CHAPTER - V

THE COLOSSAL IDEALIST & NOAH OF THE NEW MILLINEUM
Not a scholar shackled by any traditional theoretical orientation, Thornton Wilder held various sources together in a special way in his plays. “Wilder’s job is to balance the individual experience with multiplicity” (Donald Haberman, *Our Town : An American Play. 26*). Now, nearly four decades after his death, Wilder’s dramatic proposition of universalism voiced in his works can be heard anew, and his theatrical presentation mostly exerted in *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* can also be revealed. *Our Town* is basically an incredible play – a pleasing fantasy with Wilder’s affirmative accent of the commonplace. *The Skin of Our Teeth*, on the other hand, an alarming but restless apocalypse shows a strong and promising belief that there is something in all that is eternal and meaningful. Incontestably, Wilder shows a broad insight into both American life and human history; however, he always manages to show the endurance of little people through private sorrow and sympathy.

From both remarkable records of the writer at work, one can realize a brilliant mind playing over various possibilities and coming to grip with the issue of how best to give literary expression to passionately held convictions.
Wilder’s plays indeed offer readers a general yet fascinating beauty and opportunity to discover his potentiality at work and the workings of his unique and innovative theatricality inherited from the classical, traditional, and even cross-cultural sources. Never being restrained by conventional modes of the theatre, Wilder develops a singular theatrical world and tour de force of his own. As Rex Burbank extols in his discussion on Wilder:

Going his own way saved him from being identified with the ‘schools’ of realism, naturalism […], but that freedom cost him the critical attention that accompanies recognizable affinities with other writers who are currently in favor, or with literary movements. His plays comprised a curious combination of the traditional and innovative, provincial and urbane, modern and Classical, American and European, timely and timeless – by careful design. (Rex Burbank, “Limitations and Achievement.” *Thornton Wilder*. 2nd edition. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1978. 17-18).

These qualities make him as one of the most popular playwrights of the twentieth century theatre and establish his “boundary-breaking” characteristic with “a higher and broader horizon” that his plays tend to display. On one level, Wilder’s various theatrical devices as we have discussed above are meant to destroy the boundary that conventional box-set has imposed upon the theater; on another, he crosses American cultural heritage by absorbing the new ideas from other cultures.
The subject matters of Wilder’s plays may seem trite to readers nowadays. But, in this old bottle, Wilder has tried to put some new wine. In the form of theatricality he strikingly spared almost visual set and props to a minimum and distorted the normal structures of time and space, but not drifted into a grotesque or coarse pattern. He has done a good job with skill and ease of his time. He has set up each of the two from a repeated storytelling of daily minutiae to an everlasting classic that people will continue to talk with great relish.

Wilder is a writer for the theatre of a collective mind in order to “come closer to reality” (John Gassner, “The Two Worlds of Thornton Wilder.” The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder. Vol. I ed. by Donald Gallup and A. Tappan Wilder. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997. 312). If what Bertolt Brecht wants is to provoke the audience by making the familiar unfamiliar with his alienation effect, and what Luigi Pirandello pursues is his life long inquiry into the reliability of appearances like a man’s mask; what Thornton Wilder attempts is to express his theatre’s profound concern to find a lucid, comprehensible metaphor for every modern man who left face to face with himself. John Gassner portrays that every Wilder’s major work helps to define his unique features and the configuration of a talent that embraces both “the commonplace of life and the life of imagination” that poises “between life and theatre, fantasy and philosophy, skepticism and mysticism, playfulness and sobriety.” (John Gassner, “The Two Worlds of Thornton Wilder.” The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder. Vol. I ed. by Donald Gallup and A. Tappan Wilder. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997. 312). Even though he possesses some theatrical resemblances in
form and presentation with his predecessors and coevals, there is still a discrepancy found between Wilder and other dramatists.

The same or similar technical means are used to explore and elucidate fundamentally different governing concerns, belief, and underlying visions … At the same time, in utilizing the older playwright’s techniques for his own purposes, Wilder maintained his integrity as an artist and converted his borrowings into raw material for the construction of his own unique theatrical idiom. (Paul Lifton, “East Meets West: Reflections of Asia, Classical European, and Popular American Theatres in Wilder’s Plays.” Vast Encyclopedia: The Theatre of Thornton Wilder. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995. 131-132).

Both those “imported” materials and Wilder’s self-created intellect are combined and apprehended as his unequalled flavor in the plays, however. His exuberant vision and fertile theatrical intensity have set Wilder’s drama apart from that of all other playwrights.

