Our Town—Great American Tragedy?

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OUR TOWN—GREAT AMERICAN TRAGEDY?

In our longing for an unattainable perfection, perhaps it is to be expected that the attempt to find “the great American novel” and “the great American drama” should continue. But ours is a nation of great size and remarkable variety; it poses a complex problem for the writer who attempts to synthesize and interpret its life for us. Though this is doubtful, considering the nature of art and our subjective reaction to it, in time a work may appear which will by overwhelming weight of opinion be awarded the title of “the greatest.” Meanwhile, this search sometimes leads to extravagant claims.

Such a claim, which seems unwarranted in view of the limits of the play set by the author, has been made for Thornton Wilder’s Our Town. Professor Arthur H. Ballet, writing in The English Journal of May, 1956, finds in Our Town “the great American drama.” This judgment seems to have been encouraged by the continuing popularity of the play as evidenced in performances, mainly in college and community theatres, and by discussion in critical and academic circles. Cited also is the choice of Wilder as their “favorite living playwright” by a group of American dramatists polled in The Saturday Review.

It is not my purpose to denigrate Our Town, which is, within the limits of its subject, form, and point of view, an interesting and valuable play. But one must challenge the claim that it is the greatest American play; that it is an outstanding tragedy; and that Emily is “a tragic figure of enormous dimensions.” Necessarily this discussion will have to take the form, in part, of an examination of Professor Ballet’s article.

According to his analysis, Our Town is like classic tragedy in several respects. Structurally it is a trilogy, with each act serving as a separate play; 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 . . . 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 reinterprets 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 Stage Manager, who serves as chorus, is further evidence of affinity with classic drama: “[He] represents the observing community . . . his serious but twinkling control of the progress of the play [prevents] over-identification, which would destroy the higher implications. . . .” There is, also, a classic simplicity in the setting.
“Returning to a theatrical tradition ranging from Athens to Elizabethan England, [the play] returns . . . to a plane of imagination rather than realistic reproduction and soars above mundane distractions of actuality. . . .”

At first glance, in this interpretation, Our Town falls short of accomplishing the purgation and ennoblement called for by Aristotle as essential effects of tragedy; but further analysis shows that death “is the fear-agent employed as a catharsis,” and Emily, “the smallest of God’s creatures, a young mother who becomes aware of the tragedy of life,” is ennobled by death “to understand how wonderful life is. . . .” Further, Wilder establishes Grover’s Corners as a part of the cosmos, thus pointing the way to “a higher level of understanding” of the rôle played by man. In accord with Aristotelian standards, therefore, the play is “elevating” and “approaches significance as a tragedy.”

Admittedly the play is sentimental. Frank M. Whiting (An Introduction to the Theatre) is quoted: “It [Our Town] 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 the sexually frustrated.” However, Professor Ballet believes this sentimentality is “without sententiousness; [the play] has romance without romanticism, and innocence without naïveté.” Finally, although the criticism that the first two acts are comic and the third tragic is “in a sense true, and obviously in contradiction of Aristotelian principles . . . life is both ‘the human comedy’ and ‘the incredible fate’ of man.” And the conclusion is: “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 great 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 to see and understand.”

The foregoing, I hope, represents the essential aspects of the article. In summarizing, probably I have done it less than justice, but I have tried to give it as accurately as possible in this abridged form.

It is questionable whether Our Town can be called tragedy at all in any worthy definition of the term. Surely it does not fit Aristotelian standards; or, to put it another way, it is not like Greek tragedy. The three acts are like the separate plays of Aeschylus’ Oresteia in not much more than that Wilder divided his play into three acts and gave each a theme or motivating idea. Consider the Oresteia: each play, while essential to the great whole, is complete within itself, with carefully built up situation and plot, characterization in variety and depth, and conflict leading to a solution. Imaginatively we participate in and
are moved by the power and beauty of *Agamemnon* and the other plays because in each Aeschylus has created the details of a complete story.

Act One of *Our Town*, illustrating or symbolizing The Daily Life of Grover's Corners, could not possibly stand alone as a complete play, nor could the other acts. More than a third of Act One, in fact, is comment of a sociological or historical nature. Through the Stage Manager, who acts as both commentator and participant—and as such he has a function similar to that of the Greek chorus—and others, we are given selected information about this small New Hampshire town as it was in the early part of the twentieth century. (Incidentally, the Stage Manager and the scenery, or lack of it, are reminiscent of the Chinese theatre, with which Wilder is known to be familiar.) Employing short, episodic scenes, Wilder focuses on two middle-class families, the Webbs and the Gibbs, who are evidently meant to be typical of such small-town American people. His emphasis is on social relationships rather than on individual character, on the town rather than on Mrs. Gibbs or George or Emily.

Act Two, entitled Love and Marriage, carries on the story of the town by giving further information and, more important, by concentrating on the two young people who create a family and thus insure the town's continued existence. Wilder establishes a somewhat deeper emotional involvement with his characters than in Act One by his skillful description of love, courtship, and marriage, but again George and Emily are not sharply and deeply individualized. They are, and are meant to be, symbols of youth; they are abstractions or forces clothed in words. "People were made to live two-by-two," says the Stage Manager, emphasizing the social relationship.

