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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author’s life can inform and expand the reader’s understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author’s experience. In this lesson, explore the author’s life to understand the novel more fully.

Thornton Wilder’s international upbringing in China laid the groundwork for his interest in foreign cultures—although, interestingly, he had not yet been to Peru when he wrote *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. *The Bridge’s* preoccupation with literature, music, and theater reflects the emphasis his mother placed on the arts in the upbringing of her children. While Wilder worked on that novel at the MacDowell Colony (a writer’s retreat) over several summers in the 1920s, his long walks in the town of Peterborough, New Hampshire, and the surrounding countryside inspired the setting of *Our Town*. As a result, we can find traces of the man in his work, even if his novels and plays do not tend to draw from the author’s experiences and personal acquaintances.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points learned from listening to the guide.

Ask your students to read the following essays from the Reader’s Guide: “Introduction to Thornton Wilder,” “Thornton Wilder, 1897–1975,” and “An Interview with Thornton Wilder.” Divide the class into groups. Each group will present a summary of the main points in its assigned essay.

Writing Exercise

Have your students write about a foreign country or a different part of the United States that they have never been to, but would like to visit. Have students imagine sights, sounds, smells, and the architecture. What is the basis of their interest in that place, and what do they imagine life to be like there? How does what they imagine differ from the life they know?

Homework

Distribute Handout One: Spain in the New World. From *The Bridge*, read “Part One: Perhaps an Accident” and “Part Two: The Marquesa de Montemayor.” Read fifteen to thirty pages each night in order to complete reading this book in four lessons. Have students keep a reader’s journal. Ask them to write a few paragraphs about Brother Juniper’s desire to mathematically document the theological implications of the collapsed bridge.

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of *The Bridge*. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Bridge is set in Lima, Peru, in 1714, at a time when Lima was one of the chief cities of the Spanish empire in the New World. Located on the Pacific coast, it was an important trading center, although a series of earthquakes in 1687 had devastated the city and—with the resulting famine and disease—halved its population, from 80,000 inhabitants to 40,000.

Despite the city's size, the novel gives the sense of a close-knit community, and there is almost a small-town feel to the ways in which the lives of the novel's characters continually cross one another. According to Wilder, "Peru had passed within fifty years from a frontier state to a state in renaissance," and his depiction of Lima emphasizes both its provincialism and its sophistication. Officially, the Catholic Church—in the form of the Inquisition—exercised an iron control over behavior and belief, but privately there was much sensuality and even more cynicism. Scholarship and the arts flourished, but so did superstition, gossip, and (as shown in the city's response to the Perichole's smallpox) spite.

Discussion Activities

The setting of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is remote from us (and from its author) in both time and place. Ask your students to characterize, and respond to, the world that Wilder creates.

Wilder writes that the Abbess "had never known any country but the environs of Lima and she assumed that all its corruption was the normal state of mankind." Encourage a discussion about mankind's nature. Do your students agree or disagree with the Abbess's assumption? Are people the same everywhere? Ask them to explain why they feel the way they do.

Writing Exercise

Have your students write a brief essay on the following questions: What type of person is the Marquesa? Amid the remoteness and the exoticism, are there any elements of her character and situation that affect the reader in a real and immediate way? If not, why not?

Homework

Read "Part Three: Esteban" of *The Bridge*. As the focus now shifts from one main character to another, have your students write a short essay in their reader's journals about the ways in which Esteban differs from the Marquesa, as well as any qualities they may have in common.

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story, with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves his or her point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey is told by a third-person omniscient narrator who presents frequent, detailed descriptions of the unspoken thoughts and feelings of all the major characters and who directly addresses the reader. The narrator calls attention to himself by his observations about the characters and their lives, and about the larger questions of life and death. Early on, he ironically raises doubts about his own omniscience: “And I, who claim to know so much more, isn’t it possible that even I have missed the very spring within the spring?”—perhaps a fitting gesture in a novel that has as one of its principal themes the impossibility of ever really knowing what is in another person’s heart.

