CHAPTER - I

THE VERSATILE LIFE OF
THORNTON WILDER
During the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century literature written by Americans was a part of English literature. Although Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Poe and Hawthorne had created a distinct and distinguished body of literature which voiced the aspirations of emergent America during the nineteenth century but it could not assume a separate identity. It was due to the efforts of H.L. Mencken that American Language, which communicates the struggles of early settlers and the gradual evolution of the United States of America from diverse and scattered colonies, got recognition, and now American English enjoys the status of world language, Literature written in this language is known as American literature. It powerfully and spontaneously expresses various shades of emotions, thoughts and feelings of the people of the United States of America. In short, it reflects the life attitudes, modes of perception, traditions, linguistic and stylistic devices which have emerged over the years in U.S.A. Now the process of the Americanization of English is complete and the literature written in this language, known as American literature, has attained maturity. Its future is immense.

The origin and growth of American literature are intimately connected with the growth of America as a nation. The progenitor of American
literature had a European and an Anglo-saxon past. Chaucer, Shakespeare, the ballads, the religious literature of the seventeenth century, the English Augustan poetry and romanticism, the English novel of character and other cross-currents of English literature have left an indelible influence on American imagination and literature. Its roots reach down into English literature. But American literary culture is a "transformed" one. Robert Spiller writes:

Yet it is equally true that our literature is a transformed culture. It has been written in a new continent, and under conditions definitely and impressively different in the vast majority of instances from the circumstances of Great Britain, or of Europe in general. (*Literary History of the United States* XIX).

Although English is the common language both of English and American literatures, but the literature of the United States of America is written in the English language which expresses "the values, the expectations, the experiences of life in America" which have been significantly different from those of England. The language too has been transformed in order to give expression to typical American sentiments and environment. It is written in the English language which bears the stamp of the American nationality, sensibility and ethos. Hence, it is American literature written in American English.

American literature authentically mirrors the character of the nation from its birth onward. It reflects the myriad cultural traits, which make
America a nation. The early settlers' accounts of travels, descriptions of the land and authentic reports of colonial life reveal the aspirations and hopes, the trials and setbacks of those who were struggling against the wilderness. These early writings tell us how the nation grew.

American literature reveals the American spirit and character. The American spirit is made up largely of courage, industry and optimism. These are the characteristics that inspire men and enable them tackling problems that arise. American literature deals with facts and not with abstractions. Americans are not best theorizers as English men are. They are the world's best fact finders. This love for facts is revealed in American literature, especially in novel. American literature is factual and realistic. American writers deal with literary, philosophical, social, political and economic problems of society.

'Drama' was incapable of keeping pace with the progress achieved in poetry and fiction in American literature. Neither in the eighteenth nor in the nineteenth century was the drama an important department in America. Most of the plays were mediocre. The plays of Shakespeare and other dramatic masterpieces of the past were staged. Some remarkable changes took place between 1860 and 1890 which greatly influenced dramatic authorship. After the civil war the old stock companies were replaced by travelling companies. The development of rail roads contributed to it. It encouraged dramatic authorship. Talented writers wrote plays which were staged. The dramatists were assured their share of professional income. Talented writers established a new profession of "dramatic authorship".
American economic collapse and its aftermath with the advent of the crash of the stock exchange, the breakdown due to inflation which shattered the nation’s dreams and prospects of many peoples’ lives of the early nineteenth century of America. Money became a rare commodity; people were exposed to untold suffering leading to Great Depression. The land of honey & milk became a land of hunger, unemployment, sickness and destitution. This brought the quest for the social alternatives. The intellectuals of the twenties and thirties rushed to public commitment and so majority found Marxism as a philosophy and communism as an organization as the most effective means of satisfying their need. There was a literary turn towards the left advocating other liberal reforms or revolutionary change in social, political or economic order. Among the various literary forms, drama particularly offered a very powerful means of propagating leftist ideas and attracted a number of talented writers. Most of the major playwrights of the period- Clifford Odets, John Howard Lawson, Robert E.Sherwood, S.N.Behrman, Elamer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, Irwin Shaw and Lillian Hellman became highly concerned with the socio-economic and political issues rose by the depression and preferred commitment to age callousness, although their degrees of commitment considerably varied.

Drama became a weapon in the class struggle. It became essentially a social art, the theatre, the audience and several other aspects of production, be it the talent in acting became great significance in contrast to a movie or a fiction, the full impact depends solely on the writer’s shoulders basing on the abilities. Thus the growth and development of the American theatre has become a prominent aspect in the history of American drama.
The impact of the Great Depression changed the direction and tenor of drama in America. The immediate demise was the age of experimentation. “The change in the direction of the American drama is first noticeable in the season of 1932-33. Drama is a complex and collective art; it takes a while for immediate social issues to find artistic reflection. Literature being the reflection of society, its depressed face was clearly caught in the works of the age. It was the ideal period conducive to the intensification of theatrical activities, with the production of various types of drama to suit the temperament of time. A large number of new theatrical organizations sprang up due to restless spirit of the age. Sincere activity in the fields of directing, acting, and writing and in producing plays of both major and minor increased. The emotional climate of the day was favorable to the drama of real Adour and self criticism. Though the age was turbulent but the plays had a positive approach. Active quests for social and political alternatives were launched by them.

