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THE USE OF MYTH IN THE SELECT WORKS OF THORNTON WILDER

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Abstract

The plays and novels of Thornton Wilder have often attracted religious interpretations. These interpretations are profoundly a historical and have ignored significant elements of the nineteenth and twentieth century context of wilder's work as well as their historical settings. In doing so, such explications have failed to reveal wilder's pervasive sense that religious theme are always contested and always shaped by historical forces. In other words an individual's apprehension of the sacred is dynamic rather than static. This paper examines the representation of myth and allegory in the select works of Thorton Wilder.

Keywords

Myth, Biblical, Image, Resistance, Thornton Wilder, Plays, Novels.

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Thornton Wilder was no stranger to the anomie of our epoch. And just as he was intimate over long periods of immersion in the works of Kafka, Stein and modern masters, so he was at home with the great pioneers and iconoclasts of modern thoughts and with the master texts and pamphlets of the time.

Significant works of the imagination require and make their appeal to some shared cultural experience and registers of response. If Wilder's work is seen as shaped by religious influence, or viewed as unmodern for that reason, it can hardly be because he orchestrates specific tenets or rites of a churchly tradition. After his earliest plays any explicit biblical or devout thematic appears only in a highly eclectic and oblique form. The representation of the afterlife in the closing scene of *Our Town* can appear heretical to the theologian. In *The Skin Our Teeth*, Mr. Antrobus is as concerned to save homes and the muses as he is Moses. The enervations of religious custom today in his recurrent disquisitions on the Roman ceremonies.

One has to go back to the woman of Andros to find a fable pointing at all directly to the Christian dispensation, and here only in the first and last paragraphs of the book with its reference to the land, which was later to be called holy and which was even then preparing its precious burden. Like its model by Cervantes. Wilder's heaven's my destination is as much a satire on its Christian tradition as a celebration of it.

Apart from such ambiguous motifs, avant-garde critics have found other grounds for charges of didacticism in the writings. The deeper story or activating myth in my brother's fictions rejoins the America dream both with respect to its humanism and its austere biblical antecedents.

The foregoing considerations have a bearing on any supposed handicaps of my brother's nurture any outlook. It is a question not only of his own horizons as a modern writer but of his public. In referring to Wilder's early years biographers are content to characterize his father as a forbidding

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Calvinist type, and it is implied that he was disposed to stifle aesthetic aspiration in his children. With the contemporary vogue of psychobiography this opens the way to freewheeling analysis. There are, moreover, recurrent errors and misjudgment about his family and early years which need to be corrected. More importantly, there is a wide inability in many circles today to appreciate the kind of distinctive strain in our society here represented. These matters can only be put in their right light into certain aspects of the family history at some length.

The assumption of family background can be encouraged that the author of *Our Town* was so conditioned that he was never able to make a clean break with the enervating influence of a didactic, ascetic and moralistic rearing. His seeming complaisance with dated family values, as reflected in his work; his espousal of the hopes of at least an underground remnant in our society; his focus on a dimension of wrestling and survival deeper even than that of contemporary writers.

In his first novel, *The Cabala*, published in 1926, Wilder introduced a theme that recurred in his later work; the possibility that an American could travel abroad, partake of the cultural experiences that Europe had to offer and return enriched but not overwhelmed. Wilder believed that America could benefit from the old world but was still the land of golden opportunity. The concept ran counter to the thinking of the so-called lost generation of writers who could not reconcile themselves to their homeland. Wilder was able to fuse the humanistic spirit of the past with the temper of the present.

In his work Wilder explored moral and religious themes and tried to capture the complex of human life. He believed in the absolute mystery of life, the working of which defies rational explanations. Wilder also believed in a higher power of love that did not simply spring from sexual desire. For Wilder, love was an indispensable part of life and a moral responsibility.