Act Three, extending the story through death into eternity and so raising it to a universal plane, is the principal basis for the claims made for the play as significant tragedy. In death Emily discovers, as have the other dead, that the living are troubled and blind, and that life is short and sad. In considerable part Wilder focuses on Emily to illustrate these truths, but again her character, as an individual, fails to acquire depth. She is still only one of the group who are given much attention and who, all of them together, living and dead, symbolize the persistence of human life as it exists in the community. The cycle of life persists, the life of the town, a small but significant part of mysterious eternity. In short, Emily is not the protagonist of the play; the protagonist is the town itself.

The expressionist form chosen for the play is well adapted to the author's purposes. In "The Family in Modern Drama" (*The Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1956), Arthur Miller suggests that realism is the best medium for presentation of "the primarily familial relation," expres-
sionism for "the primarily social relation." He cites *Our Town* as an example of the latter. While I can think of dramatists who use expressionism successfully to interpret individual and family relationships (Strindberg, Pirandello, O'Neill, for instance, and to a certain extent Miller himself in *Death of a Salesman*), I agree that expressionism is well adapted to emphasize social ideas or forces. More obviously symbolic than realism, more "theatrical" in that it does not seek primarily to produce an illusion of reality, expressionism forces the audience into a more intellectual or objective attitude.

However, such objectivity does not, I believe, provide a strong medium for tragedy. While he is involved in society, the individual must be the hero and the victim of tragedy. Oedipus and Hamlet and Lear are in part symbolic, but more important, they are multi-dimensional, fully realized personalities. They "come alive," as they must do to provide the emotional involvement necessary for the tragic reaction. I am aware of the presentational or symbolic quality in Greek tragedy; in a sense, the technique was similar to that of modern expressionism. We, of course, cannot know just what the reaction of the Greek audience was, but it must have been conscious of the actors as larger than life-size, as symbolic figures. At the same time, I cannot believe that it did not also participate in the fortunes of the tragic characters as representatives of living people; it must have recognized universal human qualities in them, rejoiced and suffered with them. Else why should Aristotle name terror and pity as productive of catharsis? The last plays of Aeschylus, and certainly the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, were, as all tragedy must be, basically realistic. From story, from what happens to the characters, comes meaning, come terror and pity and beauty. And what stories the Greeks told!

Through the continual intervention of the Stage Manager, Wilder never allows his audience to forget that it is witnessing a symbolic presentation. But no one can feel about a town as he does about a person. Insofar as he focuses on his people, Wilder involves his audience with them emotionally as well as intellectually; but it is not a strong, complex involvement. Emily is simple and superficial; she typifies the sweet, innocent girl who progresses normally through adolescent awakening into courtship, marriage, and early death in childbirth. The sketchiest comparison with Oedipus, Electra, Medea, Hamlet, Lear, or for that matter Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman*, Blanche of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or Mio of *Winterset*, shows how far she falls short. The tragic protagonist, fully realized as an individual, is involved from beginning to end in an impossible struggle with fate, circumstance, or society, with his antagonists, himself, and death—doomed to failure but perhaps finding or projecting, after immense suffering, a kind of reconciliation or enlightenment. To him,
what must be, cannot be; what cannot be, must be. Emily does not struggle; things merely happen to her. Her fate is the common one, and it evokes a gentle sadness. She is pathetic, not tragic.

Is Emily ennobled, and the audience or reader “elevated,” by her understanding of “how wonderful life is”? What she as a character understands mainly, it seems to me, and this only after death, is that the living are ignorant and troubled and that life is short and sad. She is made to say, “Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?” Perhaps this is true, but it is hardly either profound or elevating. (Indeed, one might suppose that there are people who understand, while still living, something about the nature of life: evidently Wilder himself does.) True, in the play as a whole Wilder apparently wishes to illustrate the paradoxical nature of life: persistent and wonderful as well as short and troubled. But again, the context chosen, and therefore the effect produced, is not that of tragedy; it is, rather, that of gentle nostalgia or, to put it another way, sentimental romanticism.

The assertion that *Our Town* is of the romantic genre is defensible on several counts. One notes that Wilder chooses fantasy in Act Three to convey the full measure of his meaning, basing his presentation on the romantic assumption that there is an existence after death. What other play highly regarded as tragic, of the past or contemporary, calls on such fantasy? Tragedy shows the agonies of its people in this life, draws its meaning and its catharsis from experience in the here and now.