Wilder’s Americans in his plays reach out for little things and hold tight with the vast gape of the universe which looming over them with the impermanence of death and contemplating as the inerasable fact of having lived. Within these quotidian parameters, he has built up a universe of little events in Our Town and in a humorous attitude reflected man’s courage to
strive before the unalterable circumstances of life in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Human life may be a hard play to live up to, but one’s responsibility for alleviating the suffering for himself is indispensable. Wilder does not look forward to build a new paradise in his plays, but penetrates into every sphere of human life-circle as a means of achieving the true understanding of reality. Not in search of an illusional ideal world behind reality, he emphasizes the universal themes by laying on the theatrical means rather than ends, on the use of dramatic methods rather than literary theories. This is mostly seen and proved by the end of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, a paradoxically open-ended closure with Sabina’s words. Not in particular to dwell on the grimmer aspects of reality, he substitutes an idyllic town for a cruel capital society, a sweet-after-sweat survival of a family for a defeated victim or sacrifice.

The simultaneity of life and death, of the feelings of hope and despair, for theatrical sake, is typically presented in Wilder’s plays. There is, certainly, a balanced affirmation of the duality between the individual and the universal, the local and the global, and life and death in human life. According to Rex Burbank, he calls it is through Wilder’s “irony” to establish this balanced affirmation. (Rex Burbank, “Limitations and Achievement.” *Thornton Wilder*. 2nd edition. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1978. 128-129).

Wilder’s plays are successfully accomplished only “when irony enriches the affirmations through qualification and understatement” (Rex Burbank, 129). There is a peculiar example to explain this point, that is, the ironic character of Simon Stimson in *Our Town*. The play consists in the simple fact that life in Grover’s Corners is ordinary and beautiful, but it seems that Wilder purposely supplements the role Simon Stimson to justify his one-sided
affirmation about the marvelous part of the town.

Wilder’s works are a curious amalgamation of various literary and artistic trends. Any attempt to classify them into a particular category would be like reducing the vast mountain ranges into museum-showcase pieces. However, the patterns contained therein may be extended, enriched and refurbished through research. This study has sought to emphasize two aspects of his art: firstly, his celebration of human power and potential and secondly his juxtaposition of the ‘Bright’ against the ‘Dark’ to highlight the brightness of the ‘Bright’. An impartial balancing of these two entailed a firm commitment to human values and an immense faith in man. Wilder’s success as a writer is proof that his art is fulfilling a vital imperative of the times.

The fascinating icon of life dominates the patterns of his canvas. Although his speculations revolve around the humdrum details of day-to-day living, the meaning that they convey ranges far beyond the sensory perceptions. The pageant of Life with its scenes of birth, death, love, laughter, success and despair is mysterious and awe-inspiring. It kindles the desire of many an explorer but never seems to quench their thirst.

Wilder’s versatile genius presents the value of life through the realization of its absence. His protagonists recognize the value of life through love and compassion. They suggest that these emotions affirm Man’s vulnerability and perhaps to be vulnerable is to be alive. Wilder’s works seek to establish his belief that a deliberate debasing of human potential never leads to any positive results. It merely worsens the situation. Moral courage and faith are the only alternatives which maintain the dignity of Man and help him to
create a meaning for himself. The author’s sanguine personality is reflected in the affirmative tone of his works which emphasize that living is a great experience. His works suggest practical humanistic alternatives which assist in rekindling the insight. Writing in general, Wilder seeks to convey certain fundamental values of the human experience. His works do not “urge social activism, convey despair at the human situation or stress sexuality.” (Bernard F. Dukore, “Thornton Wilder,” American Dramatists 1918-1945. London: Macmillan, 1984, 122). On the other hand, they communicate the eternal relevance of certain great old traditional ideas which urge mankind to view the world from a broader perspective wherein the concentration on the self is the least. Written for everybody, everywhere and for all times they have a perennial appeal because of their luminous humanism.

Presenting both the ‘bright’ as well as the ‘dark’ sides of life Wilder skilfully communicates their beauty. As his “voice quivers with pain and still proclaims joy” (Soren Kierkegaard, as quoted in Gilbert Harrison, The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder. New York: Fromm, 1986. 1) it corroborates Kierkegaard’s criterion that any joy celebrated without the experience of pain and suffering is empty, insignificant and insubstantial.

Wilder’s works emphasize that learning is the basic purpose of the experience of living. This learning is a continuous process. All Wilder’s characters-ranging from the Marquette and Pepita to Chrysis, Emily, Antrobus, Dolly Levi and Alcestis-exemplify this point of view. They are all learners who wish to shed their inhibitions and go through the various experiences of life to comprehend their value. Wilder never allows us to forget pain and death; he reminds us that in most cases this knowledge, this realization, comes too late.
Perpetually troubled and strife-torn humanity realizes the value of life only when the swirling mists of oblivion begin to darken the panorama.