The search for right kind of drama that would voice the spirit of the age in all its complexities emerged during this time. Intense dissatisfaction was the mood of the period and had to be expressed in all its poignancy, tempered at the same time with the positive attitude towards the future. In spite of the problems pervaded in every nook and corner of the period but yet there was no surrender and frustration. Eager search for alternatives was on with firm determination. Resolute quest for the rebuilding had to be reflected. Militant approach towards social injustice, literature, especially drama had its direct access to common man.
Discussing the stimulants and irritants behind the new type of drama during this period, John Gassner explains how the irritants of a straitened economy in the thirties left the Broadway theatre floundering for a time, resulted in the rise of uncommercial, socially critical, militant or ameliorated organizations like proletarian theatre union, the new theatre league ranches, the group theatre and the relief project for the theatrical profession known as the federal theatre which became the first national institution of its kind in the United States.” Gassner explains the rise of the proletarian drama during the period as a natural outcome of the anger and the bitterness of the “battered passengers” who were the products of the 1929 crash “seeking for some key to distress which they observed, they occupied the Marxist explanation that the capitalism was in the throes of death…..Looking abroad, they saw a new nation arising in Russia and despite the head – shaking and documentation of some disillusioned reporters, the Soviet looked like the promised land to a number of new and a few of the older playwrights”

Several critics of the period explained the re-vitalization of art. Drama being a social art involving an audience, it began pulsating with the violent feelings of the people whom it represented. Drama became a tool to articulate the nation’s frustration. Most of the contemporary social problems have drawn attention through the art media of drama. The urge among the writers to create proletarian drama was evident due to impact of depression.

The communist party’s influence was insignificant; the impact of Marxist ideology on the intellectuals was quite deep. (Communist party an organization with Marxism assists philosophy exerted great influence in the USA during the early thirties because they offered a clear program of action.
They had the concrete example of the Soviet Union, as a working model with its apparently successful political and economic experiments. Dialectical materialism formed an effective framework. By 1935, the Communist Party gradually began to lose hold on the intellectuals and started rather openly-seeking the support of non-radical antifascist intellectuals. Their influence began waning. Meanwhile, the New Deal reform brought by President Roosevelt improved the economic status of the nation. The United Front declared that all capitalist countries need not be considered alike. A united Front against Fascism was the most important need of the hour after 1935. The programs of the Marxist League of American writers began to dwindle down into lesser revolutionary. The popular Front came to an end in 1939 by Nazi-Soviet Non-aggressive Pact, creating a staggering impact. The imperative need for collective action drew many of them closer to the Communist Party. The dramatists of the decade can be boldly classified into two groups. The first group consisted of playwrights like Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, and John Howard Lawson. This group entered the thirties with a reputation already achieved in the previous decade. To the second group belonged Thornton Wilder, Clifford Odets, along with Lillian Hellman, Sidney Kingsley and William Saroyan. The reaction to the new drift of thought differed in intensity from group to group.

During the seventies and eighties of the 19th century James A. Herne and Bronson Howard (1842-1908) prepared the way for the modern drama. His *Hearts of Oak* (1879) is a domestic melodrama. It is remarkable for authentic character portrayal and depiction of rural setting. *Margaret Fleming* (1890) is a domestic tragedy. Hearn's *Shore Acres* (1892) is conspicuous for rural setting.
and "the old homestead" but its outstanding characteristic is the lack of sentimentality. Bronson Howard revived the social comedy and paved the way for Clyde Fitch, Augustus Thomas and other playwrights of the twentieth century. Howard's main achievement was his appeal to the urban and sophisticated class. Clyde Fitch (1885-1905) gave a new direction to the development of drama in the first decade of the twentieth century. He won international recognition. He wrote melodramas, social comedies and period plays which show his dramatic acumen. Some of his famous plays are *Bean Brummell* (1890), *Mistress Betty or The Toast of the Town, The Moth and the Flame, The Climbers* (1901), *The City* (1909), *Lover's Lane and Her Great Match*.

By the end of the 19th century American drama was moving steadily toward realism, illuminating the rough or seamy side of life and creating more believable characters. Realism remained the dominant trend of the 20th century in both comedies and tragedies. American drama achieved international recognition with the psychological realism of plays by Eugene O’Neill and their searing investigation of characters’ inner lives. As the century advanced, the number of topics considered suitable for drama broadened to encompass race, gender, sexuality, and death.

Modern American drama originated from the Little Theatre Movement of the Second decade of the twentieth century. The American Theatre in the 1920s experimented in many directions. "It tried to represent life more concretely through abstractions, tried to moralize, satirize, lyricize in terms of new manipulations of space and movement, new concepts and sequences of dialogue, new versions of characterization. It also experimented
brilliantly in the matter of stage design, the settings in many cases proved more revealing of theme and motivation than character themselves. The newness was not exclusively a matter of techniques, but part of the general of experimental activity in arts. The most important characteristic of American theatre after 1916 is relentless experimentation--desire to avoid cliches of plot, characterisation, dialogue, acting and staging, which had hitherto tended to make the theatre dull and lifeless." The efforts of T.S. Eliot, Paul Green and Thornton Wilder are memorable in experimentation.

The new American drama had become a reality in the twenties. Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine which was produced by the Theatre Guild in 1923 was a popular play. Some other memorable plays which were staged during this period are George Kelly's The Show Off (1924), George Kaufman's Once In A Life Time (1930), Robert Sherwood's The Road to Rome (1927), John Howard Lawson's Processional (1925) etc. Maxwell Anderson (1888-1859) was a versatile dramatist who wrote both comedies and tragedies. His famous tragedies are -- Elizabeth the Queen (1930), Mary of Scotland (1933), Kalley Forge (1934), Winterest (1935), Key Largo (1939) and The Eve of ST. Mark (1942) are mostly historical in theme.

Robert E. Sherwood (1896-1965) tried to shift from high comedy to the drama of serious importance. Reunion in Vienna (1931) is a comedy that brings into question the theories of psycho-analysis. The Petrified Forest (1935) depicts the political philosophy in the Western desert of America, which is devoid of spiritual values. An Idiot's Delight (1937) Sherwood brings together in an Alpine hotel representatives of major nations and political
philosophies. Sherwood effectively dealt with the social and spiritual bankruptcy of modern life without making it a mere a cry of social protest.

