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Author(s): Arthur H. Ballet
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"In Our Living and in Our Dying"

ARTHUR H. BALLET

"Like Oedipus before her, Emily finds a place in dramatic literature as a tragic figure of enormous dimensions..." An exploration of the significance and appeal of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" leads the author, an Assistant Professor of Drama at the University of Minnesota, to nominate the play as "the great American drama."

In the short history of American literary criticism, there has been a continuous search for "the great American drama." It is the purpose of this essay to continue this search by exploring the qualifications for this signal honor of Thornton Wilder's Our Town. It is hoped that, since Our Town continues to be widely read and performed in educational and professional theatre, new light may yet be shed eighteen short years after this play's first presentation. Either educators, directors, and the general theatre-going public have been deceived by the play, or they must come to terms intelligently with it if they are to continue presenting it in the theatre or the classroom.

As a beginning, it might be observed that, literary and moral implications assumed, all important drama in the history of the theatre has had popular appeal. Great theatre is neither closet drama, which is to be read effetely by connoisseurs, nor is it avant-garde drama, which is to be relished by bored or malcontent sophisticates. That drama which through the years has gained in literary and theatrical respect and security has always appealed to the then-current theatre-going audience. For example, the great plays of Sophocles not only won literary laurels but were the popular plays of their day, drawing on the entire citizen-population of ancient Athens. Likewise, Molière was both an actor and a playwright who knew how to succeed in the difficult art of pleasing a living, popular audience. And, of course, William Shakespeare's dramas were the "smash hits" of their own days. Elizabethan audiences and critics went so far as to view the Bard as a hack who turned out popular but unimportant plays for the general amusement. They looked elsewhere to now-forgotten dramatists for "great drama." However, it is not suggested that all popular drama is necessarily important or significant, but merely that great drama has been popular theatre.

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Attention must be turned next to those playwrights who have appealed to the general American audience. The criterion that the drama must have stature, significance, and literary importance before it may be considered rules out long-run plays like Tobacco Road, Life with Father, and Mister Roberts. Four playwrights remain for consideration. Eugene O’Neill undoubtedly was the greatest of the American innovators and experimenters in the theatre. His finest plays, now that they may be viewed in perspective, seem to have been his “sea plays,” which at best are fragmentary vignettes. His pretentious, longer attempts have been disappointing as literature and as theatrical fare. Second, Tennessee Williams has enjoyed almost unprecedented success as a playwright, but closer observation reveals that his best efforts have been devoted to a minute examination of neurotic Southern women. The resultant appeal seems to lie in Williams’ sensitive and sensational portraiture without further implication or significance.

The third leading playwright is Arthur Miller, whose rugged but “safe” social protest of the ’40’s and the ’50’s has undoubtedly been enormously popular in the theatre, but whose plays lose their significance when carefully examined for what they have to say. The Death of a Salesman, for example, has been justifiably called by one critic a “sententious snivel” rather than the significant American tragedy to which it has pretensions. All three playwrights seem to appeal to some segments, but they have not had the lasting and universal qualities which stir not only imagination but intelligent reflection as well.

The fourth playwright is Thornton Wilder, who, according to a recent poll of playwrights in The Saturday Review, is, interestingly enough, American dramatists’ own choice as their favorite living playwright.

Where, then, is the appeal of Wilder’s Our Town? Frank M. Whiting, in An Introduction to the Theatre, points out that the play has qualities beyond its novelty:

... it is an honest and revealing portrait of small-town American life. It has been criticized as sentimental, but American life is sentimental; Emily, George, and the others give us a far more genuine insight into twentieth-century American living than do the studies of neurotics, gangsters, and sexually frustrated.

It is necessary, however, to go beyond this, to qualify “sentimentality,” and to consider the play as a modern American tragedy.

SIMPlicity OF PLOT

The plot of Our Town is deceptively simple. A stage manager appears to tell the audience about the background, to philosophize a bit about life and death, and to set the scene. He introduces some of the characters to the audience and answers questions from the audience, thus interestingly enough getting over what might otherwise have been painful exposition. Two neighbors—the Gibbs and the Webb families—receive focus in the play’s beginning. They are upper-middle class Americans, and we are told that we will observe them “... in our growing up and in our marrying, and in our doctoring and in our living and in our dying.”