Religion is an important strain in the development of Wilder’s thought. It is never, however, presented as a cult, a sect, or a dogma. When simply interpreted, religion in Wilder may be understood as knowledge, realization and experience. "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.” (Donald Haberman, *The Plays of Thornton Wilder: A Critical Study*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967. 38).

Thornton Wilder's world-view may be related to personalism. In personalism, a "supreme personality" nearly sufficient in all respects, is the ultimate fact in perceiving this world. In this system, the nearly refined personality is the ontological being. It creates and sustains the world in all respects. In Wilder's world-view also, "the person" forms the creative centre of his vision. He recreates the "individual" states of mind rather than the characteristics of a group of people or society. The quest of the individual for achieving greater and more perfected states of mind forms the defining principle and motive in his imagination. The essential cult of Wilder is to dramatize the attempt and anguish of the individual in his trials of self in achieving greater perfection.

The theme of morality or the individual quest for "pure existing" which is Wilder's primary creative motive, is personalistic in its philosophical meaning. Life is always perceived in the dynamic aspects of living itself. It is
not merely a symbolic act, but an intense existential necessity to "realize" one self in this world, and in this life itself. The theme of love in Wilder's vision is a true means for individual self-awareness and perfection.

Personalism posits to a possibility for "Self-development, physically, mentally and spiritually". Wilder's imagination is also intrinsically based on the potentialities for limitless creativity of Man. Caesar recognizes the importance of poetic imagination in man's life. A poet is gifted with the possibility "to weave future". He is capable of all the possibilities for getting the joy of "every moment of his work". A higher sense of reality and creative intelligence define Wilder's imaginative structures. Outreaching all the other areas of fulfillment, there is yet another realm of awareness and cognition. All the narrative situations and characters make forays into this area. Such a quest for realizing creative intelligence forms an important aspect of Personalism. It believes in the "creative process" with its qualities of duration and permanence, alike.

Thus, ultimately, this supreme intelligence nearly sufficient in all respects, seeks "to transcend its creations". Priceless importance of personality and a quest for self-fulfillment also define Wilder's concept of "pure existing". Being is central and vital to his imagination. Personalism lays emphasis on the theistic aspects of religion. It is a quest for the self-transcendence and integration of the individual with a higher religious order, namely God. It seeks to find the "fullest harmony with the nature of things". However, religious order is resolved in a mood of cynicism and moral and spiritual betrayal of its values of benediction to the humanity in the world of Wilder. An enlightened humanistic order and a quest for self-benediction in this world through the various trials of self form the centre of Wilder's religious experience.
In such an individual and "personalistic" quest for perfection, 'Time' provides the imaginative destiny for the trials of self of the various personages in Wilder's creative world. Time forms the culminating area for fulfillment of the destinies of his characters in his fiction and plays. It is manifested in various forms and acquires diverse meanings and purposes. The essential temporal drama in his creative world is performed by certain recurrent imaginative practices. The idea of realizing a vast, universal temporal backdrop forms the narrative medium of The Cabala. In Wilder's vision, 'Time' is the universal medium of reference and cognition of human life in this world.

The use of time and space in Wilder refers to the universal and the eternal. It lays emphasis on the point that human adventure remains much the same in all times and all places. Yet this similarity has a lot of variety. The practical manifestations of this scheme attempt to look for coherence and organic unity in the multiplicity of the various experiences. An individual’s claim to happiness and suffering is very much an inner thing. What can possibly be the value of ‘I love,’ ‘I rejoice,’ ‘I suffer’ when studied in the context of billions of people who have lived, loved and suffered? Yet each individual’s emotions are significant because it is these trivial emotions of joy and sorrow which constitute the entire experience of life. The vast stretches of time and space seem to minimize the value of these small events. But Wilder’s works in their celebration of the ordinary affirm the same. Wilder seems to contend that every small event of daily life has a universal, cosmic significance. Whether his novels or plays are set in eighteenth-century Rome, or sixteenth-century Peru or twentieth-century New Hampshire, they proclaim the same idea. His message is that small events are occasions and in their full
enjoyment and cherishment lies Man’s achievement. All his works are successful blends of the past, present and future which present people ‘in their living’ and ‘in their dying.’ The idea frees the audience-reader from meaningless particularizing details. It facilitates Wilder’s convincing representation of his themes in a broader, wider perspective. The general connections between past, present and future are contoured through brief sketchy strokes. His experimental effort in this realm articulates meaningfully his comprehension of human destiny.

Thus, more than the apparently visible cyclical world of re-current optimism, there is a world of grim catastrophe and remorseless negation and poignancy of the humanist quest in the linear Time shape in Thornton Wilder’s creative world.

