CHAPTER - III

FANCIFUL & FLOWERY ILLUSIONIST
Thornton Wilder’s career as a dramatist actually began with a series of sixteen moralistic, three-minute one-acts, published under the title *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* in 1928. And more importantly, *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays*, a collection of six also one-act plays together printed in 1931, noticeably marked his passion for compression and love for the dramatic form, the theater. Comparing with many famous modernist writers, Wilder was not a prolific writer during his lifetime. And yet, the amount of theatre performance and the extent of influence engendered by his major works timelessly flourish and put on the stage in America and elsewhere around the world after his death.

Portrayed as one of the few enduring writers of his time, Wilder has always shown an intellectual preference for the classic as well as the newcomer. His ideas and emotions may run deep in his works, but they are not permitted to outrage or destroy vehemently the form and structure. His interest has always been in universal subjects and theatrical practice. (Bernard Grebanier, 5-6). In personality, Wilder was “shy, withdrawn, and bookish” during his early boyhood, according to his biographer, Richard H. Goldstone
Thornton Wilder is a born scholar, as well as a born humanist that can be perceived by his readers through the whole of his works. As a dramatist, Wilder is considered simultaneously a traditionalist and an innovator who uses highly experimental and diverse staging techniques and forms to promote values associated with family, community, sense of morality, ethics of love, and the appreciation of life’s pleasures and meanings. As in 1957, Wilder made a self-reflection at the conclusion of his *Preface to the Three Plays*:

> I am not one of the new dramatists we are looking for. I wish I were. I hope I have played a part in preparing the way for them. I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of the forgotten goods and I hope a remover of obtrusive bric-a-brac (111. Hereinafter the essay abbreviates as *Preface* and the book as *AC*).

To avoid becoming a contracted traditionalist or didactic moralist, he was not only in love with the past, but also with the re-creation of the past belonging very much to the present and the future.

Regarding his preceding proclamation, Wilder was honest and humble, even though his ideas and theatrical forms definitely influence those later American writers such as Arthur Miller (1915-), Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), and so on. Unlike some of the celebrated coevals, the advent of Wilder-like influence in American was slower, but in the long run was of greater importance. His impact on all aspects of the theatre in the United States was comparable to that of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), William Saroyan (1908-
1981), and the like; but the originality and ubiquity of his universal philosophy as a standard of living attitude took longer and stronger appeal in modern times.

In the eyes of his brother, Amos Niven Wilder, “Wilder is indeed somewhat anomalous and hard to pigeonhole (29)”. On the basis of Amos’ descriptions, for many accomplished critics, Wilder’s works has been put on the margin and fell outside the mainstream to the early twentieth-century literary arena for they worry that there is certain traditionalism in his outlook which undermines the modern premise. (Thornton Wilder and His Public 29). At that time, he was not immediately popular with the publication of his early works. They were under the impression that in most of his novels and plays Wilder was the preacher to speak for a grass-roots American experience which may be presumed as too didactical, banal, and sterile.

Wilder had grown up in different places where the local cultures or education might be influential either large or small on his art. Travel was an important part of his childhood as his family resided alternately in the Unites States and in China.

In the words of Goldstone, “Wilder was both an artist and a man of passion” (Thornton Wilder : An Intimate Portrait 173). Wilder’s initiation into the theatre as an actor was a determining factor in his intensely physical approach to the stage. Far from being fettered or satisfied by old routine and conventions, Wilder was a stylistic maverick and courageous experimentalist who made every effort to revolutionize the theatrical skills for his viewers. Similar with Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) in
the anti-illusionistic techniques, Wilder is from time to time compared with them in dramaturgic dimension. But, focusing upon somewhat different motifs in the works, Wilder himself believed that the theatre had the potential to make the audience newly aware of their own perceptions of reality. Wilder’s plays have the power of appealing to widely different talents and his influence in America is radical and exquisite because it is felt through the practice of the theatre itself.

Wilder's experience and experiments in the theatre have made him cosmopolitan lest the reader should merely be contended with the provincialism like that of used by some modern American realists or naturalists. In many of Wilder’s dramatic compositions, the two major plays in particular, they are “without loss to their universality, profoundly American” (Bernard Grebanier 6).

A very important part of Thornton’s life is, of course, the theater. That “I regard the theater as the greatest of all art forms” is his belief in art and he also credits that “(Drama is) Experience for experience’s sake” (Donald Haberman 9).

As far as Wilder was concerned, his theater was not made for artificial purpose to solve any social problem or religious judgment as other dramatists endeavor to do. For Wilder, “[t]he theater is admirably fitted to tell both truths” (“Preface to Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker” 107). He explains that in the theater, on the one hand, each actor before us is “indubitably a living, breathing one in particular,” but the theatrical mission the actor strains to exhibit is “a general truth” on the other hand. He
further scrutinizes that a novel or fiction is pre-eminently the specialized vehicle of the unique occasion or incident, but the theater is of the generalized one. He tries his every effort to traverse the theatrical limitation of visible props and the control of form at that time for he has sensed the theatrical weakness of the nineteenth century drama:

They loaded the stage with specific objects, because every concrete object on the stage fixes and narrows the action to one moment in time and space...When you emphasize place in the theater, you drag down and limit and harness time to it... (“Preface to Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker.” 108).

Therefore, one should realize that why he always longs to represent the symbols of things and the embodiment of abstract ideas through the theatre.

Wilder’s intention does not lie in describing the actual objects because when the theater pretends to give the real thing and event in canvas or by other actual properties, it loses something of the realer and substantial thing which enhances the reality outside the theater that is there. Whether place or time, Wilder wishes to fasten down neither part of them to precisely localize or cramp the conceivable extension of a play.

Therefore, it is his distinguished way through the dramatic power of the theater to uplift the indicative personal action into the realm of universal idea and type that is able to evoke our belief while sitting in the auditorium. His stress on the immensity of time and space is because he doesn’t want the action
of his plays narrowly retreated to past time. Wilder, from his heart’s participation in the theater, glorifies the stage for it could always be now and renewal there. He makes all the action and characters seem alive in front of the audience without those dated production methods. Both his artistic characteristics and humanistic personality direct him to be enthralled by the theater and to be a playwright which is the most impartial and objective kind of literary performance supported by Wilder himself.