Clifford Odets (1906-1965) was "associated in the public mind with a sympathy for the revolutionary movement and an attack upon the principles of middle class society and mercantile spirit." He was associated with the Theatre Guild. He is a dramatist of social protest. His debut play Waiting For Lefty held firmly the public imagination. He was influenced by Chekhov from whom he learned "his most striking stylistic trick, the writing of brisk colloquial dialogue". He dramatized with ardour and intensity the economic crisis in terms of the feelings and actions of very ordinary persons.

Lilliam Lehman wrote realistic plays. Her famous plays are The Children's Hour (1934), The Little Foxes (1939) and Watch on the Rhine (1941), 'she did not recommend open rebellion against social injustice. The dramatist uses the indirect method of holding up her view. Propaganda dominates over art in her plays.

T.S. Eliot (1885-1965) propounded the theory of the poetic drama in Rhetoric and Poetic Drama (1919). Drama expresses the depth of human soul. "The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse". He asserts that "the greatest drama is poetic drama, and dramatic defects can be compensated by poetic excellence". He holds that the craving for poetic drama is permanent in human nature and that "we must find a new form of verse which shall be as satisfactory a vehicle for us as blank verse for the Elizabethans." Eliot not only propounded the theory of the poetic drama, he also wrote memorable poetic plays-- The Murder in the Cathedral (1935), The
Family Reunion (1939), The Cocktail Party (1950), The Confidential Clerk (1953) and The Elder Statesman (1958). In these plays Eliot a new mode of poetic expression which comes close to modern idiom. He explored the dramatic possibility of verse.

Eugene O' Neill (1888-1953), the most illustrious name in American drama, brought about a revolutionary change in American drama. He is a genuine imaginative American dramatist par excellence. As a dramatist O'Neill liberated himself from the conventions of the stage and he seriously explored the unexplored regions of the mind, not for the sake of entertainment alone. His famous plays are The Emperor Jones, Desire Under the Elms, Lazarus Laughed, Dynamo, Strange Interlude and Mourning Becomes Electra. He is generally acknowledged to have been America's foremost dramatist. In 1936 he received the Nobel Prize for literature - the first American playwright to be so honoured.

Tennesse Williams (1911-1983) was influenced by contemporary concern for psychological problems. His famous plays are The Glass Menagerie (1945), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Summer and Smoke (1948), The Rose Tattoo (1951), Camino Real (1953), Cat an A Hot Tin Roof (1955), for which he won Pulitzer Prize, Orpheus Descending (1957), Garden District (1958), Night of the Iguana (1961), Stapstick Tragedy, The Red Devil Battery Sign (1975) and Clothes for a summer Hotel (1980). Williams deals with contemporary issues such as the place of women in society, homosexuality, drug addiction, child abuse etc. His characters live and suffer intensely. He was the one of the first American dramatists to stir the conscience of the nation.

Thornton Niven Wilder (April 17, 1897 – December 7, 1975) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright and novelist. He won three 'Pulitzer Prizes' - for the two plays *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) and for the novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) - and a U.S. National Book Award for the novel - *The Eighth Day*.

Thornton Wilder is one of the most well-known American writers of the twentieth century. American literature has had a rich and varied tradition in the art of fiction and drama. Thornton Wilder enjoys the unique distinction of being both - a perceptive novelist and a distinguished dramatist. His works endeavour to emphasize the true value of life. Thornton Wilder shows that although life is painful it has an alluring, magnetic grandeur. It is this paradox which immediately arrests the attention of the reader. His works seem to provide a soothing anodyne to the emotional and moral stresses of strife-torn, industrial societies of our times. He always pondered and affirmed the purpose of human life. Wilder's portrayal of good and evil action, friendship, tyranny,
justice, and community make his writings a proper setting for an examination of the perennial questions of political philosophy.

Wilder had new ideas about what the dramatic experience ought to be. A play, he believed, should set the audience's imaginary forces to work. To aid the imaginary forces of the Spectators Wilder introduced into the play the stage manager who comes to the foot-light discuss the play's background and the coming action, with the audience. He reappears several times during the performance of the play to underline a point or assume a minor role.

Throughout his plays and novels, Wilder is concerned with the variety and forms of human action. His gifts -- the polished style, the scholarly allusions, the slightly didactic plots with an elegant touch of mysticism -- were viewed in critical circles as relics of the genteel tradition. He was concerned with the affirmation of human values and the questioning of certain ideologies and attitudes. His thought-provoking works have been subjected to the most intensive and critical investigations; yet it seems that his themes and techniques have not received the attention they deserve.

In a sense, Thornton Niven Wilder is a neglected author. It is true that he is a three-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize; it is true that his two prize-winning plays have been successful on Broadway, and that *Our Town* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* were converted into movies; it is also true that some of his works are read by the literate classes of not only the English-speaking world, but also Germany and France, to mention two major countries. He is important enough to be discussed by Edmund Wilson and Joseph Wood Krutch as well as less establishment critics, but it is in the critic world that he is most
neglected. In both quantity and quality, the existing criticism on Wilder is inferior to that on any other American writer or equal productivity and quality.

There are obvious reasons for this two-fold neglect. Prior to the stock market crash of 1929, Wilder had published only three works: *The Cabala*, 1926; *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, 1927; and a collection of *Three-Minute Plays for Three Persons, The Angel That Troubled the Waters*, 1928. *The Cabala* was immediately recognized as a book of literary worth. Malcolm Cowley, who was one of its first reviewers, says “hardly anyone doubted from the first that Wilder would be an important member of the new galaxy.” ("Introduction", *A Thornton Wilder Trio* 2). With the publication of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilder became a popular success and elicited from the critics remarks similar to that of Arnold Bennett, who said, "The writing has not been surpassed in the present epoch. It dazzled me by its accomplishment." ("Introduction", *A Thornton Wilder Trio* 5). The collection of playlets was incidental to the previous successes.

