CHAPTER THREE

Our Town

Our Town, one of the most widely produced plays in the entire history of American drama, deserved the Pulitzer Prize bestowed on it as surely as any of the plays granted this award. Wilder had been working on a play script which sprang from the deep emotional ties he had felt toward the small-town life in Peterborough, and he sought to put into simple dramatic terms the sense of timelessness, the eternal value of daily living, all too often overlooked in the rush, the ever-increasing speed of a scientific age. Our Town was produced and directed by Jed Harris, working in close collaboration with the playwright. At first the play was conventionally staged, with full scenery and props. It was tried out in Princeton, Jan. 22, 1938, and went from there for a two-week engagement at the Wilbur Theatre in Boston. The notices in Princeton had been mildly favourable, but in Boston they were downright bad, and the second week was cancelled. A conference was held immediately after the last performance to decide what could be done to save the play before it moved into New York.
For a long time Thornton Wilder had felt that by eliminating the usual techniques of realistic representation and avoiding all pretense, the play would achieve a form that would press into reality to its utmost limits. At that crucial conference in 1938, he presented his ideas to Jed Harris, who was quick to see the point. He took away the scenery and other props except a few tables, chairs, a ladder, etc. Played on an essentially bare stage, Our Town was much more successful. The pared down production opened in New York the following week at the Henry Miller Theatre, and while some critics thought the staging was rather severe, most of them found it a refreshing departure from the usual overstuffed Broadway shows. Almost all praised the play itself enthusiastically, without reservation. Few realised that much of the eloquence of the simple lines emerged because of the simple staging. It was considered to be a miracle of theatrical magic and it settled down for a long run, eventually winning the Pulitzer Prize.

Our Town presents Wilder as an adventurous writer who combines erudition and entertainment, using unconventional theatrical techniques to reveal the
miraculous in daily life and the heroic in the ordinary people. The action takes place in Grover's Corners, in the north east state of New Hampshire on three specific days, one each act, between 1901 and 1913. Act I portrays a complete day in the life of the town and in the Webb and Gibbs households, while George Gibbs and Emily Webb are still in high school, just discovering each other. Act II focuses on their wedding day three years later, and Act III, nine years later, on the day of funeral of Emily, dead in childbirth. The first Act is labelled "Daily Life"; the second "Love and Marriage"; and the third, "Death". The first act establishes the relation of the town to history and geography; the second act, its relation to man's earthly aspirations; and the third Act, its relation to eternity.

One of the most common alienation techniques, used by Bertolt Brecht in his plays again and again is that of a narrator which enables him to dispense with the realistic theatre's pretense that the audience is eavesdropping on actual events. Similarly Wilder also insists on the full theatricality of the proceedings.
The Stage Manager immediately names the play's author, director and chief actors, thereby indicating to the audience that the play is a fiction, not reality, and also thwarting our predisposition to regard the production in realistic terms. Standing in a vast emptiness which stretches from the proscenium to the back wall of the stage, he starts destroying the illusion of the missing fourth wall from the very beginning. The text hints that the huselights are still on when he first saunters across the stage and begins to put chairs in place. Now and then he looks out to see how the audience is coming, and takes a glance at his watch. Wilder uses Stage Manager as the alienating factor, having him set the scene as he spoke, as in the classical or ancient Chinese theatre. He presents the life on stage directly to the audience, comments on it, even answers questions from the audience, and plays various roles in the play. He is at once a member of a particular theatrical production, a citizen of the village and a commentator reflecting its constricted viewpoints.

The drama begins when he announces, from a bare stage, the title and author and names of the principal
actors. He describes the geography of the town, thus creating Grover's Corners with his words. He opens and closes the episodes by calling the actors on and thanking them when the scene is finished, thereby alienating the audience and destroying the illusion of realism fully. He can manipulate time at will, he can move the action along, when necessary, he can metamorphose into other persons and step into the action, retaining, however, his general identity as supervisor. In the courtship scene, he plays the drug-store proprietor and in the wedding the minister. He has an equally intimate relation to the audience, for, besides being an "actor", he is also the ideal spectator. He acknowledges their presence directly throughout and controls them as he does the actors — excusing them at the intermissions and dismissing them at the conclusion. By acknowledging their presence, by assimilating their point of view, by controlling their universe, the Stage Manager produces an on-stage alienation, which is the result of his multiple functions.