Discussion Activities

Literary critic Rex J. Burbank contends that the narrative voice in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is a “weakness.” In *Thornton Wilder*, he disapproves of “the sometimes obtrusive presence of the omniscient author, who judges and interprets as he narrates the histories and inner lives of the main characters.”

Ask your students if they think Wilder’s narrator strengthens or weakens the portions of the novel they have read so far. Have them cite passages from the text to prove their points.

Writing Exercise

Ask the class to write a brief description of a significant personal experience. Have the students choose to write in either a simple, straightforward narrative, or describe their experiences in the style of the novel, including commentary and observation. Read some of the essays from each group, and solicit class reaction to the different techniques.

Homework

Read “Part Four: Uncle Pio” from *The Bridge*. Have your students write two paragraphs in their reader’s journals examining the following questions: In what ways does the relationship between Uncle Pio and Camila Perichole resemble those of the Marquesa and her daughter and of Esteban and Manuel? In what ways does it differ?

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw such as weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a “hero.” An “antihero” is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist’s journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a “foil,” has traits that contrast with the protagonist’s and highlight important features of the main character’s personality. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey takes an unorthodox approach to characterization and character development. Rather than the interplay and clash of personalities in an unfolding plot, Wilder gives us what amounts to impressionistic studies of three of his characters, in which other characters also make significant appearances. One might at first be tempted to call Brother Juniper the protagonist, in that his inquiries provide structure to the novel, but in the end he is a rather peripheral figure. Two of the characters—the Abbess and Pepita—approach the status of protagonist in the sense that their personalities and actions embody the work’s positive values of humble and selfless love. It is harder to assign the role of antagonist. Each of the other characters may be said to act as an antagonist through the exercise of his or her human weakness, which may itself be said to be the true antagonist of the novel.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Divide the class into three groups. Assign each group one of the title characters of the three middle chapters. Have each group produce a written report that analyzes the personal strengths and weaknesses of its assigned character, and discusses the ways in which that character helps to illuminate the novel’s larger themes. Ask students to read the reports aloud and discuss them as a class.



Homework

Read “Part Five: Perhaps an Intention” from *The Bridge*. Instruct the students to identify symbols throughout the novel, especially in the final chapter. In their reader’s journals, they should list each of the symbols they identify with a short explanation of how the object functions symbolically.

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Symbol and Allusion

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

A writer may make reference to a person, place, or thing that might be unfamiliar or seem out of place at first. These *allusions* are often brief, sometimes indirect references that imply a shared knowledge between the author and the reader. They may appear as an initial quotation, a passing mention of a name, or a phrase borrowed from another writer—often carrying the meanings and implications of the original.

Discussion Activities

Brother Juniper's book may symbolize the futility of all attempts to resolve the deepest mysteries of life and death. The most important symbol in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is the bridge itself, a powerful symbol of the span—and precariousness—of human existence, and of the arbitrariness, even the capriciousness, of fate. How does Wilder put that symbol to a new and thematically crucial use in the very last sentence of the novel? (Consider also the symbol of the wall in the novel's last paragraph.)

Writing Exercise

Have the students research the allusions in the last sentence of Part One of *The Bridge*, using the phrases “as flies to wanton schoolboys” (*King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 1) and “His eye is on the sparrow” (Matthew 10: 29–31). Have students write a short essay on the meaning of these references.

Homework

Have the class prepare to discuss the following questions in the next day's class: Why does the Inquisition condemn Brother Juniper's book as heretical? Do you think the Inquisition would have reacted positively to Wilder's book? Why or why not?

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways.

Faith

Brother Juniper begins his inquiry in this spirit: "He knew the answer. He merely wanted to prove it, historically, mathematically, to his converts,—poor obstinate converts, so slow to believe that their pains were inserted into their lives for their own good." How might other characters share this faith? How might the faith depicted in the characters reflect the author's position on faith?