The bulk of criticism on Wilder, therefore, was written during the twenties and thirties. A few articles appeared during the forties, notably after the appearance of a new work, but little or no attempt at general evaluation appears again until the late fifties, when Wilder once more seems to be attracting some attention. The early critics worked under unavoidable handicaps which made accuracy of perception impossible and therefore seriously lowered the quality of their work. In the first place, Wilder was a new author with no background of development against which to relate the individual work. Secondly, wilder, contrary to the mainstream of contemporary American literature, chose to ignore the current issues and therefore provided
little opportunity for critical speculation and illustration of the importance of current trends. Criticism moulds itself around literature, and the literature of the 1930’s angled sharply with the bent of the nation while Wilder danced out curving universalities that refused to fit the pattern.

This probably unavoidable bias of the majority of the older critics toward Wilder was so strong that when he answered Gold’s challenge and wrote a book about contemporary America, the critics found it unsatisfactory. They were still looking for the black headlines of upheaval, but wilder’s characters and situations are not the unusual or the catastrophic which would attract the journalistic mind.

The reputation Wilder achieved as an optimist who skirted the issues of actuality is still attached to him. As late as 1958, a Fulbright lecturer returned from Germany to complain that Wilder has given war-torn Germans an image of America as ideal, pastoral, and charming. "The use of Wilder as a mode of psychic consolation betrays the German’s pathetic belief in an America which becomes less believable every day." (Paul Fussell, Jr. 394-395).

Another stigma which Wilder gathered during this early period of critical attention is that of a Christian propagandist. Not only Michael Gold, but far more conservative critics labeled him a didactic writer on Christianity. R.P Blackmur spoke of Wilder’s "sermons on the Christian Soul," (The Hound and Horn, 586) and E.K. Brown was certain that "the world of Wilder’s piety was catholic". ("A Christian Humanist : Thornton Wilder," 367).

Wilder himself assisted the critics in their efforts to label him didactic when, in the preface to The Angel That Troubled the Waters, he wrote:
Almost all 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...I hope, through many mistakes, to discover the spirit that is not unequal to the elevation of the great religious themes, yet which does not fall into a repellent didacticism... The schoolmaster... sees all that is fairest in the Christian tradition made repugnant to the new generations by reason of the diction in which it is expressed... The revival of religion is almost a matter of rhetoric... The work is difficult, perhaps impossible... But it at least reminds us that Our Lord asked us in His work to be not only as gentle as doves, but as wise as serpents. (xv-xvi).

Obviously in 1928, at least, Wilder was very much a Christian with an intent to proclaim Christianity in a fresh language. One of the most recent critics, H. Wayne Morgan, says that "the Christian purpose threaded through all of wilder’s early work. But he hastens to explain that it was not a spelled-out Christianity resplendent with dogma". ("The Early Thornton Wilder," 248). Even some of the early fit into the traditional concepts. It is significant that Robert McNamara in an issue of "The Catholic World" felt Wilder had difficulty understanding grace to be in all men, and tried instead to teach men his own solution of love, considering himself to have found the right way and to be under obligation to reveal it to the world. (648).
Again the critics of the 1930’s were working under handicaps. On the evidence they had, they were perhaps justified in assuming Wilder to be primarily a Christian didactic. By 1947, however, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* were published, and Fred Eastman in his book *Christ in the Drama* could allow himself no stronger comment than that Wilder’s plays have tried to "interpret life in terms of abiding spiritual values, and we cannot imagine any of them written in a culture which Christ had not influenced." (119). It is fairly safe to assume that a person capable of re-creating *Finnegan’s Wake* has sometime during his reading come in contact with the theories of Plato and the Neo-Platonists. Furthermore, coming from a family of New England Congregationalists, Wilder is no doubt thoroughly familiar with the New Testament. It would seem, on the basis of implied and internal evidence, that the tradition with which Wilder is aligned is that of Christian Idealism rather than dogmatic Christianity.

Compared to his novels, on the whole, Wilder’s plays have been more favorably received as adequate structural forms. Alexander Woollcott remarked that “here is a theatrical craftsman every bit as bold, as impatient, as ingenious, and as sovereign in his field as Frank Lloyd Wright is in the field of architecture.” (*Long, Long Ago* 246). One of the critics, Francis Fergusson says "His two most famous plays, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, are the most skillful works our theatre has to show, and at the same time, market successes." ("The Search for New Standards in the Theatre,” 593). But here, also, there is dissension. Some critics have been concerned by the lack of traditional theatre in Wilder’s plays. The two most successful ones have very little “business” in them. There are almost no conflicts to be resolved, and
dramatic action is outside the jurisdiction of the character portrayal, being rather in the unfolding significance of the overall meaning.

Wilder’s plays contain very little of the sort of dynamic action found in *Oedipus Rex*, for example, as the king struggle against his growing realization of guilt. Nor do they embody the serious spectacle of Shakespeare’s plays. The appearance of the dinosaurs in *The Skin of Our Teeth* is certainly not an apt parallel to the appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet*. On stage, Wilder’s plays are much like a series of tableaus; the drama occurs in the unfolding realization of what the tableaus are presenting. Gerald Weales is aware of this lack of force presented through on-stage conflict and spectacle when he calls *Our Town* anti-theatrical. He feels this play does not enlarge upon a moment until its meaning bursts on the audience, but that it has a long-range perspective which eventually unites the individual and the general. ("Unfashionable Optimist," 487).

Repeatedly Wilder deals with the relationship of man to something beyond himself, and the relationship of man to individual man and to mankind. The former group involves a matter of faith while the latter is primarily concerned with love. Wilder’s idea of the proper relationship in either category has altered less during the course of his career than have his methods of presentation. Besides setting his ideas into both novels and plays, Wilder has experimented with form within the boundaries of media. This experimentation with form led him to find a method which allowed his thematic material to be presented quite freely, and permitted him at one point to overlap form with theme. Based upon the simultaneous presentation of matters temporally different, the form, as Wilder uses it, has been most successful in his dramas,
and through the theatrical employment of such a structural device, Wilder has contributed to modern literature.