Among the distancing devices that Wilder used, the use of myth is the most common alienation device in his plays. Modern playwrights like Eugene O'Neill,
Tennessee Williams and T.S. Eliot have used tribal myths in their plays, but Thornton Wilder is an innovator in the sense that he does not follow the conventional tribal sort of myth. The myth that Wilder uses in Our Town falls in the category of "Apocalyptic myth". According to Northrop Frye, "The apocalyptic world, the heaven of religion, presents in the first place the category of reality in the forms of human desire, as indicated by the forms they assure under the work of human civilisation."¹ "Apocalyptic" comes to mean the most common possibility of experience in life. In order to make this commonplace interesting to watch, Wilder transforms it into ritual through the use of theatrical innovations. Grover's Corners is not real but prototypical and this helps in destroying the illusion of real life happenings. Even in mentioning Grover's Corners, the Stage Manager raises the town to universality by mentioning the exact geographical coordinates:

The name of the town is Grover's Corners, New Hampshire — just across the Massachusetts line; latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes; longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes. The first act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7, 1901. The time is just before dawn. (p.5)
Wilder addresses *Our Town* to an undifferentiated audience of a classless society. The play's values are those of the ideal American small town in the stable, pre-interwar period before the First World War - democratic, egalitarian, middle-class, neighbourly and homespun. Its characters repeatedly call the town nice, unremarkable, ordinary and unimportant. If Grover's Corners were less ordinary it would be less archetypal.

Set against infinity, Grover's Corners becomes all of the world's remote communities in all of time. The earth shrinks to a small but cherished place, while on it each person plays his enigmatic part in the timeless cycle of eternity. The town he presents is the universal town, the archetypal town which can be any town anywhere and in any period. His centre of attention is the whole of society in *Our Town*. The people living in the town have some permanent experiences like birth, growth, marriage and death, comprising a pattern common to all human beings at all times. Thus Wilder has used in this play myth in a unique way to produce the effect of alienation. According to Thomas E. Porter: "*Our Town* approaches pure ritual in method and illustrates, in a unique way, the power of the
The use of myth makes the audience adopt an entirely new distancing attitude and they start critically evaluating the customary, obvious and never-questioned events.

The aim of Wilder's inventive dramaturgy is not to demonstrate total personalities or to demonstrate the inner lives of the characters. *Oedipus, Antigone, Medea, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, Phaedra, Mary Stuart* — these titles show the emphasis on the individual and his particular fate with which the spectator identifies and which moves him to pity and fear. Wilder, however, did not intend to portray well-rounded individuals. Emily, who will become the protagonist of this play, is not immediately shown as significant or even likeable. Her death in the third act and her response to it, become more moving precisely because she has not been singled out in advance as in anyway special to the life of the village, or of the play. Her role is more of a blank cheque which the dramatist accords to the artist for him to fill in, not entirely blank, for Wilder tries to ensure that the actress playing this part shouldn't
identify herself with the character. An actress might play the soda fountain scene with shy innocence or as one who manipulates George to decide against going to College. For example, Emily's repetitions and statements that follow the pause, suggest that she thinks before she speaks. This is against the conventions of the realistic staging that demands the spontaneity in the spoken dialogues:

George: Emily, if I go away to State Agricultural College next year, will you write me a letter once in a while?

Emily: I certainly will. I certainly will, George... (Pause. They start sipping the sodas through the straws.) It certainly seems like being away three years you'd get out of touch with things. (p.66)

Wilder set out to present an interpretation of social reality, and his characters are important only so far as they forward the presentation. Thornton Wilder makes the Stage Manager interrupt the conversation of Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb (and for that matter of other characters also at different places in the play) when he finds that the purpose has been solved:
Stage Manager: Thank you, ladies. Thank you very much.

(Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb gather up their things, return into their homes and disappear.)

Now we're going to skip a few hours. But first we want a little more information about the town, kind of a scientific account, you might say. So I've asked Professor Willard of our State University to sketch in a few details of our past history here....