Characterization in Wilder is scrupulously externalized and presented in a leisurely manner. The characters frequently represent ideas and may be interpreted as symbols. However, Wilder’s skill does not permit them to become lifeless or stereotyped. They are wonderfully alive as they facilitate the artist in the illustration of his idea and assist the audience in distilling its essence.

Wilder’s characterization allows plenty of room for dramatic recognition, expression of exasperation and intense contemplation. Sometimes deliberate digressions give the impression of being devices used to create suspense. Although the element of suspense is maintained, it is there at a moderate pitch. Nothing in the style is so designed as to keep the reader breathless. Therefore, sometimes when these deliberate interruptions come at a
moment when a situation is tending to become tricky or emotional, they seek to relax the tension and not to mount it further. Much of Wilder’s plays depend on the actors and the way they act. A good actor makes an idea pulsate with life. Thus, the vividly sketched characters seek to win the audience over and they succeed frequently in their endeavour.

The narrative skills establish the point that Wilder’s plot serves the basic function of illustrating ‘an idea. The idea is all important and thus the plot attempts to present events which have significance beyond the presentation. As the plot projects glimpses of life, the vibrant embodiment of the idea can be felt in the background.

It may be seen that Wilder frequently draws his inspiration from a myth. As a myth already possesses a significant idea, it provides vital clues to Wilder’s illustration. The role of the Stage Manager thus becomes very important. Like the ‘Sutradhal” in Indian classical theatre he serves several purposes as he facilitates the smooth movement of the episodic plot. Sometimes a friend, a neighbour, or a gas-station attendant or a philosophizing mouthpiece ’of the times, he guides the reader in his interpretation. Wilder’s objective approach prevents him from being an instructor.

The use of language in Wilder is in keeping with his theme of life. It is warm and life-like. Adequately appropriate and inclusive, it communicates effectively, thereby fulfilling its theoretical and practical functions. The Fortune Teller in The Skin of Our Teeth laughs at Antrobus saying:

    I tell the future. Keck. Nothing easier. Everybody’s future is in their face.
Nothing easier. But who can tell your past-eh? Nobody! Your youth-where did it go? It slipped away while you weren’t looking. While you were asleep. While you were drunk? (The Skin of Our Teeth in Our Town and Other Plays. Penguin, 134).

It is a well-known fact that Wilder studied the classics seriously and studiously. Segregating the eternal and the universal from the transitory and the fleeting he made creative attempts to present certain fundamental ideas which seem to be fast vanishing in the materialistic society of our times. The mirror of his art is held up to the various experiences that constitute life and if he does succeed it is entirely because of his protean approach. Thus, he provides a fresh dimension to a strain of thought which has been uppermost in the minds of the twentieth-century readers.

It must be admitted that Wilder’s works have certain limitations. An objective analysis of the same helps them from being misunderstood. The occasional lack of complexity in characters can be understood through their intended role as representations of moral, religious and metaphysical ideas responding earnestly to social and psychological pressures. There is no falsification, ornamentation or disfiguration of any kind, either intentional or otherwise. Their opinions and concepts are sorely tested through social obstacles and formidable challenges. Hence, all the conflicts are communicated through episodes and generalized action.
The contention that where conflict is absent the affirmations are achieved far too easily is far from true. Antagonisms of all kinds, abstract and concrete, natural and man-made, challenge Man at every turn of his life. His own weaknesses thwart his advancement thereby becoming his most formidable foes. Destruction and defeat loom large on Wilder’s canvas but ultimately it is through his dexterous handling that all these are “undermined by a portrayal of great human spiritual depth and nobility.” (Rex Burbank, *Thornton Wilder*. New York: Twayne, 1961. 134). Man’s struggle with forces which seek to strangle his freedom goes beyond the physical, psychological and emotional to the metaphysical. Moral courage is tested again and again on the anvil of abstract foes like Chance and Destiny.

Most of Wilder’s works are compelling because there is irony to enrich the affirmations. The appeal of *Our Town* consists primarily in its presentation of the idea that life is both beautiful and banal. Through the depiction of the village drunkard, Simon Stimson, Wilder also conveys that life can be dangerous for talented and sensitive people. In *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* the prospective mystery of theology is brilliantly avoided by a scrupulous shift from the abstract realm to the more concrete one of morality, thereby leaving the option open for both believers and non-believers. In Heaven ‘s My Destination the affirmations are created through a subtle conflict between the sensitive, compassionate Brush and the harsh materialistic world he encounters. In *The I des of March* Caesar’s skepticism is a countervailing force in the context of the mystery of life. In *The Skin of Our Teeth* the Antrobus’ confidence and optimism are constantly challenged by Sabina’s perpetual pessimism and Henry’s inherent evil.
*The Matchmaker* is Wilder’s appeal for a fuller and freer participation in life; it is manifest in each character’s yearning for ‘pudding’- the code word for adventure in the play. Urging people to break out of their self-built glass-domes of alienation and complacency, the play shows how the self-righteous attitude of people clings around them like the Ancient Mariner’s Albatross, thereby becoming the chief impediment to their happiness. The form of face keeps the action moving at a rapid pace. Separate chapters are devoted to a discussion of each of these plays.

