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A study of the dual vision in the novels of Thornton Wilder

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A STUDY OF THE DUAL VISION IN THE NOVELS OF THORNTON WILDER

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This study has been accomplished through the encouragement and assistance of several people. I wish to express my deep appreciation to Mr. Thomas Walsh, who has directed this study with the intensity of a scholar, but with the humanity of a fellow enthusiast. I sincerely hope the work merits his support.

Dr. Bruce Baker has been most generous with his time and his suggestions in his critical assessment of this work.

And to Dr. Clifford W. Anderberg, I extend my thanks for encouraging a spirit of inquiry. This study has proved rewarding for me in the revelation of Thornton Wilder's vast scope of ideas, which has provided me with a better understanding of my fellowmen, as well as a profound appreciation for the art of Thornton Wilder.

Though I speak with the tongues of man and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. . . .

For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

--I Corinthians: 13:1-13.

Chapter I

Introduction

"The art of literature springs from two curiosities, a curiosity about human beings pushed to such an extreme that it resembles love, and a love of a few masterpieces of literature so absorbing that it has all the richest elements of curiosity. . . . The training for literature must be acquired by the artist alone, through the passionate assimilation of a few masterpieces written from a spirit somewhat like his own, and of a few masterpieces written from a spirit not at all like his own."[1] Thus, early in his writing career, Pulitzer Prize winner, Thornton Wilder, identified the sources of his literary expression. This curiosity about human beings, it seems to me, is reflected in the very humanity of Wilder's literary characters; it serves as the basic premise of this paper. Wilder's curiosity about human beings resembles love in that he projects it to the whole human race, the "family of man." Artistically, he achieves this through an adroit technique of dual vision for the reader, by rendering the particular through the exposition of his narrative, and at the same time, encompassing a broader view of humanity from an omniscient viewpoint.

[1]Thornton Wilder, The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays (New York: Coward-McCann, 1928), p. xiv.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of his six novels from the standpoint of theme and style. The success of Wilder's dramas, I believe, has overshadowed his contribution to the genre of the novel. Drama critics have assessed Wilder as an experimentalist, a conformist, an ancient and a modern. The ambiguity of his dramatic works is apparent in his novels as well. He offers a challenge to the reader to relate the complexity of the settings and themes of his six novels into a meaningful design. Thornton Wilder, I suggest, has been neglected by the critics in the assessment of his novels, as their emphasis has been placed on his contribution to the theater. As much as any novelist of our day, he needs to be studied and evaluated, as the significance of his moral vision, as well as of his unique style, earns him the deserved recognition of his time.

Basically, this critical study of Wilder's novels will be from my interpretation of primary sources, biographical interpretation, and the limited secondary sources available. I have included all of the novels, as I believe each contributes a significant worth to the evaluation of his artistic purpose. A thorough consideration of the six narratives reveals the development of Wilder's craftsmanship, as well as the growth of his philosophical vision.

For purposes of clarity and analysis, it is my intention to separate the novels into two thematic groups: the

first from a consideration of Wilder's metaphysical viewpoint, that is his cosmic vision of order in the Universe; and the second from his concept of human worth, which concerns man's relationship to man and how he solves his problems and conflicts with others in order to give meaning to his existence. In one way or another, all of the novels deal with love and religion; still, Wilder is concerned with the social implications of man's civilizations, as well as the spiritual aspects of his nature. Consequently, I believe a study of his novels from these two thematic considerations, the metaphysical and that of human worth, will provide a more comprehensive understanding.

The treatment of time is the significant factor in the novels of Thornton Wilder. Malcolm Cowley quotes the author as saying: "It is only in appearance that time is a river. It is rather a vast landscape and it is the eye of the beholder that moves. . . . There are no Golden Ages and no Dark Ages. There is the oceanlike monotony of the generations of men under the alternations of fair and foul weather."[2]

A second pertinent observation concerning the nature of his writing was suggested by Wilder to the James Joyce Society; the author declared that the use of myths offers the best way for man to examine himself. He said that the poets of the centuries have expressed the story of the soul

[2]Quoted in Malcolm Cowley, "A Unique Case," Book Week, World Journal Tribune, April 2, 1967, p. 2.

and its searchings through the retelling motif of the myth. "The retelling of them on every hand occurs because they whisper a validation--they isolate and confer a significance--Prometheus, Casandra, Oedipus, Don Quioxote, Faust."[3] Through his use of myth, Wilder projects his themes with an overwhelming conviction that one time is really many times, and one place is many places. There is a wistful quality of déja vù in his novels.