May I introduce Professor Willard of our State University. A few brief notes, thank you, Professor, — unfortunately our time is limited. (p.21)

Moreover the characters are not specific individuals, psychologically revealed, but types. Wilder tries to develop the idea of a sample of humanity, as for example, the family in the small township of Grover's Corners, just as statisticians select their representative samples, he also selects typical families. The Webbs and the Gibbeses are representative of American middle class life. Emily and George, the young boy and the young girl, have already become legendary, ingrained in the myths of a nation.

Not only the characters but the experiences that they undergo in the course of the play are also raised
to the level of myth to create deliberate discrepancy in the time period which will alienate the audience from the action. Just as the man is a speck in an endless succession of generations, so each moment of breathing is part of the history of man. As Allen Lewis observes: "The method Wilder employs is quickly apparent. The smallest daily chores, the most repeated of living action, the local events — doing homework, listening to the Albany train, watching the boy down at the stable, ironing a dress — are magnified to equality with the movement of the stars.... Timelessness and pancakes are discussed in the same everyday language." Through the use of alienation devices Wilder frees the audience from the bounds of one particular time and one particular place. In Our Town, the consciousness is not only the product of simply one particular town but of all towns at all times.

Our Town is unique as it uses the most basic experiences like marriage and death and raises them to the level of the apocalyptic myth, alienating the ordinary occurrences in a family at a particular time, as though Emily and George have been especially chosen by destiny
to get married and be separated by such a tragedy.

A common event like marriage in all communities is considered the reenactment of the same pattern of ritual as has happened at all times. In different communities different ideal marriages are held out as archetypal models, as for example in India, the marriage of Arundhati. The marriage of Emily and George is just the universal human experience all human beings understand because marriage is a wise family event to give a productive channel to the sex urge since the early days of society. After the wedding in Our Town, people remark with a sense of satisfaction, as Mrs. Jones says in a shrill voice: "Perfectly lovely wedding, loveliest wedding I ever saw. Oh! I do love a good wedding, don't you? Does not she make a lovely bride?" (p. 77). So also is the case with "death", as in Emily's tragic death in childbirth soon after marriage. Those related to her consider the tragedy a unique occurrence, forgetting that such occurrences are very frequent. But for the alienation device of mythicisation, the events mentioned above will look very ordinary, not capable of touching a responsive core in the hearts of the spectators. Silver doesn't take any chance and uses the alienation device of direct addressing by making his
Stage Manager focus the attention of the audience on the universality of mundane experiences: "This is the way we were in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying" (p.32). A wedding ceremony or ritual, even in the American community follows the same pattern as a similar ceremony in distant and remote Greece. Wilder has universalised a typical wedding, that of Emily and George in Grover's Corners, into a perennial symbolic occurrence. As Porter points out, "Our Town presents, in a mythical mode, the ideal American community. By mythicising the small town, Thornton Wilder manages to create effective theatre with stereotypes for dramatic personae and soap opera meditations."

In order to destroy the illusion of immediate environment and estrange from the audience the behaviour of the characters, Wilder resorts to the alienating technique of historification in Our Town. The Stage Manager interrupts the play and invites Prof. Willard to sketch the history of the place:

Prof. Willard: ... Grover's Corners lies on the old Pleistocene granite of
the Appalachian range. I may say it's some of the oldest land in the world. We're very proud of that. A Shelf of Devonian basalt crosses it with vestiges of Mesozoic shale, and some sandstone outcroppings; but that's all more recent: two hundred, three hundred million years old. Migration toward the end of the seventeenth century of English brachiocephalic blue-eyed stock... since then some slav and Mediterranean... (pp. 21-22)

As he narrates the historical past, the audience are expected to sit back, relax and reflect on the lessons to be learnt from those events of cart-road days like the audience of the bards who sang of the deeds of heroes in the houses of Greek kings or Saxon earls, while the guests ate and drank. This technical feature of epic theatre, the "historification of every day life," makes the audience adopt an entirely new distancing attitude and they start critically evaluating the events, which are depicted on the stage. Malcolm Cowley pertinently comments on the use of historical element in Wilder's plays that helps to achieve the alienation effect:

Wilder does not think of history as an irreversible process of a river in flood; he thinks of it as a series of recurrent patterns, almost like checkerboards set side
by side... (his) all the books embody or suggest the same feeling of universal experience and eternal return. Everything that happened might happen anywhere, and will happen again.