The plays of Wilder are brief sketches. On the canvas of religion and morality are sketched the themes of existential isolation, the redemptive influence of love and the feeling of awe generated by the fantastic phenomenon of life. Facilitating the concentration of meaning, the form of these plays enables Wilder to arrange his ideas in interesting theme patterns and exhibit his individualistic spirit. Concentrating on the theme of the shallowness and insubstantiality of mortal wishes and strategies he plays deal with the full luxuriance of life with its sorrows, despair and fulfilled and unfulfilled hopes. Malcolm Goldstein’s comments in this context are noteworthy. He says:

The plays are not sociological tracts. They are not intended to revise our ideas about the virtues of the proletariat, the constraints of suburban living or the horrors of repressed sexuality, though each of these matters receive attention. In short, the plays are not topical, as was most of the anti-naturalistic drama written in America and on the continent during the 1920s. All economic classes receive careful attention, and all face the same problem: the difficulty of
finding a quiet moment for calm speculation on the meaning of experience. (The Art of Thornton Wilder 78).

This observation presents the essence of the early plays. The plays contained in the volume entitled The Angel that Troubled the Waters describe certain psychological states of the mind as they explore various tensions and obsessions that grip man. The plays of the volume The Long Christmas Dinner are not act dramas. Three plays of this volume The Long Christmas Dinner; Pullman Car Hiawatha and The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden are thematically ingenious and technically expressionistic as they represent journeys and abound in symbols. The ideas contained in these plays voice the several problems that occur with never-ending urgency in human life. In their diversity they become the cables which link all of Wilder’s works.

When nineteenth century melodrama, with its sloppy stage paraphernalia, continued to plummet down mediocre lane in its appeal, unmindful and even disdainful of its claustrophobic effect, there arose a strong desire for change. Technically, the early plays of Wilder are a response to this desire for change. These one act experiments do away with the nineteenth century traditions of well-made plots with their pre planned, all’s well that ends well, endings. The static stage effects, the illusion of real events taking place on stage, actors looking out from the box-set stage towards the audience, puppet characters whose future on stage is controlled by the strings on the fingers of the dramatist creator, and the unfolding of highly improbable events, are all discarded. Instead, Wilder’s innovative technique deals with simple
uncomplicated rituals of day-to-day living like annual Christmas dinners, night
time in a train, and a car ride across a state.

Concentrating on small structure the earlier plays are stylized in a
manner which upsets conventional trends and sets new horizons. Wilder’s
experiment was not so much with dialogue and diction as it was with the other
essential elements of drama like plot, character, exposition, climax and
denouement. These were discarded in favour of elements like the Stage
Manager, stage properties which draw-attention to themselves and visual jokes.

*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.

As the name itself suggests, the play is an allegory. The expressionistic vision, the delineation of character and the language of the play combine to make its technique arresting and interesting. The tension between Flora and her lover represents a general psychological truth. Her over-estimation of him reflects her feeling of insecurity. The sailor-lover is typical in his desire to avoid any serious commitment. The colloquial speech pattern of the play is a noticeable trait in Wilder’s craftsmanship and is repeated in almost all his works. Wilder had understood early that for the portrayal of depth and intensity, ordinary everyday speech was the best.

*Nascuntur Poetae*, the first play of the volume *The Angel that Troubled the Waters*, presents the quest of a soul for a meaningful, sustaining love which is more rewarding than selfish love. Presenting the story through a young boy in a painting the play shows how this boy is told that he is to be one of the chosen few special artists. In the boy’s artistic initiation and the trepid anticipation of his mission lies the theme of the play. In the pursuing of this love, there will be for him, an eternal, all-compassing love. Thus the theme of the play is the isolated and anxious progress of a sensitive poetic soul who represents thousands of bewildered aspirations.

The plays abounds in Dantesque imagery. “Shadow of the wood” and “the profound shade” are examples. The real charm and significance of the play lies in the overall effect of its theme. “Protestant in its emphasis on the boy’s
election and clumsily Catholic in its medievalism, the play is another Wilder combination of resources.” (David Castronovo 64).

_Proserpina and the Devil_ presents the story of Proserpina. The play 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.

_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.

_Host Thou Considered My Servant Job_ is packed with the Biblical parable. Reversing the Biblical story, it is a convincing attack on “the smugness of modern pessimism and cynicism.” (David Castronovo 66).

_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 most interesting play of this volume is *The Flight into Egypt*. Thematically 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.

The play 'dispenses with pretentiousness, scales down effects, and adopts a contemporary idiom that is both-charming and highly ironic'. The bare unornamental stage complements the elementary questions that arise in unpretentious minds in their search for truth and substance. Hepzibah wonders why the infants who were being slaughtered by Herrod were ever born. He says: “Even in faith we are supposed to use our reason. No one is contented to swallow hook, line and sinker, as the saying is. Now take these children that Herrod is killing. Why were they born, since they must die so soon? Can any one answer that?” (David Castronovo 67).
The bare stage of the play contrasts with the magnitude of the theme and subject matter and heightens its effect. Abandoning all decoration, Wilder adopts the technique of simplicity for the exploration of fundamental questions. “By eliminating cliches of staging he is able to offer the cliches of life as one kind of truth.” (Donald Haberman 72).

The plays of this volume display the signs of Wilder’s talent: “The plays were written about a year and a half before publication and so represent the ‘bridge’ period. Although their quality varies considerably as they stage conflicts about faith, human pain, and the ironic aspects of existence, each play is outlandish and thoroughly ‘out of step with literary naturalism.” (David Castronovo 65).

*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.

Thus 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 scripts of these plays are not more than six pages per piece, yet they display a complex symbolic art. The technique of *The Angel that Troubled the Waters* resembles a Baroque painting in its style and effect. *Hast Thou Considered My Servant Job* is interesting as it reverses all expectations and is spectacular in its blending of trickery and morality.

The characters are drawn from several sources and the range is astonishing. The dramatis personae of the volume includes Christ, Satan, Judas, Gabriel, Mary, Joseph, Hepzibah, a mermaid, Ibsen, Shelley, Mozart, Childe Roland and several others. If the stage directions were to be taken seriously the stage setting of each play would be outlandish both visually and financially. The settings of the scenes of the plays range from heaven and hell, to the bottom of the sea, and the heart of oriental mosques.