The second curiosity which Wilder pointed out as a source of his art--"a love of a few masterpieces so absorbing that it has all the richest elements of curiosity"--has provoked critical dispute among those who have commented on his works. He defends himself in a letter to John Modic by saying: "You might call me an 'eclectic.' I pick out and combine. It is for you to decide whether these borrowings are assimilated into a new coherent self-constituting creation or not."[4] Modic agrees and he comments that Wilder is practicing the ancient art of contaminatio. "The works of Menander, Plautus, Terence, Shakespeare, Moliere, and others are often examples of contaminatio--deliberate combinations and blendings from other sources. Wilder is a combiner and blender of parts from other writers, and of his

[3]Thornton Wilder, "Joyce and the Modern Novel," A James Joyce Miscellany, ed. Marvin Magalner (New York: James Joyce Society, 1957), p. 15.

[4]John Modic, "The Eclectic Mr. Wilder," Ball State Teachers College Forum: I (Winter 1961), p. 60.

own previous writing. Very little goes to waste."[5]

Wilder justifies himself by saying that his life has been "a series of infatuations for admired writers." In an interview with Ross Parmenter for a 1938 publication in The Saturday Review Wilder comments: "It seems to me that the writer learns what is called technique not by any willed application to handbooks, to exercises, and to what is called experimentation, but through the admiration of a series of admirable examples--a learning which takes place in the subconscious."[6] Certainly, one has to agree that this borrowing of source material is not a new technique in literature. Chaucer, Shakespeare and Mark Twain are relevant examples of this device as an authentic technique.

One of the primary considerations of this analysis will be to point out Wilder's use of dual vision for the reader. I suggest that his vision encompasses more than "the slice of life" depicted by many of his contemporaries. The labels of "ancient" and "modern" can be reconciled in the framework of eternity envisioned by Wilder. This technique bridges the time span apparent in his novels. It serves the further purpose of revealing the inner man, his spiritual nature, and at the same time, the outer man, fulfilling his physical being. Wilder's curiosity about human beings probes the existence of evil; his viewpoint is not a blind

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ross Parmenter, "Novelist into Playwright," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIX (June 11, 1938), 11.

faith in the goodness of man, but rather a recognition of the weaknesses and the strengths of human nature. Wilder is concerned with the cyclical structure of civilization; on closer scrutiny his themes fuse into a single metaphysical attitude. It is an attitude centered on the ancient questions of human destiny.

Wilder is an experimentalist; he poses provocative questions for his readers and projects epigrammatic statements. While reading his novels, I often experienced that pleasant, puzzled feeling of having met a character another time, in another place. Later I realized that I was being introduced to the "Stage Manager" from Our Town, disguised as an appropriate character for each respective setting. Through this device Wilder effectively insinuates the omniscient voice of the narrator. It is, then, in this keen interest in repetition, in repetitive patterns of human existence, that Wilder's novels can best be approached.

Various critics have attempted to list the basic themes which have been of greatest concern to Wilder. Joseph Firebaugh proposed the longest list: ". . . love, the Platonic idea; intuition and revelation; the other-worldly; human worth; freedom and responsibility; and poetry and scholarship."[7] The list is valid, but unwieldly for purposes of this study. Consequently, this paper will be limited to the recurrent themes of love, human worth, the

[7]Joseph Firebaugh, "The Humanism of Thornton Wilder," Pacific Spectator, IV (Autumn 1950), 427.

cyclical pattern, religion and philosophy, as these themes merge to form a unified philosophical position. Brilliantly staged, Thornton Wilder's novels portray his themes through eloquent symbols. This critical analysis will be concerned with an interpretation of the repetitive themes in his six novels from the standpoint of the metaphysical aspect, and, secondly, from the consideration of Wilder's statement on human worth.

Chapter II

Three Metaphysical Novels

Thorton Wilder believes that the religious impulses in man are enduring; he writes of the universal questions which have troubled all men of all times. Wilder is generally classified as a Christian writer whose respect for the rich heritage of the past is mirrored in his choice of settings. The purpose of the present study is to examine three of his novels from the metaphysical standpoint to determine the unity of design in their themes and structures. The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927), The Woman of Andros (1930), and Heaven's My Destination (1935) provide a dramatic contrast of cultures: eighteenth-century Peru, pre-Christian Greece, and America in the twentieth century. Earlier in this paper, I pointed out Wilder's awareness of the repetitive patterns of human experience. He has expressed his interest in the cyclical nature of man by linking the past to the present in each of the three novels. In the preface to three of his plays, Wilder said:

> Every action which has taken place--every thought, every emotion--has taken place only once, at one moment in time and place. "I love you," "I rejoice," "I suffer," have been said and felt many billions of times, and never twice the same. Every person who has lived has lived an unbroken succession of unique occasions. Yet the more one is aware of this individuality of experience (innumerable! innumerable!) the more one becomes attentive to what these disparate moments have in common, to repetitive patterns.[1]

[1]Wilder, A Thornton Wilder Trio, (New York: Criterion Books, 1956), p. 13.