Examining Wilder's work to date, Gold criticized the bridge of San Luis Rey as a day dream of homosexual figures in graceful gowns moving archaically among the lilies. Some of the philosophically inclined, whether pious or not, saw the loss of God, at least of Christianity, as virtually accomplished from an early date. Kierkegaard writes that he must admit that he had never seen a Christian in the strict sense of the word, Kierkegaard's standards may have been impossibly high: it is not clear how few people have counted as Christian in his views. Yet in America, Henry Adams, reflecting on his youth in and near Boston at about the same time as Kierkegaard's entry, wondered whence religious belief had disappeared.

Ultimately in Adam's conception, increasing physical powers (the dynamo) the binding force of religion would lead to social disintegration. In fact, beyond good and evil, Nietzsche claims that most industrious Germans simply have no time left for religion while they participate in religious customs when it is required they do so with a patient and modest seriousness and without much curiosity and discomfort they simply line up too much apart and outside to feel any need for pro and con in such matters. Thus, indifferent ways include the great majority of German middle-class families, Protestants especially in the great industrial centres of trade and the vestiges of the slave morality left by Christianity are the foes that Nietzsche sees himself fighting, because God has already left the stage of history.

An American popularizer of Nietzsche, has a similar attitude. He is not ardently opposed to religion. Writing in 1920, he claims "I am anything but an atheist and haven't the slightest objection to church-going, so long as it is honest. I have gone to church myself many times honestly seeking to experience inward exaltation that religious persons speak of not even in Rome have I sensed the least

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trace of it Mencken illustrate that the true enemy of religious faith in the modern age is not atheisms but difference in that he feels no indignation that religious faith exists .Like Nietzsche Mencken thinks that Christian morality is the significant problem.” (197) In other words, systems of morality almost always outline their usefulness, simply because he got upon whose authority they are stuck to., to get rid of all the difficult obstacles. But that is largely a problem of the fact that most people are educative.

Thornton Wilder’s 1942 play *The Skin of Our Teeth* is an allegory about the history of mankind told through the story of one family, the Antrobuses, who lived through a new ice age, a great flood, and a devastating war. Thornton Wilder attempted with his ambitious 1942 play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*. But *The Skin of Our Teeth* is also a story about a single family, the Antrobuses, who live in the present day of Wilder’s time.

Wilder uses the literary technique of allegory, taking a specific set of characters and events and making them stand in for something much larger. The name of the family at the center of the play—Antrobus—comes from the Greek word ‘Anthropos’, which means human or person. And while living a seemingly normal life in early-20th century New Jersey, the family also lives through the devastating events of an Ice Age, a great flood, and finally, a devastating war. Throughout the play, the characters and their experiences are connected to stories from the Bible, classical mythology, and world history to highlight how this one family is standing in for all of mankind.

The play is divided into three very distinct acts. The first act takes place in New Jersey at a time when the entire eastern United States is threatened by a giant wall of ice moving south from Canada. ‘the family is introduced by a narrator and further described by their servant Sabina. George, head of the family, is considered to be the inventor of machines. Like wheels, Irons. It felt that inventing these kinds of machineries would develop the human in future.

The first act ends with refugees and from the impending Ice Age reaching to Antrobus. These figures include the Bible; in the Old Testament about prophet Moses, the Greek goddesses of the arts. The second act takes place on the Atlantic city boardwalk where George is being ordained as president of the ancient and honorable order of mammals, human subdivision. Sabina shows up disguised as a beauty queen who tries to steal George away from his wife, Maggie. Through the raucous party, the weather starts to change and leads to a great flood like the one from the story of Noah’s Ark in the Bible. The act ends with the Antrobus family acting like Noah and directing pairs of animals onto a boat.

The final act takes place after a devastating war. Maggie and her daughter Gladys emerge from a cellar to find the Antrobus house destroyed. George and his son Henry, who had been generals on opposite sides of the war, return home. The family discusses how civilization will be rebuilt this time and asks whether it is worth it to rebuild society at all since humanity.

All of the characters in *The Skin of Our Teeth* are archetypes, or characters meant to stand in for a set of personality traits or ideas. The fact that the characters stand in for all of humanity, instead of being individualized people themselves, is highlighted by the various parallels they have to biblical and mythological characters. As head of the family, George represents traditional authority and learning we first see him creating new tools and technology in Act-1 like the early men first created these tools. He is compared to Adam, who in Biblical tradition is the father of mankind, and to Noah, who in the Bible starts a new civilization after the first one is wiped out by the great flood.