These experiments of Wilder bore promise of a brilliant talent. Fluctuating between fantasy and philosophy, playfulness and serious intent the plays introduced the essence of his craft.

The three earlier plays of the second volume *Such Things Only Happen in Books, Love and How to Cure It*, and *Queens of France* concentrate on the theme of fantasy. Emphasizing the fact that sometimes reality is absolutely different from fiction, and sometimes reality is as gruesome as
fiction, Wilder comments on the fantasy building strain in human nature. Stressing the fact that romantic illusions have a knack for destroying the pursuer, Wilder claims that these illusions, when indulged in excess, are destructive.

_Such Things Only Happen in Books_ offers an ironic comment on a writer who plays at life as if it were a game. The play presents the story of a novelist who firmly believes that incidents like wives having lovers, murderers returning to the scene of crime, cooks passing family food to their friends, can happen in books only. Little does he know that each of the above-quoted incidents is happening very much in his own house. Herein lies the theme of reality being similar to fiction. Through the complex psychological self of the novelist Wilder presents a particular group of individuals who can never respond intelligently to the stranger than fiction truths of life.

_Love and How to Cure It_ presents the story of a young boy Arthur Warburton who falls in love with a stage dancer Linda, who does not reciprocate his feelings. Failure. in his romantic quest distresses the protagonist to such an extent that he contemplates killing the stage dancer-destroying that which he loves. After killing, her he plans to kill himself. Very cleverly, Wilder prevents him from doing so. Joey an older character in the play decides to help Linda when she requests him, to cure Arthur of his love. Linda’s exasperation with Arthur finds expression in her outburst,

Linda : (Suddenly) Oh, I hate him, I ’ate ’im! Why can’t he let me be?

Rowena : Yes, Yes. That’s love.
Linda : (On the verge of hysterics)
Auntie, can’t it be cured? Can’t you make him just forge me?

Rowena : Well, dovie, they say there are some ways ... but I say there’s only one way to cure that kind of love when it’s feverish and all upset. Only love can cure love. (86).

Like Rowena, Joey also understands that only ‘love can cure love’ and so he sets about his task with the help of Rowena, Linda’s aunt. Joey impresses upon Arthur, with gravity and force, the idea that genuine love involves compromise and understanding. He tells him, “I read in the papers about people who shoot the persons they love. I don’t know what to think. What is it but that they want to be noticed, noticed, even if they must shoot to get noticed? It’s themselves—it’s themselves they love.” (86).

Suddenly the enlightenment dawns on Arthur that he was in love with the traditional, romantic, illusory concept of love. His realization finds expression in, “What he said is true. I want to be noticed. I wish you liked me, Linda. I mean I wish you liked me more. I wish I could prove to you that I’d do anything for you .... To prove to you. But you’ve all been so kind to me. And that … I think just loving isn’t wasted,” (86).

He undergoes a change of ideas. He realizes that his love was shallow and empty. He also realizes that lasting love, involves delving beyond the self. In-this realization' is the subtle theme which indicates that the emotion of love involves primarily, thinking beyond the self and that there is a vast difference
between reality and fiction in life. Unlike fiction things may not end well in life.

*Queens of France* presents the story of a charlatan who through his smooth talk, convinces three sophisticated nineteenth century ladies, that they are the queens of France. The theme of fantasy emerges explicitly, when M’su Cahusac opposing as a lawyer cons each woman into believing that she is the particular heir to the throne of France. Each of these women falls an easy prey to his fantastic suggestions because they lead a dull life, void of any excitement. In the young man’s yarn spinning lie the promises of an exciting future, and in their efforts to grab this chance the women reveal the pathos of human existence. What Wilder is trying to point out is that man, ignoring the present, tries to pursue the future blindly, forgetting completely that it is the present which is everything. It is the present which will be the future and it is the present which has become the past. Tomorrow shall soon become yesterday. In an enthusiastic response to the present, the here and the now, lies the key to an exciting tomorrow and a fully lived, satisfactory past.

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.

The plays in the second volume entitled *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays* portray this idea. Three plays of this anthology - *The Long Christmas Dinner*, *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, and *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* - deal with profound themes as they present short moments in the eternity of life, which help us to find meaning in this world.

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. (David Castronovo 70).

*The Long Christmas Dinner* is technically exquisite in its arresting presentation of the strange cycle of human life. The Proscenium stage is
conventional but the other devices are brilliantly imaginative. The left side exit of the stage is decorated with garlands of fruits and flowers. The entrance signals the advent of the new generation as babies are brought in their perambulator. Directly opposite to this entrance is the right side-exit, over which hangs black velvet, appropriately symbolizing Death. As characters begin to grow old they put on their wigs, wrap their shawls around and without any fuss walk toward the black corridor. Ninety years are traversed during the course of the play and several generations of the Bayard family sit down to successive Christmas dinners. They eat imaginary turkey with imaginary knives and forks. The use of pantomime is appropriate as it successfully depicts the transitory nature of time. The fleeting years are depicted through the conversation and the acting. One character walks a few steps towards the death portal and then comes back exhibiting superbly his recovery from alcoholism.

Wilder’s use of 'time' in the play is persuasive. The passage of ninety years is depicted without any interruption. There is only a slight pause when some family member walks towards the death portal and then life goes on. The scenes blend harmoniously and the effect conveyed is that of smooth floating 'on the tides of the ocean of life. The beauty of the impact is increased manifold when we understand that Wilder has achieved this effect by the use of the sophisticated technique of merging the real with the unreal and the abstract with the concrete. The technique conveys the theme convincingly and the overall impact is stupendous. The cleverness of this technique makes its vision impressionistic and the rapidity of the one-act form conveys fleeting pleasures and permanent apprehensions appropriately. Genevieve’s exasperated outburst towards the close expresses the exquisite sublimity of the play. She says, “I
can’t stand it. I can’t stand it any more. I’m going abroad. It’s not only the soot that comes through the very walls of this house; it’s the thoughts, it’s the thought of what has been and what might have been here. And the feeling about this house of the years grinding away.” (25).