The anguish of the individual experience is the focal point for Wilder to project his Christian Humanism views. Each of the three novels voices the Platonic and Christian mysticism of the author's beliefs. Wilder agrees with the Platonic assumption of dualism--of a "higher" and a "lower" nature in man; like the Greeks in fifth-century Greece, Wilder assumes above all the dignity of man when he acts in accord with the spirit of moderation and rejects absolutes, dogmas and extremes of passion. Dangerous extremes of passion, or hubris, result in suffering. It is my intent to point out the conflicts evident in each novel and to relate the author's comments, as well as his questions, concerning the metaphysical aspect. Wilder once told a German writer: "I am trying to describe this magic unity of purpose and chance, of destiny and accident."[2] It is with these questions, then, that we can begin to explore the metaphysical merits of the three novels.

It has been pointed out that Wilder's religious feeling is more allegorical than historical. The three novels I have chosen to examine in this chapter reflect Wilder's interest in myth and fable, as well as his fascination for past civilizations. He recognizes these sources as rich in symbolic meaning. In his essay on James Joyce, Wilder declares: "Myth is the dreaming soul of the race telling

[2]Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1952), p. 408.

its story."[3] It is important for the reader to recognize how Wilder uses myth and fable to employ his technique of dual vision, in which he envisions a larger picture of mankind, while relating the narrative. Many of his characters are allegorical in that they represent philosophical concepts. The emphasis of this critical study will be placed on the dual vision, the author's use of time, and the use of myth and setting to structure his philosophical views.

A. The Woman of Andros

In a prefatory note Wilder explains, "The first part of this novel is based upon the Andria, a comedy of Terence who in turn based his work upon two Greek plays, now lost to us, by Menander."[4] Perhaps Wilder wanted to point out that all writers have used the same themes. Wilder adapts the comedy to a serious novel. From the Athens of Terence's play the setting is changed to the beautiful Aegean island of Brynos, a century before Christ.

Wilder's concern in this novel is with an ordered structure of religion in which he examines a paganistic religion of a pre-Christian society. The Woman of Andros is a direct attempt on Wilder's part to illustrate the

[3]Wilder, "Joyce and the Modern Novel," 14.

[4]Thornton Wilder, The Woman of Andros (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1930), n. pag.

religious propensities of classical Greek humanism. Critics have termed the style of the novel as a Greek pastoral, as its classical structure has the qualities of a narrative poem. A haunting melancholy, an elegaic quality, permeates the narrative. One of Wilder's major themes, love, is the subject of the novel. It is a dual tale of the famous hetaera, Chrysis, and of the love affair of Pamphilus with her younger sister, Glycerium. Wilder retains the double plot of Terence's comedy by interweaving the love affair with the conflict of the humanistic Chrysis and the conventional Brynos citizens. Chrysis symbolizes the Socratic spirit of classical Greece in her spirit of inquiry with her group of young disciples. She frequently quotes Socrates. Her most intelligent disciple, Pamphilus, is searching for the meaning of life. Thus, the characters resemble philosophical concepts, which is Wilder's technique for developing his theme.

The opening paragraph of the novel suggests the mysticism of its theme and anticipates the coming of Christ: "THE EARTH sighed as it turned in its course; the shadow of night crept gradually along the Mediterranean, and Asia was left in darkness. . . . Triumph had passed from Greece and wisdom from Egypt, but with the coming on of night they seemed to regain their lost honors, and the land that was soon to be called Holy prepared in the dark its wonderful burden."[5] The novel begins with the problem of arranging

[5]Ibid., p. 7.

the marriage of Philumena and Pamphilus. The fathers of the young couple, Chremes and Simo, are concerned about Pamphilus and his hesitancy to complete the marriage plans. From the conversation of the two older men, the reader has his first hint of the woman of Andros from the comments of Chremes: "Her name is Chrysis, and I don't know what she means by calling herself Andrian. The island of Andros was never famous for such airs and graces as she puts on. She's flitted from Corinth and Alexandria, you may be sure."[6] The women of the island share the antagonism of Chremes; although the women think she is brazen, the young men find her the most captivating individual they have ever known. Chremes continues his description of Chrysis, lamenting her influence on the young men: "She has twelve or fifteen of them to dinner every seven or eight days,--the unmarried ones, of course. They lie about on couches and eat odd food and talk. . . . She is very strict with the young men, apparently. She makes them pronounce all the Attic accents. . . . "[7]

There are other things about Chrysis which puzzle the islanders. She is a humanitarian; in her house are the "social outcasts" who seek refuge and security. The lame, the blind, and even the insane find sanctuary in her home.