George and Emily, the older children of the neighbors, are in love. Their families approve; there are no Romeo
and Juliet complications, no financial barriers. We see the young lovers in their first tentative overtures to one another. After further family and community life fill-in, we see George and Emily in the crucial moment of their lives as they pledge themselves, in the corner drugstore, to one another. Love blends imperceptibly into marriage, and the simple action seems concluded.

However, there is yet another act, in which we learn that Emily is dead. Childbirth has taken her from her beloved friends and family. We see her, waiting in eternity, while the family places her body in the grave. With human weakness, she yearns to return for a brief moment to earth, but her friends in eternity advise against it. Emily is determined; she returns to see life as it really was. Saddened but wiser in the ways of life and death, she returns to her grave to "wait." And the play concludes.

There are, of course, complications, dramatic actions, beautifully constructed moments of almost pure theatre (such as the end of the first act when the chorus is singing in the church, while the lovers work a mathematics problem) and highly interesting characterizations. Basically, however, the plot is a boy-meets-girl affair—but with a difference. Before this "difference" is considered, however, other matters must be studied.

The characters, for example, are excellently blended. Mothers Webb and Gibbs are both "typical," but they are far from alike, emotionally and intellectually. Likewise the fathers, both professional, intelligent men, are contrasting studies of the same type. In essence, each adult couple presents a different facet for our consideration of the same idealized characters. Pre-adolescence is similarly examined through the youngsters Wally Webb and Rebecca Gibbs. The sordid side of human nature is also reflected in the play by Simon Stimson, who, having taken his own life in alcoholic desperation, chooses his own epitaph in the form of musical notes. Not just a community of people is presented to the audience, but a tiny, idealized reflection of the entire human community is set to work for the audience to observe—and from which the audience is expected to learn something about itself.

But tragedy is more than human beings, however well portrayed and set in motion on the stage. There are matters of structure, of motivation, and above all of theme, or meaning, that determine stature and significance of any drama. Those dramas which contribute something beyond all these considerations are the highest form of the dramatic art: tragedy.

CLASSIC STRUCTURING

Our Town is a carefully constructed drama, following the precepts of classic drama with certain justified modifications. Actually it is a trilogy. Act One may be thought of as a separate play dealing with The Daily Life, Act Two examines Love and Marriage within the totality of its act structure, and Act Three expands the first parts of the trilogy into a complex of eternity where the mystery of life is culminated in death.

Like its Greek predecessors, Our Town is concerned with the great and continuing cycle of life; out of life comes death and from death comes life. This cycle is man's closest understanding of eternity, his finest artistic expression of what he senses to be a mission
and a purpose. The trilogy, thus considered, admirably re-interprets this concept in modern terms and language and form, finding its roots in what is probably the finest drama of all time: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

The use of the stage manager as a chorus is another manifestation of close attention to the classic structuring of the drama. The chorus-stage manager serves as the human link with the audience and personifies the *milieu* of society. Joining the audience with the events presented in the spaceless and timeless stage, he explains and interprets, fills in, and establishes the background for each episode. He is, however, more than just a narrator. Abandoning the modern concept of the impersonal, almost mechanical commentator, Wilder has returned to the kind of choric voice so effective in Greek tragedy. The stage manager represents the observing community; he is biased, sympathetic, informed, and concerned. His calmness in the face of both joy and disaster is never construed into passivity. The most lyric passages of the play are assigned to him, and this is quite rightly conceived by the playwright, for, as the agent of the human community in the drama, what occurs within the play makes a difference and must be sensitively considered.

At the same time, the stage manager subtly introduces a note of patience and understanding which is essential if the action is to have a meaning above that of a sentimental or emotional orgy for the entertainment of the audience. His interruption of the action, his interspersed observations, and his serious but twinkling control of the progress of the play all serve to prevent over-identification, which would destroy the higher implications of the play. Then, too, there is the classic simplicity of the setting. Left to the imagination, it avoids realism of time and place which would devoid the play of its larger application. Returning to a theatrical tradition ranging from Athens to Elizabethan England, it returns also to a plane of imaginative rather than realistic reproduction and soars above mundane distractions of actuality. In addition, and still within the classic tradition, Wilder employs asides, soliloquies, choric interludes, short scenes, and frank theatricalism to heighten and expand his basic theme.