In *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, the plot revolves around the journey of Ma Kirby, her husband and their children from their home in New Jersey to that of their elder married daughter’s in Camden. The daughter Beulah is recuperating from the intense anguish and trauma of a recent miscarriage. The play is a superb depiction of family love which reaches its peak when suddenly Beulah asks her father, “Are you glad I’m still alive, pa?” (103), Three of man’s basic feelings are packed in this line, “the desire for love, the fear of rejection and the fear of death. At the moment of the play’s conclusion comes the tacit suggestion that all will be well for the entire family and consequently for all humanity.” (Malcolm Goldstein 81-82). Concerned with the ordinary from the beginning to the end the characters celebrate the same because they have discovered its significance. There is no sentimentalizing or romanticizing. The simplicity of the theme projects the profound and complex sublimity of the day to day when a ride in a car becomes an occasion for cosmic comprehension.

The stage directions for *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* state categorically that ‘no scenery is required’ for the play. The cast of the play ‘consists of five members of the Kirby family and the Stage Manager. He is the pivot who performs several functions. He has to place the properties on stage and remove them as required. He performs the roles of minor characters although he never changes his voice. Sometimes a woman, sometimes a child,
a neighbour or a gas-station attendant, the Stage Manager represents the multi-dimensional vision.

The automobile in the journey is represented by four kitchen chairs and a platform. The abstract setting of the play facilitates the universalization of the experience and the technique comes full circle when the realistic acting of the characters particularizes the experience. Place seems to disappear on stage as the Kirby family travels from Newark to Camden. The characters mime the motions of a journey with Pa Kirby holding an imaginary steering wheel and shifting imaginary gears. The children move their head slowly and in unison depicting the turns and they lurch forward and steady themselves as the car manoeuvres some risky twists on the journey.

The journey is devoid of any fantastic elements or literary allusions. The characters represent the ordinary and the mundane. The journey is full of ordinary events, ordinary happenings and ordinary encounters. The plot in its unornamental presentation of the cycle of pleasure and pain is simple. There is no sentimentalizing because Wilder is presenting ordinary facts and observations.

*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 Stage Manager opens the play by making the plan of the car called Hiawatha on the floor of the stage with a piece of chalk. He says, “This is the plan of a Pullman car. Its name is
Hiawatha and on December twenty-first it is on its way from New York to Chicago.” (52).

Through an overnight train trip Wilder succeeds in conveying the swift passage of time and the various thought streams at work in several individual minds. The audience hears the characters thinking.

Lower Five (the lady of Fifty) : Let’s see:
I’ve got the doll for the baby. And the slip-on for Marietta. And the fountain pen, for Herbert. And the subscription to Time for George...

Lower One (the 'maiden lady) : I know I’ll be awake all night. I might just as well makeup my mind to it now .... Well now I’ll lie on my right side and breathe deeply and think of beautiful , things, and perhaps I can doze off a bit.

Lower Nine (Fred) : That was the craziest thing I ever did. It’s set me back three whole years. I could have 'saved up thirty ' thousand dollars by now, if I’d only stayed over here. What business had I got to fool with contracts with the Goddam Soviets. Hell, I thought it would be interesting. Interesting,What-the-hell! It’s set me back three whole years. I don’t even know if the company’ll take me back. I’m green, that’s all. I just don’t grow up. (53).
Wilder moves swiftly from the passengers in the train to the general inhabitants of the earth, to the geographical phenomenon. Grover’s Corners, Ohio, speaks to us as also does the field, through which the train passes. It gives the details of the various snakes, mice, bugs, insects and spiders who are well settled in its vast expanse. The weather, the minutes, the hours and the years all present themselves on stage. The Stage Manager informs the audience that the “minutes are gossips: the hours are philosophers and the years are theologians.” (52) The planets Saturn, Venus, Jupiter all come on stage to convey their opinions and thought processes. Wilder moves on to the spiritual realm and when we reach the most abstract realm of thinking, feeling and experience we are brought back to the everyday. The play ends.

*Pullman Car Hiawatha* also represents a journey but here the car is replaced by a train. The train travels from the ordinary and mundane to the complex and the metaphysical. The machinery of experimentalism directs the audience to the absurd and sometimes tragic collision between our daily lives and our ultimate destinies.” (David Castronovo 70). As the train passes through towns and fields, they talk. Even ghosts and dead philosophers volunteer information. The role of the Stage Manager, character as individual thinking actors and the comic use of literary quotations to emphasize the theme make this short play a complex, thoughtful experiment. In some respects it anticipates *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Explaining his intentions Wilder had specified that he was writing plays with the chief aim of depicting reality and not ‘verisimilitude.’ His interest in theatre from his days of youth facilitated a deep understanding of its techniques. His stay in China enhanced his knowledge of the strategies of the
Chinese and Japanese theatres wherein a character straddling a stick is supposed to be on horseback and in the ‘No’ play of the Japanese, an actor taking a round of the stage conveys the impression of being on a long journey. So also in Wilder’s *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* four kitchen chairs represent an automobile and the travelling of seventy miles is done in twenty minutes. In *The Long Christmas Dinner* ninety long years with their joys and sorrows, achievements and despair and pleasures and pain pass us by in merely fifteen minutes. In *Pullman Car Hiawatha* plain chairs make up the berths of the train and we hear all the important details of the towns and the fields as the train passes them by. The audience gets a chance to hear their thoughts and the planets also make their presence felt.

Thus the plays stand out most meaningfully as they attempt to define the playwright’s major concerns and introduce his sensitivity and strong awareness of the significance of form and discipline. Brilliantly juxtaposing the complexities of the universe with the simple everyday occurrences of life, the plays exhibit Wilder as a perceptive observer of reality who is willing to surrender all inhibitions and preconceived notions in order to come closer to it. Emotion is held at an arm’s length and emphasis is achieved by juxtaposition and spare dialogue. The plays display the talent and insight of the great writer that Wilder ultimately became.

*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.