In *Some Thoughts Playwriting*, Wilder lists four fundamental conditions of dream which distinguish it from the other arts. He says: "A theatre performance requires many collaborators; it is addressed to the group mind; it is based on a pretence and its very nature calls out a multiplication of pretences and finally the action takes place in the perpetual present". (Thornton Wilder, "Some Thoughts Playwriting" in *The Intent of the Artist*. ed. Augusto Centeno. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941. 85). As Wilder gives detailed accounts of life and people he violates all limitations of the past, present and future by using all three of them simultaneously. He achieves a perpetual present or eternity on the stage.

*Our Town*, the Pulitzer Award winning classic, is Wilder’s promising celebration of the glory that is life. The depiction of life as a thematic device has been favoured by artists for a long time. The reason for the same is not difficult to trace. Just as the scientist creates optimum conditions in his laboratory to perform an experiment so also the artist with his phenomenal imagination is master of all he surveys. He finds in the vast expanse of life the perfect laboratory with several challenging combinations on which to
experiment. The challenges fascinate him as they rekindle his thirst for exploration which seems to brook no quenching. The greater the challenge, the greater his 'desire for exploration and the more intense his fascination. The stage devices employed by Wilder in this play include the whole world and hence although the play begins and ends in Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, the audience understands clearly that the emphasis is on things which range far beyond the village boundaries.

The meaning of *Our Town* is two-fold: it is both universal and vastly general, as also at the same time, most intrinsically particular. There is a quest for transcending the realms of the limited and imperfect into the areas of the Eternal and the Perfect. The play seeking to underplay life’s utmost priorities in achieving at least a measure of perfection lays down the important concerns. According to the Stage Manager, "something" is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. However, in this quest to reach the realms of bliss and solitude, there is a grim negation of the human endeavour. Thus, there is this dilemma and dichotomy of vision between the living and the dead.

The success of *Our Town* lies in the fact that Wilder made the ordinary, interesting and convincing without falling into sentimentality. The notion that the play lacks suspense arising out of complications, conflicts and disturbances, can best be understood through Rex Burbank’s observation: “Lacking the suspense that goes with a carefully plotted conflict between characters, the play admittedly draws heavily upon theatricalist novelty for fresh treatment of its materials; and much of its effect is owing to its appeal to audience nostalgia. But the material and the technical devices conceived for the benefit of the ‘group mind’ have within them the seeds of a larger meaning;
and this promise of a larger meaning gives suspense to the action.” (Rex Burbank, *Thomton Wilder*. 1961; rpt. New York: Twayne, 1962. 91). So, one can see in Wilder’s play, a classic and convincing portrayal of the goings-on in the corridors of life. Wilder had set about his job with subtle planning. The technical devices of the play direct their effect towards the visual faculty. Hence the censure on the forced intrusion of loud theatrical paraphernalia.

Wilder’s characters in *Our Town* are not sophisticated shammers who pretend intelligence at the cost of human values. On the other hand in direct juxtaposition to the pseudo-intellectuals, they portray Wilder’s primary concern, that the importance of life is how we live it at a time and not, what we think and plan about it.

The characters of Emily and George symbolize the simplicity and the fresh innocence of youth. They are representations of small town life, rather than individuals. They represent the characters, as they must have been when the event first occurred in the beginning.

The technique of juxtaposing time segments, expresses Wilder’s expressionistic intentions. Since Wilder was portraying life on stage this technique freed him from the clutches of time limitations. This was indeed a very difficult technique and in an unskilful effort would have run the inevitable risk of miscomprehension.

*The Skin of Our Teeth*, like *The Eighth Day* and in some respects like *The Ides of March*, dramatizes Time as an archetypal pattern in human life. If in *Our Town*, Time acts as a vast, universal backdrop for the people of Grover’s Corners, in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, it operates with a grim primordial
urgency. Here, Time’s values are profoundly implicit, as in *The Ides of March*. The temporal backdrop is on a colossal scale. The threat to disaster and the optimistic retrieval, even at the precipice are realized in a vast and general Time scale and Space. The retrieval is at three levels: at the universal level, at the domestic level, and the most important, the play is itself saved from collapse by the heroic efforts of the Stage Manager.