Selfishness

The Marquesa had come to feel that "the people of this world moved about in an armor of egotism, drunk with self-gazing, athirst for compliments, hearing little of what was said to them, unmoved by the accidents that befell their closest friends, in dread of all appeals that might interrupt their long communion with their own desires." How is the Marquesa's point of view vindicated (or not) by the novel?

Love

Esteban "discovered that secret from which one never quite recovers, that even in the most perfect love one person loves less profoundly than the other. There may be two equally good, equally gifted, equally beautiful, but there may never be two that love one another equally well." Explain which emotional attachments in the novel reflect Esteban's point of view and why.



Homework

Distribute Handout Two: The Real World of *Our Town*. Read Act I of *Our Town*. Prepare your students to read one act each night in order to finish reading this play in three lessons.



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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Reading a Play

A novel is meant to be read; it corresponds exactly to its printed text. While the printed text of a play is a crucial element, it is only one part of the play's full theatrical experience. Ideally, a play should be seen in performance where directors, actors, set designers, and wardrobe consultants bring additional richness and depth to its stage adaptation. However, many of us lack the time, the money, or the opportunity to attend the theater, and there are many fine plays that are rarely, if ever, given the benefit of a production. It is customary to observe that a translation is a poor substitute for the original work, but it is a substitute that most of us willingly accept when the only alternative is to be unable to read Sophocles or Dante Alighieri or Leo Tolstoy at all. Likewise, it is better to read a good play than never to know it.

In some respects, reading a play can even have advantages over seeing it performed. We can experience *Our Town* (1938) as Wilder wrote it, without the subjective filters of actors and directors. We can go at our own pace, pausing to analyze the craftsmanship or savor the beauty of the writing. We never have to lean over and ask the person sitting next to us, "What did he say?" And just as a successful production enhances the text of a play, a poor production can make a good play seem less than it really is. But as we read a play, it always receives the best of all possible performances in the theater of our imagination.

Discussion Activities

Solicit students' reactions to their reading of Act I of *Our Town*. Some of them may never have read a play before. Allow them to air whatever complaints they may have—the intrusiveness of the stage directions, the difficulty of keeping the characters straight, etc. Try eventually to steer the discussion to what they liked about the play, which may turn out to be more than they realized.

Writing Exercise

Write a brief essay on why Wilder might have included the Stage Manager in the play. Should we trust the Stage Manager? Is the Stage Manager similar to the narrator in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*? If so, in what ways?

Homework

Read Act II of *Our Town*. What does the Stage Manager (and Wilder) mean in Act II by "The real hero of this scene isn't on the stage at all . . ."

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: Setting the Stage

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen revolutionized drama with a series of realistic plays focused on the lives and problems of ordinary middle-class people very much like those in the audience, with the stage furnished to reflect what the actual homes of such people would look like. (In the 1928 interview with André Maurois reprinted in the Afterword to *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilder says: “Ibsen seems to me the only dramatist who has really invented themes, and isn’t that just his real greatness?”)

In *Our Town*, and in several earlier one-act plays, Thornton Wilder experimented with breaking down the barriers between the stage and the audience. Citing the bare stages that were used during the greatest ages of drama, such as ancient Greece and Elizabethan England, Wilder wrote: “If Juliet is represented as a girl ‘very like Juliet’ . . . moving about in a ‘real’ house with marble staircases, rugs, lamps, and furniture, the impression is irresistibly conveyed that these events happened to this one girl, in one place, at one moment in time. When the play is staged as Shakespeare intended it, the bareness of the stage releases the events from the particular and the experience of Juliet partakes of that of all girls in love, in every time, place and language” (“Some Thoughts on Playwriting.”)

Discussion Activities

Why might Wilder have chosen to include the character of the Stage Manager? How crucial is the role? How does he serve to bring the audience into the world of the play? Does he control how we view Grover’s Corners?

If the Stage Manager were removed, would the play (with some minor adjustments) survive essentially intact? Would it need to be extensively reworked? If so, what changes would be necessary? Would the play be better, worse, or simply different?