Further, the picture of small town or village life—again, *Our Town*’s theme and chief preoccupation—owes much to the nineteenth-century American sentimental myth of the beautiful people of the beautiful village, a myth scotched once for all, one would have thought, by the likes of Edgar Watson Howe, Harold Frederic, Edgar Lee Masters, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner. Significantly, Wilder chooses the pre-World War I decade for his time, a simpler, more peaceful era, one that can be seen by an American audience through a nostalgic haze evoked by memories (or illusions) of “the good old days in the old home town.” The picture of Grover’s Corners and its people is highly selective: omitted are mean, sordid, cruel, generally unpleasant details. These are wholesome, pleasant, average or normal, “good” people; and wholesome, pleasant, average or normal, “good” things (including death) happen to them. It is, as Emily says, “a very nice town”—too nice, from a rational and realistic point of view. There are, as Frank Whiting points out, no neurotics, gangsters, or sexually frustrated people; deleted, in fact, are sex (except the romantic variety), violence, cruelty, poverty. Even the town problem, Simon Stimson, who comes drunk to direct choir practice and
finally (we are told, not shown) kills himself, is treated with admirable (and therefore sentimental because it is unconvincing) understanding and tolerance by his fellow citizens.

What we have here, then, is substitution of secluded garden for world. (In contrast, Shakespeare has Mercutio outside the garden cracking bawdy jokes about girls at the same time that Romeo and Juliet are making ecstatic love.) It is true that Wilder takes pains to establish Grover's Corners as part of the universe, or "the mind of God," as he puts it. The town, he seems to be saying, is integral with a process which is permanent, orderly, and good. Assuredly the play is a statement of faith in man. During the wedding the Stage Manager stops the action to comment on the eternity of which man is part: "And don't forget the other witnesses at the wedding—the ancestors. Millions of them." He also says, "... every child born into the world is nature's attempt to make a perfect human being."

This is the view of romantic naturalism: with Newtonian and Cartesian rationalism as distant base, strained through the idealistic sensibilities of Rousseau, Kant, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Emerson, Whitman, and sentimentalized by the Victorians. It recalls the lines from Pippa Passes, "God's in his heaven,/All's right with the world!"—which did not represent Browning's feeling but which have come to stand for the smug optimism of some of his middle-class contemporaries. By suggesting this idea, Our Town acquires depth and dimension; but it is not thereby raised to the status of tragedy. The universe includes Grover's Corners, but Grover's Corners does not include the universe. That is to say, the reading of life here is heavily weighted with sentimental optimism; Our Town ignores a complex of knowledge revealed to us through experience, reason, and science.

The affirmations of tragedy, its statement of faith in man's strength and courage, are not like the bland assurance of this play. Tragedy is stern, beyond tears. Man endures in spite of capricious, incredible and unendurable fate or circumstance; in spite of guilt and weakness; in spite of enormous, soul-shattering pain. In his dilemma the tragic protagonist understands little or nothing about the forces which are destroying him—until, perhaps, a glimmer of light appears as he faces death; yet he is defiant or at least stoical. Esdras' speech at the end of Maxwell Anderson's Winterset has the spirit of tragedy:

... this is the glory of earth-born men and women, not to cringe, never to yield, but standing, take defeat implacable and defiant, die unsubmitting. . . .
... in this hard star-adventure, knowing not what the fires mean to right and left, nor whether a meaning was intended or presumed, man can stand up, and look out blind, and say: in all these turning lights I find no clue, only a masterless night, and in my blood no certain answer, yet is my mind my own, yet is my heart
a cry toward something dim in distance, which is higher than I
am and makes me emperor of the endless dark even in seeking!

In questioning the claim that Our Town is tragedy of a high order
I do not, as I have said, wish to deny that it has considerable interest
and value. Certainly it has been popular. Professor Ballet is worried
that it may be ignored merely because it is popular, and he is con­
cerned to account for the popularity, for the "tragic complexities" of
the play do not explain its affectionate appeal. This, he believes, rests
on the picture of familiar daily life, showing "the homely verities of
human existence." He implies, though he does not directly say so, that
the play gives us an idealized version of life: "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."

This is perceptive: Our Town is popular, in part at least, because
it is not tragic. The American public has approved of it because of
its charming, folksy presentation of simple, "good" people, its senti­
mentally idealized account of the small town. It projects a vision of a
time and place which have vanished from the American scene, which
never existed in fact—not just as shown in the play, at any rate—but
which some people believe or like to think existed. So they view this
symbolic picture of Grover's Corners through a mist of gentle, romantic
nostalgia. Further, the optimistic assurance that this town has an
enduring place in an orderly, meaningful universe, plus the statement
of faith in man, carries strong appeal. In addition, the "truths" about
life discovered by Emily and the others—that the living are blind,
troubled, etc., are just such observations as would impress the average
audience. Emily's pathetic death, popularly mistaken for tragedy, is
evocative of tender feelings of pity. And finally, the expressionist
technique, unusual or unfamiliar to many, adds an extra fillip of
interest. It is not difficult to account for the play's popularity.

Within the limits of its purpose, subject, and form, certainly Our
Town is a valuable contribution to the drama and culture of the United
States. It is indeed worthy of respect and praise. However, I do not
believe it is at present established as the greatest American play, and
certainly it is not, in my opinion, a play which ranks with the great
tragedies—not, in fact, a tragedy at all.

In his engaging article, "A Platform and a Passion or Two" (Harper's
Magazine, October, 1957), Mr. Wilder writes: "And as I view the
work of my contemporaries I seem to feel that I am exceptional in one
thing—I give (don't I?) the impression of having enormously enjoyed
it [life]?

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