Some producers of the play (as in the case of the recent television adaptation) have attempted to “enhance” the production by adding suggestive or stylized scenery. It would seem that they have failed to grasp the fundamental reason for Wilder's elimination of conventional scenic devices in the first place. It is not a trick or “gimmick” to make the play sensational; on the contrary, Wilder, like his classic predecessors, was aware of the inherent scenery of the theatre itself. He chose deliberately, and with great sensitivity to the whole meaning of his own play, to utilize the theatre as the setting, for he wished to examine theatrical reality. This is by no means an easy thing to do. The theatre is not reality, of course; it is a life of its own but only insofar as it is a selective, sensitive, active and reflective image of the world beyond the theatre's walls. Wilder was aware of this function of the theatre, and he has made use of it and accentuated it by eliminating scenic devices beyond the physical theatre itself.

**THE PLAY AS TRAGEDY**

Still, none of these structural details are in themselves enough to enable one
to call *Our Town* a tragedy. Aristotle, in his *Poetica*, established tragedy as a "purgation through pity and fear" and as an "ennoblement" as well as the picturization of the fall of a great man. At first glance, *Our Town* appears to fall short of such ambitious purposes. The very simplicity and "ordinariness" of the drama seem to make a mockery of higher purposes. There are, however, deeply significant actions beneath the surface which do indeed fulfill Aristotelian definitions.

Death is the fear-agent employed as a catharsis. The audience witnesses the fall of the smallest of God's creatures: a young mother who becomes aware of the tragedy of life, and who finally is ennobled by death to understand how wonderful life is:

Emily: 'Good-by, good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners ... Mama and Papa. Good-by 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. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?'

Stage Manager: 'No. The saints and poets, maybe—they do some.'

Tragedy, in its finest sense, need not and should not be "sad." It should rather be elevating, should point the way to a higher level of understanding of man as a creature revolving in the cosmos. By these Aristotelian standards, then, *Our Town* approaches significance as a tragedy.

Wilder has, by careful dramaturgical manipulation of time and place, established the play quite properly in perspective. A few examples should illustrate this operation. In Act One, after the daily life has been exemplified in its simple dignity and zest, George and his younger sister, Rebecca, are sitting at night looking out of an upstairs window when Rebecca tells of a girl friend's letter from her minister:

'He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County, New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America, Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God. . . .'

In Act Two, the stage manager stops the action of the wedding to reflect on the timeless eternity which surrounds man at each moment in his search:

'The real hero of this scene isn't on the stage at all, and you know who that is. It's like what one of those European fellas said: every child born into the world is Nature's attempt to make a perfect human being. Well, we've seen Nature pushing and contriving for some time now. We all know that Nature's interested in quantity; but I think she's interested in quality, too . . . and don't forget the other witnesses at this wedding—the ancestors. Millions of them.'

And a final example of Wilder's time and space manipulation is the stage manager's soliloquy in the cemetery, opening Act Three. Time has passed, changes have been made, death and life have continued their endless cycle:

'Now I'm going to tell you some things you know already. You know'm as well as I do; but you don't take'm out and look at'm very often. I don't care what they say with their mouths—everybody knows that SOMETHING is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it
ain't even the stars... everybody knows in their bones that SOMETHING is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. (After explaining that the actors sitting on stage in chairs are "dead" and that they are waiting, he continues.) '...And what's left? What's left when memory's gone, and your identity, Mrs. Smith?'

Not only is the issue joined directly to the audience, but the level of the drama aspires toward an ever-increasing expansion of the scope of the play as a statement of faith in the microcosm, Man.

APPEAL OF THE PLAY

Assuming that audiences have been aware, however subconsciously, of these complexities within the drama, they do not explain the enduring and affectionate appeal of the play. And it will be remembered that earlier in this examination the criterion of popularity as well as significance was established for determining "great drama." Our Town is prima facie a popular play; eighteen years of professional and amateur production have not dimmed its lustre as an audience-getter or its appeal as a drama to be read and studied in classrooms throughout the world.