*The Skin of Our Teeth* sketches the history of civilization from the beginning to the present day. Its main theme is that Man with his courage, optimism and determination, shall always be victorious in the battle for survival. He shall somehow manage to overcome chaos to start afresh. While the sky is no limit for Wilder’s flights of imagination, the parameters of this ‘testament of faith’ are ground realities. The premiere production notes of the play specify that the play is about the Antrobuses who have survived a “thousand calamities by the skin of their teeth and Mr. Wilder’s play is a tribute to their indestructibility.”

It opens by making fun of old-fashioned playwriting. On the conventional box type stage there is a typical scene of a maid dusting a living room. Suddenly, a portion of the wall above the door flaps, buckles and flies off into the air. Sabina, the maid, is struck dumb with surprise. Her amazement draws the attention of the audience to this remarkable incident which symbolizes the disintegration of the conventional stage. It is also a telling commentary on the shakiness of the human condition.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the theme of courage in the face of adversity serves as a beacon light and reinforces the will to rebuild for a bright
future, irrespective of the dark happenings of the past; it shows man’s resilient power to survive against many odds. While dealing with the theme of human obligations Wilder seems to wonder whether man’s primary responsibilities are towards his self and his family or towards society. As events unfold, it becomes apparent that man’s responsibility towards society is of paramount importance as only a healthy balanced society is capable of continuing and safeguarding itself from the threats of decay and destruction.

Thus, one can see that Man's responsibility towards his family and society on the one hand is pitched against his responsibility towards his own self on the other. As the threats of destruction move from the external to the internal level, signs of disaster appear, but in the ultimate struggle man’s victory symbolizes the establishment of a healthy moral order which can ensure continuity and prosperity.

The Play *The Trumpet Shall Sound* conveys the strong theme of the infinite mercy of God. On the ultimate day of judgement, God pardons all sins except the sin of despair. Wilder convincingly portrays that the sin of despair is unpardonable. This theme is exhibited through the story of Peter Magnus, a prosperous property owner, who leaves the care of his house in the hands of faithful servants. During his absence, these servants, under the guidance of Flora, one of the maids, decide, to let the house to various tenants. Flora employs this strategy because, through this she anticipates the return of her lover. Flora’s plan succeeds and the lover does return as a tenant but he is not much interested in Flora anymore. In Flora’s attempts to secure some promises of attentiveness from him, lies the pathos of the story. Soon Peter Magnus, the representative symbol of God returns and on comprehension of the situation
decides to interrogate each sinner to determine the depth of his crime. After the exercise, he decides to forgive them, but Flora, meanwhile, driven to a state of despair, commits suicide. In Flora’s cowardice lies the hopelessness of human endeavour. Hers is the unpardonable sin of despair. Neither too sentimental nor didactic, the play conveys the simple message that life is a symbol of hope. As long as there is life, there is hope. In God’s giving life to the mortals, His greatest gift is of Hope, which unfortunately, is most of the time flung back carelessly on the face of the creator.

*The Angel that Troubled the Waters* has for its theme human pain, suffering, and the difference of opinion about faith. In this play, a group of handicapped people sit around the Biblical lake, Bathesda. As they wait anxiously for the Angel who shall appear from the lake to relieve them of their torture, there develops a conflict amongst them. The intense pain and torture of one of them, forces him to fling himself into the pool before the Angel appears from the water. Dedication to the service of suffering humanity is one of the ideas of this play.

The play *Proserpina and the Devil* presents the story of Proserpina. It exhibits that the ancient myths of Greece and Rome are still relevant, although in a different form. They’ve now donned the appearance, of Christianity. The cast of the play draws from both mythologies characters like Proserpina, Demeter, Hermes, Gabriel, Abraham and Satan. They are all puppets in the play. In their manipulation, matters are confused and Proserpina is made to move towards the devil, instead of moving away from him. The confusion represents the early stages of conflict between the old religion and the new which is the theme of this play. The technique of the play foreshadows
Wilder’s later works in its simultaneous use of the past and the present. Another play *Fanny Otcott* deals with the story of an eighteenth century actress. This play highlights the multifarious' aspect of the self. Fanny’s assuming of masks is a projection of her multiple selves. Under the force of the mirror image, Fanny succeeds in driving away her one time lover forever. The theme is the multi-dimensional human psyche.

The most interesting play of this volume is *The Flight into Egypt*. Thematicalliy concentrating on the journey-and progress of the human soul in this world, the play highlights themes like faith versus reason, fate, Providence and irony of destiny. Presenting Hepzibah, the donkey who bore Christ and Mary on their journey to Jerusalem, as the chief protagonist, Wilder makes him the symbol of the ever-curious, even complaining, modern self. The helpful and humorous trends of his nature become apparent in his encounters with the glories and miseries of this world. Philosophizing heavily, Hepzibah, the modern-day thinker and philosopher, tries to make some sense of the happenings of this incomprehensible universe.