Thornton Wilder’s plays and novels offer a rich ground for critical exploration; both thematically as well as technically. His theatrical forms are in the ‘vanguard of modernism.’ He was familiar with the stylistic innovations of Luigi Pirandello and Bertolt Brecht; their influence can be felt frequently in his works. Wilder’s handling of the elements of plot, characterization and language is dexterous. His methodology reveals literary skill and sophistication.

As a dramatist, Wilder’s reputation rests on three full-length plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and The Matchmaker. These plays are outstanding in their philosophical speculation and theatrical technique. The earlier two won Pulitzer Awards and the third, The Matchmaker, was transformed into a popular musical entitled Hello Dolly! These plays have consistently entertained people throughout the world. Their universal appeal and style foster an impression that somewhere in the world a live performance of some of their scenes is taking place all the time.

Our Town has as its theme, the value of life-life when viewed against the ultimate backdrop of death. In this play Life is the hero, the swift passing years are the villain and man’s inability to realize this experience is his tragedy. The form of the play fits the meaning to perfection. The Skin of Our Teeth was an optimistic ray of hope for the trauma-torn audience of 1942. It establishes that man is a survivor and nothing can destroy him. The appeal of the play lies in the fact that its theme is relevant even today as the world hovers on the brink of a nuclear holocaust. The stagecraft foregrounds Wilder’s expressionistic
vision. *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". (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.

In his works, Wilder seems to take a synoptic view of life as a whole. He seems to be more optimistic than most of his contemporaries: while Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller deal with despair and broken dreams, Wilder affirms the timeless validity of certain fundamental values. His works address themselves to a wide and classless society as they deal with perennial problems of mankind.

Thornton Wilder’s humanistic approach pervades the themes, setting and style of his works. It is this quality which distinguishes Wilder from his
literary contemporaries. His works can be recognized by its lively style, sincere sentiments and intense feeling.

Thornton Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 17, 1897, the second child of Amos and Isabella Wilder. He survived by the skin of his teeth, while his twin brother was discovered to be still-born. Frail at birth, Wilder overcame this handicap by the age of three and thereafter grew up to become, “the only contemporary writer who is literate in the European sense ... the humanistic sense.” (Nicola Chiaramonte 302). His father, Amos Parker Wilder, was a Congregationalist born in Maine who had obtained a Ph.D. in economics from Yale. At the time of Thornton’s birth, Amos owned The Wisconsin State Journal in Madison, and was taking some part in Republican politics through his capacity as publisher. (Malcolm Cowley 2).

Amos Wilder's decisions pertaining to his career involved a lot of moving from one continent to another. As a result Thornton Wilder’s primary influences, both academic and personal, were many and varied. Moving from one school to another, from Hong Kong to California to China, Wilder’s talent absorbed several impressions which became the guiding principles of all his major works.

The healthy, warm, value-oriented atmosphere of the family had a deep-reaching effect on Wilder’s sensitive spirit and left an indelible imprint on his heart and mind. Generating a positive and powerful influence on the formative years of his youth, this paved the way for the development of his multi-faceted genius. Young Thornton’s creative potential became evident early in life. Writing to his father from Oberlin College in Ohio, in April 1917,
twenty-year-old Wilder wrote: “My real life is abstract and moves along at its own will and caprice, and all these outer things are a shrugging-of-the-shoulders, a quirk-on-the-stream. So do what you like: a hoe or a hospital pail or a bayonet in my hand are phantoms, for my hand holds always a fountain pen”. (Nicola Chiaramonte 8). This quality assumed large proportions in Wilder’s adulthood and was responsible for making him what we know him to be.

Amos Wilder’s choice of Oberlin for Thornton’s college study proved to be very lucky. It was here that Wilder got the opportunity to study with Charles Wager, whose passion for literature and teaching skills were astounding. The influence of Wager rubbed off on Wilder, and Wilder began to respond to Wager’s communicative strategies: “It was probably from him that Wilder developed his own intuitive appreciation for the writings of the past, for tradition, for history, for legend...Perhaps what most impressed. Wilder was the discovery that genuine masterpieces are timeless.” (M.C. Kuner 4).

It was at Oberlin that Wilder was exposed to the new school of criticism called the New Humanism. Constituted of criticism like Irving Babbitt, this school believed tradition in the form of Christian orthodoxy and in the great classics provided the answer to literature and to life; books that stressed despair and deprivation could contribute nothing of lasting value. Wilder understood this philosophy perfectly and it is reflected in his emphasis on positive portrayal of character.

The changing influences of childhood and youth created a writer who was always seeking human warmth in all his relationships Wilder learned
early that a home is based not on physical location but on human relationships. Not surprisingly, his books have no strong sense of property or of material things: everything he writes is permeated by a vivid feeling for family ties.

His journey from an active writer of articles and short plays in college magazines to a writer of Pulitzer Award winning classics, was crowded with the usual ups and downs that constitute life. The ups were the bright years when his creative genius was at its very best and his talent won recognition and appreciation. The downs, caused by insensitive criticism never daunted his enthusiastic spirit. On the other hand they facilitated the fortification of his resources. In a way he seemed to have strengthened his foundations, with the very stones that were hurled at him.

Laurels came early in life. During his graduation days at Yale, 1917-1920, Wilder won the Bradford Brinton award for his Four Act Play, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*. Its publication in the 'Yale literary magazine' was a feather in his cap. The play became the first of Wilder’s plays to be staged professionally and it's ironic intent was clearly apparent. It is an allegory discussing profound questions, like the price of disloyalty, the agony and torture of unreturned love and the penalty for despair. Although thought-provoking, it did not prove to be very popular.