John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass
Menagerie* and more recently Sam Sheppard's *Buried Child* are good examples
of dramatists working on the life theme. Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* also uses
life for its theme and setting but in it, there is an essential difference. While the
above-mentioned playwrights portray life through a two-tone setting,
highlighting the peculiarities of certain individuals, Wilder’s play makes use of
it as a complete world. Life is a total entity as important as the protagonists
themselves. The central idea of the play is the value of life-life viewed against
the ultimate backdrop of death.

It is to this enigma that Emily, the protagonist of the play yearns to
return after her death in childbirth, nine years after her marriage. Racked with
anguish and guilt on the realization of the negligent waste of the precious years
of life she interprets it as divine retribution. She is quite right. It seems to be a
fitting punishment for all those living beings who waste their life by being at
the mercy of some self-centered passion or other as if they had a million years
to live.

The plot of the play deals with the story of ordinary people in an
ordinary town. Focusing his attention on two families, those of the Gibbs and
the Webbs, Wilder portrays the overall pattern of our existence.
Act I deals with the routine activities of average families. Starting at sunrise and ending at night, the Act portrays events like the early morning delivery of milk, the family breakfast, the children’s departure for school, the daily household chores, and the children’s homework at night.

Act II deals with love and marriage. The children of the two families, George Gibbs and Emily Webbs, grow up, fall in love with each other, and marry soon after they complete high school.

In Act III the focus is on Death. Emily Webbs dies. Her death brings upon her the great realization that life is a very precious gift which is wasted by living beings who fail to realize its value.

Inevitably the following theme patterns emerge. The focus is on the theme of the realization of the value of life. The idea resounds in the heart on account of its marvellous potential of delving into the emotions and moods of a vulnerable society caught in an erratic and unpredictable behavioural pattern. Brilliantly related to this is Wilder’s ability to integrate the most inconsequential and casual information into a delightfully fluid narrative. The theme of the celebration of the ordinary thus becomes the second milestone in Wilder’s engaging and stimulating quest. Simultaneously the warmly crafted theme of love conveys the fundamental essence of existence as it establishes love as the main agent of consciousness. Wilder seems to be saying that love facilitates the realization of life. Just when the theme patterns of the play seem to be settling down, the theme of each individual’s connection with the mind of God shakes them up, sending the play off in a new direction. The fourth pattern therefore appears brilliant and interesting.
John Mason Brown has astutely pointed out that although “Geographically Our Town can be found at an imaginary place known as Grover’s Corners, Sutton, County, New Hampshire, United States of America, Mr. Wilder’s play is laid in no imaginary place. It becomes a reality in the human heart.” (Dramatis' Personae: A Retrospective Show 84).

The theme of realization of life emerges subtly when vibrant life with all its joy and grief, happiness and suffering, is contrasted to passionless death. The inescapable chill of death brings the contrasting scenes of life to their highest emotional intensity. Emily Webbs, who married George Gibbs dies in childbirth. Surrounded by the other dead souls in the cemetery Emily experiences the realization of the significance of life. Her agony finds expression in her outburst, "Oh, Mother Gibbs, I never realized before how troubled and how...how in the dark live persons are...from morning till night, that’s all they are-troubled". (Our Town in Our Town and Other Plays 82).

Reluctant to quit life, Emily longs to participate once again in the daily events of life. Her desperate longing to live life once again obtains for her the permission to re-live one single day of her life on the condition that she will not only live it, but will also watch herself living it. The dead Mrs. Gibbs’ advice to Emily to choose an unimportant day of her life, for the least important day will be important enough, sounds the keynote of the play. Emily chooses her twelfth birthday and as one part of her relives the occasion, the other part watches. As the magic of the day begins to unfold, Emily experiences an unbearable anguish and ultimately she breaks down sobbing,
I can’t, I can’t go on. It goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another...

I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back-up the hill to my grave. But first : Wait! One more look.

Good-bye, Good-bye, world. Good-bye, Grover’s Corners...Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking…and Mama’s Sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new ironed dresses and hot baths…and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you.

(Our Town 88-89).

Herein lies the tragedy of all living. The ignorance and blindness of living beings prevents them from realizing and enjoying life. Emily realizes the value of life because she has lost it. From a distance she understands that most human lives are wasted, The tragedy lies in the failure of human beings to feel. Simon Stimson, the drunkard of Our Town, who is also dead, comments bitterly on the meaninglessness of life. In an obviously unpleasant tone he says, “Yes, now you know. Now you know! That’s what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feeling of those of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion or another. Ignorance and Blindness.” (89).
From the depths of Emily’s and Simon Stimson’s words emerges the primary message of the play. Very cleverly Wilder passes the burden of loss on to the audience—the living—who don’t realize the value of life. Even Emily’s appeals are not to be considered sentimentally. If these are considered as emotional, sentimental rhetoric, then the entire meaning of the play is lost. In the Preface to Our Town and Other Plays Wilder states clearly that the climax of his play requires only “five square piece of boarding and the passion to know what life means to us.” (12).

“My!” sighs the dead Mrs Soames in Act III, “wasn’t life awful and wonderful.” Thus one can see that the theme of realization of life echoes Wilder’s valuable advice. This is meant for all those who have this precious gift of life. It urges man to make the most of life while he has it for who knows when death will hurl one into the dark, dateless oblivions of dust and then there will be nothing—just nothing—no pleasures and no pain.

Similarly, the theme of the significance of ordinary events shows man as a vulnerable being. Wilder emphasizes the fact that to be vulnerable is to be alive.

Celebrating the ordinary was Wilder’s primary concern, as he had stated clearly in the Preface to Our Town and Other Plays. He wrote, “Our Town is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village; or as a speculation about the condition of life after death. It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life” (12).

Wilder’s play has succeeded admirably in doing just this. By juxtaposing the warmth of ordinary daily events of life like eating, drinking,
hot baths, fresh ironed clothes, sleeping and hopeful waking up with the feelingless, emotionless chill of death, Wilder seems to affirm that each small event has some value. It is each small event, however trivial it may be which constitutes the warmth that is life. This warmth of life is many times better than the cold and insecure dungeon 'of death. Bernard F. Dukore’s observation in this context is convincing. He feels: “Against the millennia of earthly existence, quotidian events might seem to lack significance; yet because life is fleeting each moment is precious and the apparently trivial details of an individual’s life acquire value through one’s awareness of them.” (*American Dramatists: 1918-1945. 134*).