The juggling of time is a very strong alienation device used by Wilder to pressurise the audience to use its judgement instead of drifting helplessly through the story. For example, we observe the events of May 7, 1901, but Stage Manager addresses the audience in time that is its 'now' while a copy of the play is being placed in a corner-stone of a building for people a thousand years later and he refers to the automobiles that will arrive five years from the play's 'now', life in Babylon thousands of years earlier, and rocks that are millions of years old. Our Town is a microcosm.

The Stage Manager offers a wealth of detail, including date, time of day, location of buildings and names on tombstones. He relates these to the universe: latitude and longitude, prehistoric fossils, sun and moon and stars. As Wilder in his preface to Three Plays points out, "The recurrent words in this play (few have noticed it) are "hundreds", "thousands", and "millions" (p.xii). Husbands and wives eat thousands of meals
together; millions of ancestors gather at the wedding.
To give an essentially common theme dramatic impact
Wilder shuttles back and forth in time. We have barely
met the newsboy when the Stage Manager casually announces
that he's going to die in the war, thereby transfiguring
his morning newspaper rounds into absorbing ritual. The
Stage Manager informs the audience that this time they
are going to go about it in another way that is going
to look back on it from the future: "Joe was awful bright —
granted from high school here, head of his class. So
he got a scholarship to Massachusetts Tech. Graduated
head of his class there, too. It was all written in the
Boston paper at the time. Going to be a great engineer,
Joe was. But the war broke out and he died in France —
All that education for nothing" (p. 10). And as,
soon as we are introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs at the
beginning of the play, we are informed by the Stage
Manager of the time and manner of their deaths:

There's Doc. Gibbs comin' down
Main Street now, comin' back from
that baby case. And here's his wife
comin' downstairs to get breakfast,...
Doc. Gibbs died in 1930. The new
hospital's named after him, Mrs. Gibbs
died first — long time ago, in fact.
She went out to visit her daughter,
Rebecca, who married an insurance man in Canton, Ohio, and died there — pneumonia — but her body was brought back here. She's up in the cemetery there now — in with a whole mess of Gibbeses and Herseys. (p.8)

For the spectators, after listening to all this, Mrs. Gibb's domestic duties take on the specialness of the immemorial and the transient. This type of treatment of the subject reminds us of the famous Brechtian alienation technique of removing suspense in the very beginning of the play. Even before the entrance of the main characters the audience come to know their future, thereby freeing their minds from the engrossing power of suspense.

The epic nature of Our Town is established by the interruption of dialogues by the Stage Manager every now and then, narrating the things like a novelist and considerably telescoping time and place. The use of alienation techniques allows Milder to telescope events and to eliminate transitions:

Stage Manager: Well — good deal of time's gone by. It's evening. You can hear choir practice going on in the Congregational Church. The children are at home doing their schoolwork. The day is running down like a tired clock. (p.33)
How this device is analogous to the narrative technique in which a writer bridges a transition with "the next day". The use of this technique is an open confession that the theatre is a theatre and not the world itself. Moreover, Wilder dispensed with the tedious ritual of the naturalist exposition in which the characters and the events have to laboriously establish their names and relationships in the frame of seemingly casual conversation. In Act II, the Stage Manager, like the Sutradhar of ancient Indian Sanskrit drama, starts telling the audience:

... Now they'll be coming out of high school at three o'clock. George has just been elected President of the Junior Class and as it's June, that means he'll be President of the Senior Class, all next year. And Emily's just been elected Secretary and Treasurer. I don't have to tell you how important that is. (p.60)

The spectator's unthinking acceptance of the arguments given by the playwright, which is an important requirement of the illusionistic theatre, is unacceptable to Wilder. That's why he gives constant and necessary injunction to audience to think individually and to reflect on their own way of thinking and feelings. In Act II Wilder puts before the audience the universal human experience of marriage and encourages them to
think individually while himself providing one of the traditional viewpoints backed by sacred texts. In the marriage of George and Emily he provides a tableau to illustrate the continuing ritualism of marriage with the exchange of rings and the music of the wedding march, the band striking up. Different characters express their individual viewpoints. Mrs. Webb talks about the age old traditions and rituals: "George you know's well as I do; the groom can't see his bride on his wedding day, not until he sees her in Church" (p.55).