When the dark, threatening, clouds of the First World War engaged the attention of the masses, Wilder couldn’t remain unaffected by it for long. Surrendering himself to his patriotic urge, he enlisted in the Coast Guard Artillery Corps, in spite of his poor vision and generally weak constitution. His participation in the war was a significant chapter of his life. After the war was
over he came back to Yale from Rhode Island. In his mind, echoed the obscenities and profanities the men in the barracks and he thought about the meaninglessness of their lives. This impression had a lasting effect on his mind, and it is articulated effectively in his works.

Wilder’s chief achievement during his graduation days was the writing of thirty-two short plays. These were recognized and appreciated, but did not help him financially. This caused his father Amos a lot of worry and mental tension. The turning point in Wilder’s career came with the publication of his first full-length novel *The Cabala* in 1926. Patterned on the life-style of the members of a group, this novel deals with the lives of a handful of ultra-conservatives influential in clerical and political Rome. The time is the early twenties. It was received with interest in the critical circles and a particularly noteworthy acclaim was given by *The New York Times*, which said that it was, “The debut of a new American stylist. magnificent literary event.” *The New York Times* thought it to be “one of the most delectable myth that ever issued from the seven hills of Rome.” “What a rich and finished book it is,” wrote M.C. Kuner, “and what a collection of extraordinary people.” (*Thornton Wilder: The Bright and the Dark* 91).

Of all the literary appreciation the one that mattered most was that of Charles Wager, “*The Cabala* was the real thing” he wrote to his prized student. Modestly Wilder answered that his aim had not been “stylistic virtuosity but the notation of the heart.” (M.C. Kuner 94).

Then in 1927 came *The Bridge of San Louis Rey*. Wilder pole-vaunted to fame with this novel. It became a best-seller on publication and a great
masterpiece. It won for Wilder his first Pulitzer Award in 1928, making him both rich and famous at the age of thirty-one. “Dedicated to his mother, ‘The Bridge is a 236 page speculation on the meaning of catastrophe.”

The reviews that arrived in both English as well as American magazines were stunning. E.V. Lucas thought he had “come upon nothing lately so original and striking.” Arnold Bennett wrote in The Evening Standard that he had never heard of Wilder but The Bridge was “an absolutely first-rate work, it dazzled me by its accomplishment.” The New York Times said, “It was a better book than The Cabala with a style which is learning to conceal its art.” Isabel Paterson of the New York, Tribune called it a “little masterpiece.”

Taking success in his stride, Wilder covered yet another milestone of his life when, in 1929, after the astounding success of The Bridge, he started the construction of the ‘house The Bridge built,’ in Hamden, Connecticut.

Passionately fond of travelling, Wilder succeeded in making a lot of friends during his tours around Europe and the United States. The list of his friends ranged from waitresses to police chiefs, to celebrities like Sigmund Freud, Katherine Hepburn, Ernest Hemingway, Gene Gunney and several others. Although busy with lectures and talks he also soon completed and published his third novel, The Woman of Andros, in 1930.

The years from 1931 to 1935 saw the publication of The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act and Wilder’s fourth novel, Heaven's My Destination. The Long Christmas Dinner covers ninety years, and traces the joys and sorrows of several generations of a family. Jean Gould
appropriately comments that this play foreshadowed "the playwright’s technique and style in maturity". (*Modern American Playwrights* 210).

Wilder’s theory of drama, envisaged a pattern wherein all ideas that were expressed related to the “All, the everywhere and the Always.” His interest in the expressionistic technique of Strindbergh and Elmer Rice, during his visits to Germany in 1930, made him aware of the problems of too much and too little realism. Avoiding both the extremes Wilder attempted to portray in his works, reality, and not verisimilitude. Since the chief objective of the dramatist is to communicate directly with the audience, such a technique alone could prevent the stifling of themes and illustrate skillfully, the ideas.

An avid reader Wilder’s main interests were Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Kierkegaard and Freud. He also developed an interest in the psychological analysis in literary art. His contact with Gertrude Stein in 1935 influenced his views to a considerable extent.

The death of Amos Wilder in 1936 left Isabella, Wilder’s mother to, manage on her own. Wilder’s feminine ideal is manifest in *The Long Christmas Dinner*, *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, and *Our Town*.

Like several of the one-act plays of the early thirties, *Our Town* reflects his dissatisfaction with the current theatre. The rise of the middle class in the late nineteenth century had destroyed the actual potential of drama. Longing for a theatre which would be soothing, the late nineteenth century audience created drama which would not disturb them. As a result, Wilder realized, that in drama, “The tragic had no heat, the comic had no bite, the social criticism failed to indict us with responsibility.” (‘Preface’ *Our Town*
and Other Plays 12). The theatre of the late nineteenth century was not only inadequate’ but ‘evasive’ as well. Hence, Wilder thought of writing a play which would not be didactic and yet which would ram into the hearts and minds of the audience a powerful message. Our Town communicates the essence and flavour of life. Winning for Wilder his second Pulitzer Award in 1938, the play “with the most engulfing simplicity, presents the growing up and the growing down that is everyone’s life and, though laid in a New Hampshire village has the human heart as its real setting.” (John Mason Brown 79). The most cherished acclaim, once again, came from Charles Wager. He wrote to Wilder, “You remember Joubert’s remark, repeated by Matthew Arnold, that in literature, we weep not at what is sad, - but at what is beautiful, and the tears that your play has made me shed were caused by its ‘terrible beauty.” (Nicola Chiaramonte 180). The play is indeed a classic, in its portrayal of simple events of our daily life and their universal significance.

Matters were not just sugar and spice for Wilder, for there were plenty of caustic attacks on the play in addition to the problems created by the bullying of Jed Harris, the producer director. But Wilder did not worry too much on this issue as the praise outshone the criticism.