Writing Exercise

Have the students write a brief essay reacting to the relationship of George and Emily in Act II. Do they find it quaintly charming, or hopelessly hokey, or does it really partake of the experience “of all girls [and boys] in love, in every time, place and language,” as Wilder envisioned?

Homework

Read Act III of *Our Town*. How does this three-act play follow the traditional three-act genre (setting the stage, conflict/catharsis, resolution) while at the same time breaking the rules of traditional theater?

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Comedy vs. Tragedy

Beginning in ancient Greece and extending through Shakespeare's time and for centuries thereafter, plays tended to follow the prescribed formulas of the genres of comedy and tragedy. A tragedy, customarily written in an elevated style, presented a reversal of fortune whereby a noble and powerful figure suffered a downfall leading to catastrophe. This course of events was generally caused by some weakness or error on the part of the protagonist, usually referred to as a tragic flaw. The play was intended to provoke in the audience the response of pity (for the loss suffered by the protagonist) and terror (about our own ability to make our way through such a perilous existence). Comedy was the mirror image of tragedy: generally written in a more colloquial style, it took the protagonist—through luck or cunning or a combination of both—from bad fortune to good, leading to a happy ending. Comedy suggested that we were equal to the challenges life sets for us, while tragedy showed that we would be crushed by adversity in the end.

Nowadays, the principal connotations of both terms are somewhat different from their classical origins. Comedy arouses an anticipation of laughter; while humor was generally an element of traditional comedy, evoking laughter was not an essential part of its definition. When we use the term tragedy, we generally mean suffering that is inflicted upon the innocent and undeserving, rather than a catastrophe unwittingly engineered by its own flawed victim. Modern playwrights, like Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, merge both modes to explore "tragicomedy." Like most modern plays, *Our Town* does not adhere precisely to either of the classic modes, but draws from both.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise

Are there comic elements in *Our Town*? If so, what? How do they enrich the play? Does the use of comedy ever distract the audience from a more serious topic? If so, why would Wilder choose to shift the audience's attention from a serious subject to a lighter one?

In what sense is *Our Town* tragic? Can it be called a tragedy?

Writing Exercise

Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE), the source for the traditional definition of tragedy, maintained that its end result was a catharsis, or "cleansing," of the emotions it had aroused in the audience. Does this apply to *Our Town*? Why or why not?

Homework

Distribute Handout Three: Thornton Wilder's Other Works. Ask students to begin their essays, using the essay topics in this guide. Outlines are due during the next class period.

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Writer Great?

Works of literature illustrate the connections between individuals. Great narratives articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel or play is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Divide students into groups and have each group decide the most important common theme of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and of *Our Town*. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decisions, with references from the texts. Write these themes on the board. Ask the students to discuss, within groups, other writers they know whose work deals with similar themes. Do any of these writers remind them of Thornton Wilder? If these writers are recent, ask students if they believe the writer might have been influenced by Wilder.

Ask students to describe the characteristics of a great writer. List these on the board. What elevates a writer to greatness? A great writer can be the voice of a generation. On the other hand, a great writer may also give voice to a unique sensibility and a personal vision of life and its possibilities. What kind of voice does Wilder create in each of the works studied and discussed? Does his work speak for more than one man and his personal concerns? What, if anything, does this voice tell us about the choices and responsibilities of life for a thoughtful person in contemporary America?

Writing Exercise

Write a response to someone who says: "I don't get it. What's so great about these two stories? There's no plot, no conflict, no action. Nothing happens in either one of them, and the things the characters experience are unimportant and irrelevant." As an extension, students may compare this to an episode from *Seinfeld*, which claims to be a show about "nothing."

Homework

Students will finish their essays and present their essay topics and arguments to the class.