While George expresses the opinion of a rebel as representative of the young generation by calling the whole thing a mere superstition, Mr. Webb treats the whole thing on the plane of logic: "Well, you see, — on her wedding morning a girl's head's apt to be full of . . . clothes and one thing and another. Don't you think that's probably it?" (p.56). Moreover, the Stage Manager encourages the audience to arrive at their own conclusions: "Now I have to interrupt again here. You see, we want to know how all this began — this wedding, this plan to spend a lifetime together . . . I want you to try and remember what it was like to have been very young" (p.60). Wilder's alienation devices provide the audience with alternative consciousness and alternative points of view.
to arrive at independent conclusions, but it is wrong to assume that they remain totally untouched by the views expressed by the playwright. As Ronald Grey writes, "Audience, like political voters, will go their own ways, despite press, stage and television, which is not to say that none of the media can influence those ways to a degree."

Diagonically opposed to the plays based on Stanislavsky's ideal, in the staging of Our Town, there is deliberateness of action, a consciousness of the presence of the audience. The use of mime, to fill the gaps created by the absent stage property, dispels even the least trace of illusion harboured by the audience. While George plays with an imaginary bell, Emily carries an armful of imaginary school books. In order to produce an effect, Wilder gives many stage directions, forbidding the use of realistic stage property. For example, one of the stage directions reads:

Dr. Gibbs has been coming... he stops, sets down his - imaginary - black bag, takes off his hat ... Mrs. Webb, a thin, serious, crisp woman, has entered her kitchen... goes through the motions of putting wood into a stove, lighting it, and preparing breakfast. Suddenly, Joe Crowell, Jr., eleven, starts down Main Street from the right, hurling imaginary newspapers into doorways. (p.8)
Wilder focusses attention of the spectators not on the presentation of a "slice-of-life" situations but on the logic in order to fish out hidden complexes and lurking obsessions. In Our Town the stage is bare and utterly simple with few 'pros' moved about as required. The alienation devices denote reality in their own unique way, in contrast to the 19th-century naturalists' "avowed aim of complete objectivity in art, actually impossible in practice and often confused with mere photographic reproduction of unattractive surfaces."3

In Our Town Wilder tries his hand at removing as many of the artificial contraptions of the stage as possible. The stage is a bare stage on which a few members of the representative families come and enact or just speak about the most ordinary facts of life. The opening stage direction reads, "No curtain. No scenery. The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half light" (p.5). Our Town is immensely theatrical. Actors planted in the audience ask questions about the town. Sound effects include a rooster crow, factory whistle, and the town clock. The news boy throws imaginary papers into imaginary doorways, children eat imaginary breakfast, and George careens down main street throwing an imaginary baseball into the air and catching it. The tops of two ladders form upstairs rooms. Here Wilder intentionally invites comparison with the balcony scene from
Romeo and Juliet, and, in its simplicity, the ladder scene is strangely enhanced by the overtones of our memory of Shakespeare. Moreover, Wilder eliminates realistic scenery other than two trellises explicitly "for those who think they have to have scenery" (p.7). The absence of scenery compels the spectator to focus on the details of life, not on the details of a setting. But absence of scenery does not necessarily prevent illusion. Perhaps for this reason Wilder notes in the preface to the Acting Edition two ways to produce the play:

One, with a constant subtle adjustment of lights and sound effects; and one through a still bolder acknowledgment of artifice and make-believe: the rooster's crow, the train and factory whistles and school bells frankly manufactured and in the spirit of 'play'. I am inclined to think that this latter approach, though apparently 'amateurish' and rough at first, will prove the more stimulating in the end and will prepare for the large claim on attention and imagination in the last act. The scorn of verisimilitude throws all the great emphasis on the ideas which the play hopes to offer.9

The nearly bare stage and the other techniques that clear away the theatrical clutter, besides activating
audience imagination and participation, will become part of the play’s meaning. While in the naturalist type of drama a certain social problem is taken and all aspects of that problem are placed before the audience, through dialogues among the characters, as in the early plays of G.B. Shaw and John Galsworthy in England, and in the plays by Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman in the US, the alienation drama is marked by its emphasis on the full theatricality of proceedings in order to widen and deepen the significance of the main theme. In Our Town, it is the play’s actions, not anybody’s words, which demonstrate the priceless value of the most routine moments of life, and the tragic waste of life inherent in our failure to realize that value.