*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* also reflects Wilder’s deviation from the realistic technique. The deviations are most apparent in the medieval setting of the play. Childe Roland, the traditional symbol of agony, suffering and doubt yearns for shelter and solace. Wounded physically and emotionally he longs for the peace of death. As his perseverance reaches its limits he begs admission to the dark tower. Suddenly, amidst the intense rendering there is a line which breaks the tension and provides dramatic relief.
In *The Long Christmas Dinner*, several generations of a family sit down to several successive Christmas dinners. The passage of ninety years represents in ‘accelerated motion’ ninety Christmas dinners in the dining room of the Bayard home. Newborn babies are brought in through the door on the left. Pink ribbons symbolize the birth of a daughter and blue ribbons of a son. Green however symbolizes stillbirth. The door on the right is the door of death and characters just walk toward it and then through it without any lengthy preliminaries. Two of Wilder’s basic ideas, the value of mortal ambitions against the backdrop of time, and the strange spectacle of men and women involved in trivial matters while speeding towards death, emerge through the talks of the characters at the dining table. The play is about “desperation, decay, the endless cycle of talk and birth and death and suffering that all must endure. No ‘little Lavender tragedy,’ the play is instead a compressed presentation of all the large forces that sweep through human lives and carry them toward the dark portal.

*Pullman Car Hiawatha* presents the observations of several characters on board the train of life. The dominant themes of the play are time and its power and unity in diversity. All living beings are linked together by their ‘thought processes in this huge vestibule of life.

The theme of Man’s varied aspects-his mind, his destiny and choices-is one of the most complicated subjects. The sting of satire is absent from Wilder’s works because Man is too complicated to be explained or commented upon through the meagre perspective of satire. In Wilder’s art there is no cynicism. “Satire is the tool of the skeptic: alone it gives a distorted view of mankind. Men are absurd and their absurdity must be made part of any
comprehensive vision. But a balanced, mature vision requires a full measure of human achievement and joy as well as of defeat and pain; and of courage, selflessness and nobility as well as of moral cowardice, vanity and meanness.” (Rex Burbank, *Thornton Wilder*. New York: Twayne, 1961.136).

All of Wilder’s major works deal with the problem of faith. It is Wilder’s opinion that there is something beyond man which gives value to him and meaning to the world in which he lives. The world by itself is not worth the effort of living.

To Wilder, the world in itself is not enough. It needs to have a meaning attached which stems from faith; people must believe that there is something beyond themselves which is a mystery. Repeatedly, Wilder illustrates this need for acknowledgement of mystery. In almost all of his major published works, a long succession of characters who believe in nothing but the evident and obvious form a questioning chain of misery and malcontent. These people are of two types: those who have had faith and have lost it, momentarily or for longer periods of time; and those who have never had it. To both groups, life is meaningless; there is no joy in it.

Wilder considers that faith to be essential to the fulfillment of life. It should also be apparent that the kind of faith needed varies according to the type of individual; it is not in all cases limited to a belief in Christianity. Wilder’s solution to the problem of living is, and always has been, to enjoy life. But an enjoyment of life is dependent upon a belief that living is not in vain, that here is some purpose, some mind behind the universe. In the works, particularly *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and *The Ides of March*, the God
is there, the cosmos is there, but the image of Christ is not there. That is not to say, however, that the influence of Christianity is not present. But it is almost as though Wilder realized that, in spite of his efforts, Christianity was not a universal religion, and he accordingly expanded his concept to include all people and all ages by withdrawing the spotlighted figure of Christ.

Love is one way for one to know the eternal within himself, and it is the most important element in the relationship of man to man, linking man not only to others who are contemporary with him but also to all ages and all times.

Love to Wilder must be rid of all taint of selfishness and personal gain. The characters in Wilder’s works who come to realize the meaning of love must of necessity possess a kind of magnanimity. Certain lesser types of love are too narrow to admit the necessary self-sacrifice without demanding some benefit in return. One of the most selfish kinds of love to Wilder is love as passion, that is, love which is built solely on a physical foundation.

It must be remembered that to Wilder, love as passion is an expression of self-interest which needs to undergo servitude, a hatred of itself, and other forms of purgation before it becomes really worthy love.

Lust and pride, then, are two specific forms of self-interest by which Wilder negatively illustrates his theory of selfless love. Self-pity stemming from overwhelming love is another form, and that this has no place in the highest kind of love.