Spain in the New World

As students learn in grade school, the Italian navigator Christopher Columbus made his voyages of discovery in the service of King Ferdinand V and Queen Isabella I of Spain. In 1494, two years after Columbus first found land in the Western Hemisphere, Spain signed a treaty with Portugal, Europe's other great maritime power of that era. A north-south line was established, with Spain to have control of all the territory west of the line and Portugal all land to the east. At the time of the treaty, very little actual exploration had been done. It would ultimately turn out that Portugal received an eastern section of the continent of South America—roughly what is now Brazil. Meanwhile, Spain laid claim to a vast area: the rest of South America, Central America, the islands of the Caribbean, and a large portion of North America, including what are now Mexico and the southwestern United States.

The exploration of these lands and the conquest of their native populations occurred in the early sixteenth century. The invading armies brought with them horses, dogs, and weapons made of iron—cannon, muskets, swords—all of which were unknown to the natives. They also brought diseases—especially smallpox—which the inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere had never experienced, and against which their bodies had no resistance. As a result, the Spanish armies were able to conquer vastly larger numbers of soldiers in relatively short order.

The army led by the conquistador Francisco Pizarro conquered the Incan Empire, on the Pacific coast of South America, in 1533. In January 1535, Pizarro founded what he called *La Ciudad de los Reyes* (“The City of the Kings”), though it soon came to be known by the name it has borne ever since—

Lima. Eight years later, Lima became the capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru, which insured its status as one of the principal cities of Spanish America.

In 1570, the Spanish Inquisition came to Peru. The Inquisition was a tribunal with immense power to investigate and punish a broad range of suspected offenses, especially heresy. It had been established in 1478 by Ferdinand and Isabella to maintain Catholic orthodoxy after Spain had been reconquered from the Moors. Its rulers felt threatened by the presence of large numbers of Muslims and of Jews, many of whom had converted to Christianity, but whose conversions were often viewed with suspicion by both their former and their new coreligionists. As the Protestant Reformation spread through Europe in the sixteenth century, the Inquisition would broaden its scope even further.

The era of Spain's global dominance was also—despite the Inquisition—the period of its greatest artistic flowering, in painting, music, poetry, and theater. As *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* makes clear, the city of Lima was greatly enriched by this cultural wealth. In fact, the original inspiration for the novel came from Wilder's reading of *Le Carosse du Saint Sacrement*, a one-act comedy by French author Prosper Mérimée (1803–70), about a love affair between an actress called La Perichole and Don Andres de Ribera, Viceroy of Peru.

Spain would ultimately lose control of its territories in South America through the Wars of Independence, led by Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, among others, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. But the influence of Spain on every aspect of life in its former holdings in the Americas is vast and enduring.



The Real World of *Our Town*

For many of us, the past exists mostly through old photographs of people in odd clothes and with peculiar hairstyles—though we’re sure that people of the future will never look at us that way. And we talk about how much cheaper everything was in “the good old days,” conveniently forgetting that the people who bought those fifteen-cent lunches were earning only eight or ten dollars a week. But it can be a shock to realize the many significant differences between the current lifestyle that we take for granted and the ways people had to live in times gone by.

The greatest changes, of course, have come through scientific and technological advances, which proceed at an ever-accelerating rate—so much so that someone from the Middle Ages would probably feel more at home in 1900 than someone from 1900 would feel today. Older people can vividly recall a time when there were no computers, cell phones, or portable music players.

Go back even further, to 1901, the time of Act I of *Our Town*. It is a time of relative security and faith in the future—much of which would be swept away forever by the horror and trauma of the First World War. Many members of the play’s original audiences would have been nostalgic for the innocence and simplicity of that era. The world is much quieter: there is no radio; there are motion pictures, but each of them is only a few minutes long, and silent, and places to see them are hard to find. The phonograph exists—it plays audio from large and very fragile wax cylinders—but it is beyond most people’s financial means. Electric light is a luxury available to few. So is the automobile. And the Wright brothers are still nearly three years away from getting the first airplane off the ground.