With the use of alienation techniques Wilder presents these moments so masterfully that the audience is far ahead of every one on stage in realizing their quietly charged intensity of meaning — that life is simultaneously trivial and significant, absurd and noble, humdrum and miraculous. Against the millenia 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. The play celebrates the simplest, the least pretentious type of life. If the most commonplace aspects of life have priceless value, consider the worth of what is not ordinary. When the Stage Manager says, before we see Doctor Gibbs in 1911, that he will die in 1930 and have a hospital named for him, his mundane actions and chats become heightened in the spectator's eye. The A-effects enhance the value of the present moment by setting it against all space and the oncoming tide of the future, with its burden of death.

The play's most celebrated use of alienation device is the juxtaposition of the specific and the universal. The entire last twenty minutes of the play is a good example of the abstract and the realistic, moving from the Church choir practice to an exchange between George and his father, to the walk home — in the palpable night air — of the women in the choir, to the scene between Emily and George, to the conversation between home-coming husband and wife — all of these wild episodes flowing into and out of one another, finally mounting to the consummating moment of the entire act, when George younger comes to him with the letters.
Rebecca: I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope that address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

George: What's funny about that?

Rebecca: But listen, it's not finished: the United States of America; continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God — that's what it said on the envelope. (p.45)

Emblematic of the play's light tone is a teenage girl's comment on the address: "And the postman brought it just the same" (p.45). Simply, with humour the village has merged with the profound riddle of infinity. Everything disappears into the rush and space of time.

Whatever one's reservations about the enduring qualities of Our Town, one will always remain grateful for a play that returned to first principles. At the outset the stage is bare, with the brickwalls at the rear as a backdrop. The Stage Manager walks out casually, introduces himself and begins to talk, like a country philosopher to his cronies around the cracker barrel.
A chair, a ladder, a table are enough to evoke a house or a drug store, and the props could be moved openly, as in the Chinese theatre. Wilder has done nothing new, yet it seems new. The truth, of course, is that Our Town, despite its charm and honesty, is perilously close to banality. As far as the theme of the play is concerned, Wilder wants to transcend the state of innocence which is cherished by the realistic convention. He tries to remedy this ignorance-is-bliss condition through the use of many alienation devices, because for him this is a far from satisfactory condition of existence. Our Town shows a peaceful community wasting away its existence in feeding the family chicken and doing the usual household chores. It is a town surrounded by sunflowers and butternut trees, and is full of nice people. The people live by belief in progress, culture and morality. The most shocking evil known to the town is the harmless drinking of Simon Stimson. Emily and George epitomize the passive state of innocence that prevails in the community. Seconds before his marriage, George appeals: "Ma, I don't want to grow old. Why's everybody pushing me so?" (p. 73). Emily would rather die than go through the matrimonial experiences. Nevertheless they go through the experience without any growth. Paradoxically, it is only after death that a
realization of life comes. In this context, Thomas E. Porter makes an appropriate comment: "The irony of the last act lies in the fact that Emily understands from the grave. The people who are living the experience cannot understand it."

Wilder through his A-effects succeeds in making the audience realize that life in its protected innocence is far from satisfactory. But if Wilder is saying that only death or expulsion from life can make life meaningful, then this view is ironical and envisions no hope of wisdom as long as man lives. That only a loss of life can make life more interesting is paradoxical, and it is this paradox which is at the foundation of Wilder's use of many theatrical techniques.

The A-effects are best achieved in Act III, where the theatricalist mode of presentation is so closely woven with its theme that it has become an expression of it. Against the conventions of the naturalistic plays, the dead Emily receives an opportunity to visit the living but with a painful condition: She is both participant and observer, living the moment and watching herself live it. She selects a relatively unimportant day. To Wilder, the most insignificant events of life are awesome. That's why he uses various alienation techniques to make the commonplace interesting to watch. By using A-effects, he achieves first our pleasure in recognizing the litany
of routine incidents, and then jolts us in dozens of
small ways into experiencing the radiance of that
routine. Returning to life on her 12th birth-day,
she sees with wonder what will soon disappear: a pre-
renovated drug store, a pre-automotive livery stable, a
white fence that used to surround her house, and her
mother's youth: "I didn't know, "em was ever that
young" (p. 95). As maker she sees in the crucial sense
of perceiving, that people do not need to be happy or
to express their love for each other. Life goes by too
quickly. Soon, she can no longer bear to remain among
the living and bids farewell to what, too late, she has
come to appreciate. Her final statement is the lesson
we never learn:

Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's
Corners... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks
ticking ... and Mama's sun-flowers. 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... To any human beings ever
realize life while they live it? — every,
every minute? (p. 100)

The most bruising truth is that neither had she. Like
the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht evasive responses,
covering or weakening the tension, are expressed by
other characters, so that the tension may persist. Emily
ruts before the audience a situation when she asks the
Stage Manager, whether human beings realize life while they live it. The answer of the Stage Manager is: "No. (pause) The saints and poets, may be— they do some" (p. 100). Simon Stimson, the local drunk, now with the deceased, has also something to add: "That's what it was to be alive.... To spend and waste time as though you had a million years" (p. 104). But Wilder wants that the audience should also watch critically and encourages them to arrive at conclusions themselves, which is the main aim behind the use of alienation techniques. Mrs. Gibbs' response to the views of Simon Stimson makes it clear to the audience that the views expressed by different characters on stage don't represent ultimate reality: "Simon Stimson that ain't the whole truth and you know it" (p. 101). The effect of alienation is produced because different viewpoints are only hinted at and no attempt has been made to give them the colour of real life conversation and natural environment. As Mary McCarthy writes: "The perspective of death, which Mr. Wilder has chosen gives an extra poignancy and intensity to the small-town life whose essence he is trying so urgently to communicate.... The perspective is, to be sure, hazardous; it invites bathos and sententiousness. Yet, Mr. Wilder has used it honourably. He forbids the spectator to dote on that town of the
part. He is concerned only with saying: that is how it was, though then we didn't know it. 11

The sweep of events and the rapid changes of time and place make it near impossible to give full stage representation to all the events and locales indicated in this play. But Wilder desires neither historical accuracy nor the accumulation of naturalistic details in his settings; he wants only those elements that aid in the creation of alienation effect. Wilder chooses what apparently is the most ordinary theme of human life and from there proceeds to build up a sense of novelty, using various alienation devices. Immediately, we see, in the first act, the network of blood and spirit which binds these people together in the mystery of community. By the third act, we have discovered, in the place of death, how temporary and unnourishing that community is, comprised as it is of blind mortal beings. It's a tough play, secure in its sense that every valuable in human life is an act of love, momentarily staving off dissolution. The use of A-effects makes Our Town a rich, multifaceted play; simple in tone yet complex in texture. Wilder's use of A-effects is so masterly that we start taking these innovations for granted, as if they were inevitable, there in the air waiting to be tried, when their apparent obviousness and deceptive simplicity are the results of
daring and craftsmanship.

The absence of scenery and other realistic details in the play compels the spectators to focus on the details of life, not on the details of setting. In Wilder there is a minimum use of stage manipulations of property, still a strong feeling of witnessing an enthralling spectacle comes to the audience. By contrast, the film version of the play, which with Wilder's approval shows a realistic New England Village, lacks the play's universality: the film seems to be about one, particular place, which does not emerge as archetypal like the town of the play. The use of alienation effects challenges the audience to use the play to see their own life just as richly, to interpret it just as responsibly. Its continuing popularity both in and outside America demonstrates the currency of Our Town.

The basic structure of the action of Our Town is the progression of universal human experience — birth and growth, marriage, death. How Wilder's ability to present this basic pattern of every life in its proper setting through the use of A-effects is the strongest feature of the play. Had he tried to project this content in a realistic mode, much of the impact would have been lost. The presentation and the content mesh
inextricably together. Through the non-realistic mode of presentation, Wilder has rendered the play in its own terms — out of time and space, against a universal background, in terms of archetypal actions and the rhythm of basic experiences. Reason may rebel and logic squirm, but the universal popularity of Our Town is a clear proof that non-realistic mode of presentation has its own use and place in the world of theatre.
Notes and References

All references to Our Town are to Thornton Wilder's Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1957). Page numbers have been cited parenthetically in the text.