Wilder also widens the scope of love, thereby conveying the message that love is the main agency of consciousness which facilitates the full realization of life.

As an onlooker, Emily understands that people on earth never have time to express their feelings and love for one another. Life goes by and soon everything is reduced to ashes. However the dominant mood as portrayed by Wilder is not sorrow, it is wonder. It is a wonder how time passes by swiftly. Here, the .die of moral responsibility shaped and moulded by the minds and hearts of living people, is to be cast. They should recognize that it is love which is left behind after the ‘earth-part burns away, burns out.’ By widening the potential of human love Wilder points out the disparity between the actual value of life and the one, of which the people are aware. Wilder’s play emphasizes, that collectively each one of us has to erect through love an edifice that will hold our destiny for years to come. This edifice of love, will in its turn, make life meaningful and worthwhile, which otherwise is just a swift
passing of years, wasted totally. The attractiveness of this theme lies in its uncanny ability to strike an intimate and emotional chord in the heart and mind.

These themes dominate the tone of the play. In their simplicity they exert a strong emotional appeal as they put forth the idea that in a rich realization of life lies its success.

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. Wilder begins at Grover’s Corners, and from there, proceeds to include and involve all creation. By avoiding scenery and all loud theatrical paraphernalia from the very beginning, he suggests clearly that the meaning of his play relates to several other things—other than those visible at Grover’s Corners. In Wilder’s play, the spectator is made to lift his imagination beyond the four walls of the theatre and then interpret the play accordingly. This open-ended quality of this play, constitutes its appeal.

The stage setting of the play, *The Matchmaker*, in a typical mockery of nineteenth century plays attempts to confine the action to specific locales. This confining of the action to particular places is clearly a parody of the conventions, because this technique is in direct contrast to Wilder’s basic philosophy and intent. Wilder firmly believed that confining the action to certain specific positions and situations, brings down upon them the stamp of particularity. The audience feels that such things are happening to such people at such a particular time. This feeling immediately brings about a sense of
distance, as the spectator dissociates himself from the action. Hence the basic intention behind elaborate particularized stage sets was to laugh at them in order to bring to light their ridiculousness.

One can say that the technique of farce, with all its paraphernalia, saved the play from being a mere situational comedy.

The stage setting of the play succeeds in swinging confusions one after the other. The dramatist’s mood gets infectious as the spectators begin to feel hearty and laugh at situations which blend with the rapid action of the play.

The fast pace of the play is also kept up by the characters who enliven the situations with their witty comments. As in a farce, the audience’s attention is concentrated, more on the fun, frolic and laughter on the stage, the characters run a dangerous risk of becoming stock, dead and hopelessly hackneyed. But in *The Matchmaker*, the characters are endowed with a two-dimensional appeal. On the one hand they represent types in a decided mockery of convention but at the same time they also represent individuals with their own thought streams. If as types they have their own whims, fancies and eccentricities then as thinking, individual parts of a society, they also share certain common views. They frequently step out of their world of the theatre to share their opinion with people on the other side of the stage.

In a typically melodramatic style the characters of *The Matchmaker* walk up to the front of the stage, and speak directly to the audience. Vandergelder’s view of himself seems interesting. He says: “Ninety-nine percent of the people in the world are fools and the rest of us are in great danger of contagion. But I wasn’t always free of foolishness as I am now. I was
once young, which was foolish; I fell in love, which was foolish; and for a
while I was poor, which was more foolish than all the other things put together.
Then my wife died, which was foolish of her; I grew older, which was sensible
of me; then I became a rich man, which is as sensible as it is rare.” (194). These
lines establish Vandergelder’s typically miserly, and cynical existence. But he
is very much of a human being, as well. A human being who longs for
adventure and participation in life, as is revealed in these lines. He says:
“There’s nothing like mixing with women to bring out all the foolishness in a
man of sense. And that’s a risk I’m willing to take.” (195).

Vandergelder believes strongly that the only distinction between
sensible and foolish people is their attitude towards money. He continues to be
a miser, for he asserts confidently that he is contemplating marriage for his own
comfort and convenience.

Thus one can see that the characters of the play present a two
dimensional effect. If they are types they are also full of life. “Cornelius
typifies the young rebel (but his anger takes no more violent shape than
blowing up his employer’s tomato cans); Vandergelder is the villain (but his
bark is worse than his bite); and Ermengarde and Ambrose are the devoted
young lovers (but they are just a little stupid).” (M.C. Kuner 140).

Dolly Levi, the Matchmaker, is the most interesting character in the
play. She is Wilder’s “image of contemporary survival” as she affirms that
“getting along in this world comes through taking an imaginative chance.” She
compels the other characters of the play to assume individuality. Her
imaginative qualities enhance the simple plot of the play. Her philosophy is
justified as she saves the other characters from being merely types. She says, “Well, I’m like you artists. Life as it is never quite interesting enough for me. I’m bored, Mr. Kemper, with life as it is—and so I do things. I put my hand in here and I put my hand in there, and I watch and listen—and often I’m very much amused.” (199).

The use of soliloquies in the play is also important as it reveals a serious observation about isolation, narcissistic self-involvement and the misuse of human potential. Wilder revives the discredited convention to not only portray the inner thoughts of the characters but also to provide serious commentary on suffocating phenomena like isolation and the pain it engenders.

Towards the close of the play Dolley Levi, in a thoughtful mood talks to her dead husband as she justifies her decision to marry Vandergelder and requests the late Ephraim Levi to give her away. She says, “Ephraim Levi to give her away. She says, “Ephraim Levi, I’m going to get married again. Ephraim, I’m marrying Horace Vandergelder for his money. I’m going to send his money out doing all the things you taught me. Oh, it won’t be a marriage in the sense that we had one but I shall certainly make him happy, and Ephaim I’m tired. I’m tired of living from hand to mouth, and I’m asking your permission, Ephraim—will you give me away?” (277).

The dialogue of the play is also very suitable. Never pompous, high sounding or grandiloquent, it cajoles the audience to think seriously over certain matters. Although it provides lively, subtle humour, it does not diminish the power of serious comment. The matter-of-fact appeal of the dialogue contributes largely to the impact of the play. Although the plot of the play is
very simple, it is the deftly handled dialogue which facilitates the swift movement of the play. It succeeds in eliciting hearty grins from the audience as it adapts Wilder’s ideas to laughter.