There was a much higher rate of infant and child mortality, and untimely death. A case of tuberculosis

was a certain death sentence, and, in the absence of antibiotics, so were many other illnesses easily treatable nowadays. Even the ruptured appendix that takes the life of young Wally Webb would be much less likely to be fatal today. In the absence of so many of our conveniences, much more time and effort went into providing the necessities of life. The great majority performed physical labor, much of it agricultural, and the workday was a long one, sometimes beginning and ending in darkness. In New Hampshire and the rest of northern New England, winters were long and harsh with temperatures often below zero and almost never above freezing.

With no Internet and few (usually small and poorly stocked) libraries, country people had, as the play suggests, little access to—or time and energy for—culture, even what we now call “popular culture.” It is difficult to imagine the innocent courtship of George and Emily taking place in our present media-saturated society. Communities were small and close-knit. People tended not to travel very far from home. And just about everyone went to church—which, as in *Our Town*, was often the center of the community’s social life.

Reflecting on these differences, we can gain a deeper understanding of the famous opening sentence of the British writer L. P. Hartley’s 1953 novel *The Go-Between* (whose principal action is set in the year 1900): “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” And yet, despite these differences, human nature and experience remain the same: as we read or watch *Our Town*, we see ourselves in the humble citizens of Grover’s Corners as they go about the eternal business of working, loving, cherishing hopes and dreams for the future, and coping as best they can with the loss and grief that inevitably come their way.



Thornton Wilder's Other Works

Thornton Wilder is hardly a forgotten writer. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *Our Town* are familiar to, and highly regarded by, most people who care about literature. And yet, while hundreds of books have been devoted to the lives and works of some of his contemporaries, such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, there has been relatively little written about Wilder, given the quality of his work. Ironically, some of the reasons for this neglect can be explained by the very strengths of Wilder's novels and plays.

Critics and scholars often show a preference for writers who can be viewed through a narrow focus, whose typical subjects and themes can be summed up in a sentence or two. Wilder resists such convenient classification. Indeed, he prided himself on the fact that each of his books was totally different from all of the others. For each work, he sought to fashion a style and structure appropriate to its intentions, from straightforward narratives to radical experiments with time and space, storytelling, and stagecraft.

Wilder's first novel, *The Cabala* (1926), is set in post-World War I Rome. Of his six other novels, three are set in distant times and places: Greece in the sixth century B.C.; Rome in the time of Julius Caesar, who is the principal character of *The Ides of March* (1948); and of course, Lima in the early eighteenth century. The three other Wilder novels are set in the United States. Of these, two are historical and only one—the fine and underappreciated *Heaven's My Destination* (1935)—is set in the time in which Wilder was writing.

His three major plays also differ greatly: in addition to *Our Town*, there is *The Skin of Our Teeth*

(1942), a farcical presentation of an Ice Age family whose members are also remarkably modern, and *The Matchmaker* (1955), a comedy that is totally conventional in technique and became the basis for the smash-hit musical *Hello, Dolly!* (1964).

Wilder showed his originality and independence in other ways as well. The protagonists of the novels written by many of his contemporaries tended to be men of action, often violent in nature, brimming with emotion and given to grand gestures, who displayed little or no interest in cultural or intellectual pursuits. Wilder's characters, by contrast, are often quiet spirits who read books and listen to music, who care about and discuss the larger issues of existence. His great contemporaries were all Romantics in spirit, emphasizing the struggles of passionate individuals against the societies that constrained them. Wilder, on the other hand, was by temperament a Classicist. He presents a human race in the full range of its flaws, complexities, and limitations, set down in an indifferent universe and left to make its own reality as best it can. It is ironic that some mistakenly see him as a sentimentalist, given his often bleak perspective on life's possibilities.

Many of Wilder's books are rich in cultural references. He loved the arts not because they are a distraction from reality, but because they provide us with the most moving presentation of reality and the most meaningful inquiry into its nature. For those who value craftsmanship, seriousness, honesty, and originality, Thornton Wilder will always be one of the necessary writers.