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Sabina's stock-maid monologue begins and ends the play in the same way. This "stage-play" goes on and on. In her role as resident pessimists, lacking vision, Sabina says, that's all we do always beginning again! Over and over again always beginning again. After each disaster, the just rebuild the world again she also Don't forget that a few years ago we came through the depression by *The Skin of Our Teeth* One more tight squeeze like that and where will be?

The Ice age/ the great flood are always plagued by the potential for disaster, both natural and manmade. Art literatures are way of advancing our humanity, enhancing empathy, tolerance, vision. Improvements in technology, though, don't necessarily advance human nature at all.

Similarities between the play and the James Joyce's novel *Finnegans wake* were noted in the Saturday Review during the play's run on Broadway. Norman cousins, editor of the Review, Printed a short article by Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson titled "The skin of whose Teeth? The strange case of Mr. wilder's new play and *Finnegans Wake* "in the issue for December 19, 1942, with a second part in the February 13, 1943 issue. Campbell claimed to have composed *Finneganswake* and the book from of the skin of one teeth and finally a four line, word-for-word quote.

The play's action takes place in a modern silting, but is full of anachronisms researching back to prehistoric times. The character's roles as archetypes are emphasized by their identification with Biblical and classical personalities. For example, the name Lilly Sabina is a reference to the myth of Lilith and to the historical rape of the sabine women, identifications made relatively explicit in the play's text. Henry Antrobus's name was changed from "Cain", following his murder of his brother Abel after God favors Abel over cain regarding gifts. This implies that George Antrobusin Adam, and Maggie Antrobus Eve, further supported by an event at the beginning of the play when Mr. Antrobus composes a strong for his wife in honor of their anniversary, in which the lyrics he wishes a weeding Annivesary to Eva, appear though Mrs. Antrobus is referred to as Maggie throughout the play.

The theme Catagorises the story of Able and Cain in the bible, Mr. Antrobus pays for more attention to his "prefect" third child Gladys than he does Henry, because of the murder of his favorite child. As this treatment of Henry continues, throughout the acts is seen progression of Henry slowly becoming more angry with his family, which reaches its climax in the third act.

While the Antrobus family remains constant throughout the play, the three acts do not form a continuous narrative. The first act takes place during an impending ice age, in the second act the family circumstances have changed as George becomes president of the fraternal order of mammals. Examples quoted from the bible sondom and Gomorrah, where God destroyed the city Sodom and Gomorrhach because people of these city were not good in the eyes of God, God was displeased with their behaviours and he shamed only the life of lot. Lot's wife was made a pillar of salt because she disobeyed God. And the end of the world approaches a second time;

An inclusive of stylistic complexity is added by the occasional interruption of the narrative scene by actors directly addressing the audience. In the first scene, the actress playing Sabina reveals her misgivings to the audience about the play, in the second act she refuses to say cines in the play and tells the spectators things that cause a woman in the audience to run from the theater sobbing, and, in the last act, the actor playing Mr. Antrobus interrupts to announce that several actors have taken ill, and asks the audience to indulge them while the 'stage manager' of the play conducts a rehearsal with the replacements.

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At the opening of *'The Skin of Our Teeth'*, images from a slide projector appear on the closed stage curtain. An announcer narrates these pictures of "new events of the world", telling the audience about events in both the theater and the world (a glacier is moving south over Vermont; Mr. George Antrobus has invented the wheel)

When the curtain rises, it reveals the living room of the Antrobus house in suburban Excelsior, New Jersey. Sabina, the sexy maid, gives an opening speech which parodies the clunky exposition that often begin traditional realistic plays, it not yet home, it is six o'clock and Mr. Antrobus is not yet home, it is so cold "dogs are sticking to the sidewalks" and "the whole world is at sixes and sevens. But before the end of this speech, the actress playing Sabina drops her character.

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