Thornton Wilder successfully presents events so imaginatively, that their actual feel of the situation remains intact and the account becomes enjoyable. His dexterous handling makes mundane facts pulsate with life, impressing their vitality and vigour, vividly. It is precisely this unique talent of transforming the ordinary into pure art that establishes Wilder’s credentials. The ironic contrasts and implications add to the appeal of the play.

Although this play has earned the reputation of being a farce, it is imbued with Freudian and Marxian insights. The themes of isolation, withdrawal and neurotic self-involvement suggest adventure, compassion and humanism as positive alternatives.

In the play Wilder avoids ‘fanciful’ and flowery writing. Everything has an edge and is precise and simple. Seeking rigorously to avoid any device, diction or syntax which might prove to be an obstacle between his audience and the actuality he is contemplating, Wilder selects sensory details which bring the scene directly before our eyes as in a cinema.

Wilder’s imagination takes a new turn in this play. Bustle, bounce and boisterous activity were never the characteristics of his earlier works. The play is probably an “interesting bridge between moods. Perhaps, it reflects something he once said: ‘our plays get happier as we get older.’” (M.C. Kuner 144).
Thornton Wilder's *The Alcestiad* is the most notable of his later achievements. The myth of Alcestis had fascinated Wilder since his childhood. He first heard the name Alcestis while being read to from Bulfinch’s *The Age of Fable*. He was eight years old at that time. The experience came full circle when Wilder’s mother, working as a volunteer in the costume section of the Classics department of the University of Berkeley, California, embroidered a blue toga with shells at its hem for Thornton and his brother Amos and sent them to participate as the Athenian mob in the department’s production of plays by Euripides and Sophocles. Thus Thornton discovered total theatre and ‘the Golden Age of Antiquity’.

Wilder makes some changes in his version of the myth. In *The Alcestiad* king Admetus is not portrayed as a helpless being. He is presented as a lovable king worthy of Alcestis’ sacrifice. Also, in Wilder’s play king Admetus is unaware of the fact that he can be saved if someone else dies in his place, till Act II. In this way Wilder achieves an intense dramatic appeal in Act II where the presentation of the husband-wife relationship deepens the characterization and enhances the outlines of the legend for contemporary comprehension. In this play the Watchman and Nurse Aglaia volunteer to sacrifice their life for their king. Even he herdsman, who has accidentally wounded the king, expresses his desire to die for his king. But Queen Alcestis silences them by illustrating the implications of the sacrifice.

Wilder was only one of many authors after Euripides to be inspired to retell in his own way the Alcestis fable. The play communicates its meaning on three levels. Explaining his intention Wilder wrote, “On one level my play recounts the life of a woman-of many women-from bewildered bride to sorely
tested wife to overburdened old age. On another level it is a wildly romantic story of gods and men, of death and hell, of resurrection of great loves and great trials, of usurpation and revenge. On another level, however, it is a comedy...about the extreme difficulty of any dialogue between heaven and earth, about the misunderstandings that result from the incommensurability of things human and divine.” (xv). An understanding of this vision reveals the illustration of several thought-provoking themes of renunciation as a path for spiritual salvation and divine communion; the idea of total involvement in worldly activities as a means of attaining the ultimate goal; and, the theme of selflessness and self-sacrifice. The arrival of Hercules on the scene also displays a very important theme. As the legendary epitome of courage and strength oscillates between doubt and clarity-he wonders if he has achieved success single-handedly through his own prowess or through some supernatural assistance he establishes, that, Man with his courage, determination, will and strength along with help from God can achieve the impossible-the miraculous.

Alcestis’ desire to renounce worldly illusions, to become the priestess of Apollo at Delphi, echoes the idea of renunciation. The idea of renouncing everything for the pursuit of substance and meaning haunts several sensitive souls. Act I of the play deals with this theme. Act II projects Alcestis’ inspiration to not to renounce but to pursue her goal within the framework of worldly existence. Therefore her absolute devotion and dedication to Admetus and her family responsibilities, becomes admirable. In Act III the great realization dawns on her that self-sacrifice and the realization of the self in others is the only way of discovering meaning and substance in an otherwise meaningless existence.
The play begins with Alcestis’ distress at the thought of having to discard her ambition of becoming Apollo’s priestess at Delphi, on the eve of her marriage to Admetus, the king of Thessaly. Admetus has successfully mastered the impossible task of yoking together a lion and a boar and driven them around the walls of the city of Iolcos. This was the condition insisted on by her father; and since king Admetus has fulfilled it, Alcestis has to marry him. This situation tortures her because since her childhood she has nursed the wish of serving Apollo. Her passion finds expression in her desperate outburst, “I wish to live in the real. With one life to live, one life to give—not these lives we see about us: fever and pride and...and possessionship—but in the real; at Delphi, where the truth is.” (14).

When Aglaia the nurse tries to explain to her that being the wife of Admetus and Queen of Thessaly would be also real, she remarks, “Any woman can be wife and mother; and hundreds have been queens. My husband. My children. To center your life upon these five or six, to be bound and shut in with everything that concerns them...each day filled—so filled—with the thousand occupations that help or comfort them, that finally one sinks into the grave loved and honored but as ignorant as the day one was born.” (14).

The first phase of her life is focused on finding some depth and meaning in her life. She longs for some signal from Apollo that will convince her of her mission and assure her of meaning in her existence. She even postpones all the ceremonies at Thessaly in the hope that she will receive some sign. When she doesn’t receive any she decides to travel to Delphi to become Apollo’s servant. At this point news comes that the divine prophet Teiresias wishes to convey a message to her. The message is that Apollo has to spend
one year on earth and he has chosen Thessaly for his purpose. He is present in
Thessaly as one of the herdsmen and is outside the palace. Herein lies the
startling suggestion of Wilder that Gods do exist “but are not wholly
distinguishable from men or put in another way, that what is human may
embrace elements of the divine.” (Malcolm Goldstein 148).