The concept of love and the concept of faith for Wilder are two aspects of a unified philosophy of life, the one pertaining more explicitly to
relations between men and the other to the relation of men to something beyond themselves; both aspects, however, overlap and contain many of the same elements. An illustration of this close kinship is found in Wilder’s belief that love has power to erase mistakes and forgive sins.

One can see that Wilder’s first one-act experiments are conscious attempts to break out of the barriers of form and verisimilitude. The endeavour is apparent in the devices of stage setting, plot and characterization. These plays display a strong evidence of being addressed to the mind. Although in their form they are three minutes’ duration each, they communicate certain psychological states of the mind. Although not entirely satisfying, these plays are intellectually engaging. Discarding elaborate stage setting and verisimilitude the plays impress upon the mind the various stresses and strains which torment people. They have “points of tension” rather than “paraphrasable plots.” They convey strong moral implications and leave an indelible impression on the mind.

The themes of death and despair loom large in Wilder’s literary world. They are inseparable parts in the scheme of living and in their juxtapositional contrast, highlight the value of life. A very keen observer of the total situation, Wilder was committed to writing about those aspects which he had tested on his personal anvil of feeling and experience. Whatever he writes comes from the depths of his feelings. Life and Death are powerful magnets which never lose their attraction. Wilder captures the essence of a moment so skillfully and presents it so dexterously that it gets permanently embedded in the mind. Death is present in his works, not to terrorize but to emphasize the value of life.
Thornton Wilder is a classicist in his commitment to art and life. His imagination and innate drive as a writer and also as a man strives for seeking security and a sense of continuity of the existing institutions. He is an aesthete to the core, who revels in “instructing” the world of the greater morals and ethics. His idea of “morality” is not based on the sense of being right or wrong. For him “morality” means seeking to find an inner harmony and impeccable “order” in the lives of the individuals and things in this world. Thus, his art is a consummate expression of the sense of beauty in ceaselessly discovering this harmony and balance of mind and things in Nature.

The aesthetic basis of Wilder’s humanism is neither the dogmatic assertion of living Babbitt or More, nor the ‘whatever appeals to the senses is good’ philosophy of Hemingway. His is an appeal for a full participation in the adventure of life. If Wilder keeps away from the sordid details of barbarism, pettiness and base emotions it is not because he does not acknowledge their existence; it is because he feels that the most constructive way to deal with evil is to face it with courage, fortitude, love and wisdom.

In his vision despair is not geared to convey depth. Man’s dignity forms an impressive foreground as his mature vision presents a successful and balanced integration of the ‘bright’ as well as the ‘dark.’ His is an optimistic vision but it is not, surely, an ‘unwarranted optimism.’ In almost all his works the characters occasionally convey a sense of defeat and despair. If they never complain nor even succumb to it, it is because, like Chrysis in The Woman of Andros, they share the perception that wisdom consists in accepting all things - both the bright and the dark as part of the scheme of things.
Wilder’s emphasis on human values and their eternal positive influence has been a source of enjoyment and intellectual stimulation. His vision of survival in a threatening world and the magic of his style at its very best shall continue to provide the rhythm to the mysterious quest of life.

Far and away, Wilder’s theatrical form and stage devices are made deliberately original and startling so as to astound and refresh the reader of the century. His achievement in each play is not simply concerned with the outward theatricalism for the sake of making his story more powerfully dramatic, but so as to convey and create a comprehensive mood and universal motif everywhere. The importance of each play lies not merely in the exertion of the imaginary gestures instead of concrete properties on the stage, but in the elevation of such usage to its intensity – presenting it as it is and yet making it represent something beyond itself. Wilder handles his themes with a humanist’s capacity and control in the plays. He deals with them earnestly and persuasively to contract an alliance with readers and audiences for their interest just come from involvement in the broad and full understanding of Wilder’s humanist essence and his world view. He has concocted a synthesis of all the family’s and community’s concerns, love, worth and dignity of man, the universe, and even more than that.

Drawn from a capacious assortment of literary and philosophical sources, Wilder’s plays eventually deserve their worldwide reputation and position in the realm of modern drama. In fact, not only his universal ideas, but also the innovative dramatic techniques have penetrated in Wilder’s plays and make them more comprehensive and multiform. The diversity of his theatrical influence has spread the American theatre and the world through its popular
appeal of the plays. As the critic Archibald MacLeish proclaims, “[t]here is no man in American…whose words will carry farther around the earth than Wilder’s” (qtd. in Rex Burbank, "Limitations and Achievements", Thornton Wilder. 2nd edition. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1978. 127). Like a large reservoir of skill and wisdom, Wilder indeed contains colossal ideas of various artistic forms, of the particular and the universal, of different countries and cultures, and certainly, of human affairs in his presentation of the reality of the whole human existence.