Opting for the constructive solitude of Arizona, Wilder retired to the desert retreat and busied himself in working on the play The Merchant of Yonkers; a farce with several twists and turns. The play opened in Boston, but fell flat due to its bland humourless presentation. It closed after four weeks. There was nothing particularly wrong with the play, for in 1955, a slightly modified version, The Matchmaker, proved to be very popular.
Soon the fury of war, enveloped Asia and Europe. America experienced its repercussions as well. Wilder’s endeavours were concentrated on the construction of a play that would highlight man’s capacity to survive in spite of all odds. The result was *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1942. As the script of the play neared a finishing point, Wilder received orders to report at Miami as a Captain in the Army, Air Intelligence.

After initial teething problems, the play became quite popular and won for Wilder his third Pulitzer Award. Meanwhile, however, a teapot tempest had blown up around it. It was concerned with the publication of an article in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in which, Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, accused Wilder, of plagiarizing the thought and idea from James Joyce’s *Finnegan's Wake*. Their indictment had undoubtedly been overstated and far-fetched. Wilder himself clarified categorically, that “literature resembled a torch race rather than a fierce dispute among heirs.” (“Preface” *Our Town and Other Plays* 13).

While posted as Major in Constantine, Algeria, Wilder watched with interest the smash success of *Our Town* in Belgrade on the special request of Marshal Tito. By the time a ceasefire was reached he was adequately homesick and was all set to be a civilian once again. In his mind he worked on the plan for *The Ides of March*, a novel dealing with the life and time of Julius Caesar.

After the War, Wilder involved himself in reading a lot of existentialist literature. Distilling its essence, he concluded that, ‘there is no God; there is the concession of the absurdity of man’s reason in a Universe which can never be - explained by reason; yet there is the freedom of the will
defended for the first time on non-religious grounds; and how.’ The soul of freedom is choice; the soul of choice is risk; you make up your morality as you go along.” (Nicola Chiaramonte 245).

In 1946, a message from home paralyzed all his writing. His mother was reported to be sick and Wilder wound up all his work to reach Nantucket to be with her. Isabella Wilder died in June 1946, at the age of seventy three and her death was a shattering experience for the Wilder family. Mean, while, sister Charlotte was paying the price of being one of a large family. Mentally disturbed and ill-at-ease, her health deteriorated from bad to worse, and hence she was confined to the Brattleboro Retreat. All her medical aid was financed by Thornton’s trust although this was never mentioned to her. She disliked Thornton and was convinced that she was a better writer than he was.

The year 1946, proved to be emotionally traumatic for Wilder, since many of those for whom he cared, passed away. The list included, Woolcott, Ned Sheldon, and most important, Gertrude Stein. It left Wilder feeling miserable, but he realized that all these “infinitely treasured” people specially Gertrude Stein, would always be with him, in his heart and in- his mind. 1946 turned out to be an year in which he was trying to adjust to civilian life, a year of intense sorrow and mourning and hence it also became a year of no achievements, literary or otherwise.

The anodyne was work and so he busied himself in the completion of *The Ides of March*. When it was completed, it turned out to be a “polished study of the mind of Julius’ Caesar and of power in the' last days of the Roman Republic, a fantasia in the form of imaginary letters and documents. Historical
fidelity is irrelevant.” (Nicola Chiaramonte 251). The influence of existentialism can be felt throughout the novel. Based on his own imagination the novel sold, about fifty thousand copies.

In 1955, he produced two plays. *The Matchmaker* was a revised version, of his earlier play *The Merchant of Yonkers*, and *The Alcestiad* which was presented at the Edinburgh festival.

During the period following the completion of *The Ides of March* and before the presentation of two other plays *The Matchmaker* and *The Alcestiad*, Wilder busied himself in travelling and acquiring crucial experiences. The most prominent among them were the invitation to the Harvard University as Charles Eliot Norton Professor, his decoration with several honours and medals and his involvement in the lives of living beings. Except for the incurable malicious ones who were very few, Wilder lent a sympathetic ear and friendly counsel to all those who sought his help. It is in this particular area of life, wherein Wilder was his most successful. Always discouraging regrets, and self-pity, Wilder advocated courage and grit. Wilder's counselling, with its faith and affection, won him several fans who yearned for his recipe for happiness. Generously, Wilder inspired warmth and compassion in living beings, ranging from little eleven-year-old adolescents to twenty-nine-year-old adults, and other older people.

*The Alcestiad* was ready for production at the Edinburgh festival in 1955. Having the myth of Alcestis as its base, the play is Wilder’s hand-some compliment to women. It communicates on three levels, conveying the theme of selflessness and self-sacrifice. Its opening in Vienna in October 1957 was
celebrated with the Austrian Government’s Medal of honour for Science and Fine Arts and the MacDowel Colony Medal for Wilder. He was its first recipient in 1958.

His creative talent was best while moving from one place to another. Wilder’s unceasing appetite for change involved a lot of travelling and during this he wrote his later works. In 1962, three plays, Someone from Assisi, Infancy and Childhood, reached the New York stage. The verdict of the audience was unsensational and hence the plays were dismissed. He had several plans in’ his head but they did not materialize in concrete dramatic forms. A passion for music enveloped him at this stage replacing his other talents. This passion from his early days of childhood reached its climax eventually in his taking serious interest in The Long Christmas Dinner and The Alcestiad as musical operas.

Soon Wilder grew sick of social formalities. He decided to leave it all aside and retreat to the Arizona desert not for a day, a week, or a month, but for a couple of years. May 20, 1962 found Wilder settled comfortably in Douglas, Arizona.

Wilder, who in all his works had emphasized the essential flavour of life, lived his life to the full, to the very last minute. The severe criticisms, dirty mud-slinging, excessive manipulations of his themes and content by egocentric producers could never bog him down. When the end came finally in 1975, Wilder had a good light lunch, and was enjoying his afternoon siesta.