Our purpose here is not to prove that the play is popular but to attempt to determine why it is popular. Lamentable though it may be, people do not go to the theatre to hear sermons or to be told that the only truth they can comprehend is that the end of all life is death and that in death they will achieve life. Our Town has other appeals, some immediately apparent and some quite deceptive. The daily life has the appeal of familiarity: school, with its triumphs and lessons to be learned; the routine of cooking meals and shelling peas; young, unselfish love in the village drugstore; human fear, as with George and Emily on their wedding day; and the homely verities of human existence, as when Dr. Gibbs confesses that on his wedding day he worried how he would ever find enough to talk about with his young wife. The familiarity of this daily life, as so expertly sketched in Our Town, releases the audience's skepticism and induces a sense of suspended disbelief. If Our Town does not reflect life as it really is, at least it suggests what the daily life should be like, and the audience approves.

Also present is the sentimentality already referred to, but it is without sententiousness; it has romance without romanticism, and innocence without naïveté. The fears and the faith reflected are without melodramatic trappings, and are sincere reflections of the innermost strivings of the human spirit. In short, they "ring true" because they are common experiences.

Attention finally must return to that quality which, however morbid its surface may seem, recognizes a quiet, resigned sense of justice in the inevitability of death itself. Throughout life, man is surrounded by this knowledge. In the play, old age, a burst appendix, childbirth, and alcoholism all contribute to the final end. But the audience is never repelled by this concept; it learns, as Emily must, to accept the life cycle, which not only is as it is, but is as it has to be and should be.

Any attempt to separate "content" or "theme" from "form" or "structure" is a purely academic one and seldom
worth the effort. In any literature worthy of consideration at all, theme and structure are one and the same thing, determining each other. Questions of suitability and compatibility are largely matters of individual taste. With masterly strokes, Wilder has joined both the form and the content into an inseparable entity which both appeals and instructs. The audience engages in a struggle resulting both in pity and fear but ultimately culminating in an ennoblement through acceptance and understanding.

Thus, it would appear that *Our Town* is not only an important drama but also a significant one, for it has much to relate without pretentions. The "common folk" in the play very directly refute the concept of the mediocre average or perfect being. The simple yet effective language is appropriate not only to the characters involved but to the ideas expressed. The prose-poetry which Wilder has chosen is without the modern falsification of poesy. The dramatic conflicts and tensions are devoid of melodramatic clichés or the cinematic "happy endings" which betray life itself. There is no drama worthy of the name without conflict and action, but Wilder has elevated both of these ingredients. Life and death are part of a whole and yet in constant conflict, as are love and hate (witness the exquisite "drugstore scene" in Act Two). The resultant entities are both honest and profound.

In closing, it should be noted that the critics have been wrong before, and so has the popular audience. Each play must stand on its own merits. *Our Town* is a work which cannot be ignored merely because it is popular. The final condemnation of this play by those who do not approve of it has been that it is inconsistent, that the first two acts are comic and the third is tragic. This is in a sense true, and obviously in contradiction of Aristotelian principles. However, life is both "the human comedy" and "the incredible fate" of man. There is joy mingled eternally with despair. In his sanest moments, man is aware of how fleeting both the joy and the despair are. He knows that the end of the human comedy is the awakening into "the undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveler returns."

As *Our Town* quite brilliantly shows, life is a paradox, and so it is not amazing that man paradoxically retains his faith that in death, too, there is life and a greater consciousness. Like Oedipus before her, Emily finds a place in dramatic literature as a tragic figure of enormous dimensions, for in her blindness, or death, she gains the true ability really to see and understand.

"I have been suggesting that we do not ask enough of the young, save in military service, to allow them to prove themselves, and I am also suggesting that initiation today as always is fundamentally symbolic and need not only and no longer be carried in bodily scars but can be 'carried' internally—for instance, as experience induced by books. In place of the vision quest which led the Plains Indian youngster to face the desert alone, to discover his totem and his identity, I am suggesting that we substitute the solitary vision quest in the library."

—David Riesman

in *The Oral Tradition, The Written Word, and the Screen Image*