of our treasure. The world is to (sic.) dear to be realized."²¹

Human beings merely endured the slow misery of existence, hiding their consternation that life had no wonderful surprises after all and that its most difficult burden was the incommunicability of love.²²

One never learns how to live or one's lights on living arrive too late....²³

This novel ends with the foreshadowing of the greatest love and gift of man's awareness of life and its potential. "And in the East the stars shone tranquilly down upon the land that was soon to be called Holy and that even then was preparing its precious burden."²⁴ Before the time of Christ, a Greek woman, ostracised by the community in which she lived, believed in the love for one another and in the

²⁰Goldstein, p. 68.

²¹Thornton Wilder, The Woman of Andros (New York, 1930), p. 36.

²²Ibid., p. 37.

²³Ibid., p. 47.

²⁴Ibid., p. 162.

final giving of self in love. It was this realization of love in life which she tried to impart to her students. For only after realizing the love man is capable of, can man see that the world is too dear to be realized.

Wilder uses the ideals developed with Caesar and Chrysis and utilizes them into the design that this can be everyman and his family. Thus each member of each family must learn to love, some deeply without passion, some a passionate love combined with the dream of giving of self, and some with the final giving of self in love. This knowing of self, this giving of love, and this living every moment of life is what the Lansings and the Ashleys and society learn in the novel The Eighth Day.

Wilder believes we can make it possible for youth to be the children of the Eighth Day, to learn about life. He says it through Dr. Gillies.

Nature never sleeps. The process of life never stands still. Man is not an end but a beginning. We are at the beginning of the second week. We are children of the eighth day.²⁵

In this new century we shall be able to see that mankind is entering a new stage of development--the Man of the Eighth Day.

Dr. Gillies was lying for all he was worth. It is the duty of old men to lie to the young. Let these encounter their own disillusionments. We strengthen our souls, when young, on hope; the strength we acquire enables us later to endure despair as a Roman should.

²⁵Wilder, The Eighth Day, p. 16.

The New Man is emerging. Mind and Spirit will be the next climate of the human. The race is undergoing its education. What is education, Roger? What is education, George? It is the bridge man crosses from the self-enclosed, self-favoring life into a consciousness of the entire community of mankind.²⁶

Through his seemingly uninvolved story combined with his philosophic passages, Thornton Wilder is telling us that for man to be whole, it is necessary that he be aware of the power and presence of selfless love, and then he can be aware of the world, and the living of life. And with this awareness, the world and life can be peaceful and enjoyable. This is the design in the arras that Wilder speculates man must find and reason out for himself.

History is one tapestry. No eye can venture to compass more than a hand's-breadth. . . .

There is much talk of a design in the arras. Some are certain they see it. Some see what they have been told to see. Some remember that they saw it once but have lost it. Some are strengthened by seeing a pattern wherein the oppressed and exploited of the earth are gradually emerging from their bondage. Some find strength in the conviction that there is nothing to see. Some²⁷

²⁶Ibid., p. 18.

²⁷Ibid., p. 435. (This is the exact ending of the novel.)

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