Wilder speaks French, German, Italian, and Spanish, was a friend of Gertrude Stein and Sigmund Freud, is deeply interested in music, and works at
a hobby of dating the plays of Lope de Vega. That he is erudite is indisputably apparent from his re-creation of *Finnegan's Wake*; that he is a craftsman is evident from the variety of forms he has employed in his works and also from the skillful execution of these forms. He has written two novels which resemble a series of interlocking short stories constructed in illustration of a unifying principle, a pastoral novel, a documentary novel, and a novel reminiscent of the old picaresque type. His plays, approximately forty three-minute moral plays, and one trilogy complete with the Greek type of satyr play.

His span of seventy-eight years was packed with zest and zeal for life. He appeared to different persons in different lights, but in spite of the variety of opinions there was one remarkable consistency. To all, he was a friendly, amiable, warm-hearted individual who was “unashamed of his passionate enthusiasms and his incorporations. At home with what his contemporaries were thinking, unresentful of other styles and sensibilities, Wilder never insulated his imagination from either the nourishments or the corruptions of his age. Accessible to the currents of modern philosophy and social thought, he was the least resistant of artists. While isolation was one of the major themes of his work, friendly exchange was his characteristic way of conducting a career.” (David Castronovo 149).

Taking a more optimistic view of life than most of his contemporary Writers, Wilder always emphasized throughout his works, the significance of life. The idea that he communicates is, that living is agonizingly painful, but still it is worth all the effort. In literature Wilder seemed more inclined towards drama than fiction. He regarded theatre as the greatest of all art forms. He felt that the primary objective of the plot of a play should be to illustrate an idea so
that it would have significance beyond the events that are recounted. The events should be so created and arranged that they emphasize a large general truth: The influence of expressionism can be felt in his works.

In literature this style, as in the arts of design, springs from the artist’s desire to express himself more intensely than the conventional forms of composition permit. The stage for expressionism in theatre was set at the turn of the century by Gordon Craig, Georg Fuchs and Adolph Appia. In his book *Music and the Scene*, Appia emphasized the role of light in the presentation of a play. He wrote that lighting for the stage was of two kinds. Flat light to illuminate and plastic light to cast shadows. He felt that it helped in expressing the meaning of the play. Fuchs’ equally significant work *The evolution of the Theatre* came ten years after Appia’s. Whereas Appia’s approach had been through stage lighting, Fuchs’ was concentrated on stage properties. Rejecting Realism Fuchs emphasized the use of a shallow stage. He argued that a deep stage provides space for stage properties and other illustrative details which detract from the actors. Craig too was openly contemptuous of attempts of creating on stage an illusion of reality. He recommended, instead, the illustration of the inner meaning of a play through suggestion. He noted that just as on a two inch square sheet of paper, a line can be made to tower miles in the air so also it can be done on stage—for it is all a matter of proportion and not of actuality.

This style of presentation reached its height in Germany after the First World War. Piloted by Strindbergh it emphasized action as symbol, and dramatis-personae as abstraction, presented through brief, broken and elusive
scenes. The protagonist here is not an individual but an entire group - a collective hero engaged in struggle with the forces and threats of his time.

This mode wielded a considerable influence on the literature of the early twentieth century. Noticed earlier in the works of Hauptman and Wedekind it influenced Pirandello, Kaiser, Toller and Capek in their plays and Joyce, Kafka and others in their fiction. In the US the expressionist movement was felt soon after it came to its heights in Germany. Influencing dramatists like Elmer Rice, Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Robert Sherwood, Thornton Wilder and others, it established remarkably that in American Expressionism, the protagonist never becomes pure abstraction and at no time does the action become pure fantasy. It always has its roots in contemporary realities. Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine*, Eugene O’Neill’s *Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* and Tennessee Williams’ *Camino Real* are considered to be, the few purely expressionistic plays of American drama. Wilder’s *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* are experimental versions of this mode.

What Wilder, like any Twentieth century writer, tries to find temporal fulfillment within these nebulous moments and create his own world of "interior temporarity" with its own “interior spirituality" and live happily forever. What happens to the modern man is mostly in spite of himself. If this sets in perspective the imagination of *The Skin of our Teeth*, it operates in varying degrees in the destinies of his men and women. Domestic dislocation or "seismic disturbance" as Wilder so insistently calls it, is the supposed "cause" of George's patricide. In any case, the readers are supposedly making their "choice" in the fuller glow of their personality, but the "cause" of the
failure can never be known by them. It is for religion to explore. Thus, Wilder takes the readers to the threshold of religious imagination in his creative aesthetic. To this extent, his creative imagination is "moralistic" in the best of literary traditions of what T.S. Eliot calls for literature to "instruct" this world of nobler values and virtues in the most "unconscious" and "implicit" manner.

Wilder’s chief source of enthusiasm from his days of youth, was his writing. He was attracted to that form of writing which conveyed a lot of meaning through simple words. Wilder’s dexterous strokes of the pen disguise carefully the several layers of meaning that lie hidden in his thoughts, and are expressed in his writings. A typical feature of Wilder’s writing is to be found not so much in what happens but in what doesn’t happen.

Wilder’s works are also somewhat deceptive in the manner of an iceberg. His themes and techniques hold a special interest for the audience. The surface level meaning is just one eighth of the actual intention of the artist. The exposition and the denouement do not represent the beginning or the ending. The meaning of the work lies in its language, its image, its rhythms and its thought stream. The remaining seven-eighths of the meaning can be comprehended by a diligent and enthusiastic diver. The surface meaning appears to be simple and clear to the extent that it gives the impression of being shallow. When one takes the plunge, one can go down and down and often never reach the bottom. The research on Wilder thus becomes a continuous process.