Alcestis’ hope soon turns into despair and disillusionment when she
learns that although the herdsmen are endowed with supernatural powers they
lack moral strength, which is the stamp of divinity. Alcestis’ exclamation, at
her discovery, conveys her despair and contains a hint of atheistic
existentialism. She says, “Then we are indeed miserable. Not only because we
have no aid, but because we are cheated with the hope that we might have aid.”
(30). Her naive hopes for ‘certainties’ shattered, she turns to a commitment of
her whole self in love for Admetus. The first stage of her pilgrimage thus
cultivates with her turning away from asceticism and renunciation to
‘engagement’ in life itself and to the creation of meaning in her life.

Alcestis’ vow to dedicate her life to Admetus is a challenge to destiny
and the set pattern of divine will. This choice of hers is soon put to a severe test
when she learns that king Admetus has been wounded fatally and can survive
only if someone else dies in his place. The old watchman and the nurse wish to
die to save the king. One of the herdsmen who has wounded the king
accidentally, wishes to die willingly for him. The explanation that he puts forth
is enlightening.

The realization begins to dawn upon her that selflessness and self-
sacrifice are the supreme expressions of love, and these ultimately lead to the
divine communion. “By dying, by renouncing life, she regains it, for Hercules comes to rescue her. She is as necessary to him as he is to her, for she becomes the test that he fears and must nevertheless pass if his own life is to have meaning.” (M.C. Kuner, 182). Along with this is the clear message that life will be meaningless unless made out to be something purposeful.

As the play draws to a close the canvas widens. Thessaly becomes a microcosm, its people mankind and Alcestis the Saviour saint. King Admetus dies, war brings about the defeat of the Thessalians. Despair and destruction grip the city of Thessaly as it groans under the vicious grip of a devastating plague. Agis usurps the throne barbarically making Alcestis a slave. Alcestis’ son Epimenes flees from Thessaly, and thus manages to survive. Later he returns to take his revenge but Alcestis dissuades him from doing so. She advises him instead to utilize his energy towards ridding the city of the plague. She even consoles the ailing Agis who suffers excruciating pain at the death of his daughter Laodamia. Alcestis explains to him,

The bitterness of death, king Agis, is part pain-but that is not all. The last bitterness of death is not parting-though that is great grief. I died...once.

What is the last bitterness of death, king Agis?

Agis : Tell me!

Alcestis : It is the despair that one has not lived.

It is the despair that one’s life has been without meaning.

That it has been nonsense; happy or unhappy, that it has been senseless.(101).
She assures Agis that: “Love is not the meaning. It is one of the “signs that there is a meaning-It is only one of the signs that there is a meaning. Laodamia is in despair and asks that you help her. That is what death is-it is despair. Her life is vain and empty, until you give it a meaning.” (102).

Once again a quintessentially Wilderean theme emerges. As Alcestis explains to Agis that he has been a cruel, ignorant, brutal man, she puts forth the hint that the suffering of Laodamia and her death shall help Agis understand several eternal truths. The prominent among them being the realization of the self in others. Living for one’s own self is senseless and meaningless. At this point she receives the sign from Apollo for which she had yearned all her life. As the plague lifts, she understands that she is Apollo’s sign because she has had unflinching faith even in the face of tragedy, and death. Her eternal dream of not ending as dust in the grave is ultimately realized. The play comes to a close with Alcestis being united with Apollo in a divine communion.

Alcestis’ compassion and benevolence become extensions of her super will, transcending all barriers to speak to the world in the inspired language of her beloved. Wilder’s Alcestis becomes both human and divine through finding and realizing herself in others. By turning Epimenes and Cherianter from assassination and murder to constructive effort, she in effect unites her people against the common enemy and conquers it. In the epiphany that closes Act III, Apollo affirms the final union of the human with the eternal and the transcendent-the mystical fusion of the human soul with the principle of Life or with God or Light.” (Rex Burbank 127).
Thus through Alcestis’ divine union Wilder affirms that an element of divinity is inherent in all mortals and its potential has to be tapped to reveal itself in all its magnitude and glory. Alcestis’ firm faith sustains her through her years of suffering and unhappiness. Her faith prompts her into acts of selfless service for others. In this she finds her meaning, and discovers the substance that she had yearned for all her life. Thus she herself becomes the symbol of Apollo—the saint who carries the message of compassion and love—thereby revealing Wilder’s primary theme that the ‘bright’ as well as the ‘dark’ have transcendental value.

The later endeavours of Wilder are a manifestation of his vision of the multi-dimensional potential. They are an attempt to bridge the hyphenated social institutions, particularly that of marriage. When the cauldron of selfish interest bubbles, self-sacrifice and selflessness are the only positive alternatives.

Fortunately, sentimentality and rhetoric are not at too high a tide here. The world of the later plays is not a paradise with a ‘do not disturb’ sign. Wilder paints here a vital picture of a regenerative society grappling with mindboggling devastations, both internal as well as external. The realization of the self in others, courage and fortitude in times of adversity, are a winning combination. They serve well to abate the waves of despair and pessimism. The protagonist is at the helm of affairs and in control of the entire perspective. Wilder’s philosophy guides troubled, blindfolded humanity through its periods of distress to plausible and possible solutions. Instead of elaborating on the palpably current problems Wilder’s style suggests the best possible ways of dealing with them. In the later one act plays Wilder deals with two prominent
themes the seven stages of man from birth to death and the seven temptations that stand in his way, striving to destroy him constantly.

Wilder therefore studies man, on both the levels-the conscious as well as the abstract. His vision helps him to be the architect of his own code. This code prescribes attitudes of courage, honesty and generous feeling for the effective handling of pressures and tensions in life. The mystique of this code lies in the courageous acceptance of the wounds inflicted by life. These will enable man to get on in life decently and honourably. The understanding of this creed helps one to understand that all areas of experience have been dealt with in terms of this code.

On a broadened level, the incidental episodes in Wilder’s plays gives the readers a world in miniature in which one can see the family imbedded in the town, “Grover’s Corners”, or in the community of “the Honourable Order of Mammals.” Even though bearing somewhat philosophical idealism in his mind, Wilder works in style of fantastic myth with mundane eventuality to connect the reality of human love and life struggles directly to the audience rather than to render them a sentimental evasion.