[6]Ibid., p. 15.

[7]Ibid., pp. 15-16.

Wilder describes Chrysis as a woman who has been dead, but she has been born again to accept the good and bad aspects of life. Through her wisdom Wilder voices a major theme, a plea for the growth of sympathy within mankind. Because Chrysis is pre-Christian, there is no higher sanction to justify her higher impulses. She finds meaning in life through self sacrifice and through selfless love for her fellow man. "Some day," she says, "we shall understand why we suffer. I shall be among the shades underground and some wonderful hand, some Alcestis, will touch me and will show me the meaning of all these things. . . ."[8]

Chrysis tells her disciples a fable of the dead hero who receives permission from Zeus to return to earth to relive the least eventful day of his life, on condition that he view it from the standpoint of onlooker, as well as participant. It is interesting to note that the "eclectic Mr. Wilder" borrowed this same theme from himself eight years later and adapted it with variations to his famous drama, Our Town. Through the use of myth, Wilder forcefully illustrates his strong affirmation that the wonder of life on earth is too great for humans to comprehend. The fable that Chrysis recounts at her symposium concludes with a didactic observation:

> Suddenly the hero saw that the living too are dead and that we can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our

[8]Ibid., p. 79.

> treasure; for our hearts are not strong enough to love every moment. And not an hour had gone by before the hero who was both watching life and living it called on Zeus to release him from so terrible a dream. The gods heard him, but before he left he fell upon the ground and kissed the soil of the world that is too dear to be realized.[9]

Through the eyes of the dead, Wilder affirms the wonder of life over and over again in his novels.

Chrysis is a prototype of a familiar character found in many of Wilder's narratives; she represents the human being who has struggled to a higher plateau of spiritual understanding through her suffering and, consequently, finds love through service to others. The Platonic ideal of love is realized in this characterization.

Pamphilus, the hero of the novel, arouses the reader's sympathy in his struggle against local custom and tradition. The ancient Greek setting provides a second prototype in the apparent "Generation Gap" between Pamphilus and the Greek "Establishment." Simo, his father, is bothered by his son's hesitancy to complete the marriage plans with Philumena, daughter of a respectable Greek family. Wilder points out, "Readers of a later age will not be able to understand the difficulties that beset the young man. Marriage was not then a sentimental relation, but a legal one of great dignity, and the bridegroom's share in the contract involved not so much himself as his family, his farm, and his ancestors."[10]

[9]Ibid., p. 36.

[10]Ibid., pp. 113-114.

Chremes, the father of the intended bride, talks with Simo of the differences between generations, "There shouldn't be a long step between the generations. It's bad for customs and manners."[11] Inadvertantly, Chremes reveals that he is more concerned with tradition than he is with the feelings of the young people involved. Wilder, I believe, is emphasizing the repetitive patterns existent in family life. The basic human problems with variations are just as evident in the conflicts in family life of the twentieth century; the "Generation Gap" has its roots in ancient cultures.

Simo attempts to understand his son and patiently waits for him to reach his own decision through the adolescent struggle for identity. Love as an essential part of marriage was not recognized as an important factor. Simo says to his son, "'You do not "love" Philumena, as the poets use the word. Well, when I married your mother perhaps I did not "love" her in that sense. But I grew to love her. . . .'"[12] But Pamphilus, after hearing the talk of love from Chrysis and seeing her practice of love with her refugees, senses an urgency to experience this potential within himself.

His first encounter with the fifteen-year-old Glycerium is an interesting part of the story. He sees the young girl being tormented by a group of boys from the town. Pamphilus,

[11]Ibid., p. 13.

[12]Ibid., p. 125.

who is twenty-five, uses his authority as an adult to order the boys to leave. The frightened Glycerium reveals that she is the sister of Chrysis who has purposely kept her secluded to protect her from the antagonistic people of Brynos. Pamphilus befriends her and offers to introduce Glycerium to his younger sister and her friends. The bond of friendship is strengthened by repeated meetings on the hillside and they fall in love. "It was not at this meeting, nor at their next, but at the third, beneath the dwarfed olive-trees, that those caresses that seemed to be for courage, for pity and for admiration, were turned by Nature to her own uses."[13]

The realization that Glycerium is pregnant forces Pamphilus to arrive at a decision; Simo points out that Glycerium is not a Greek citizen and is, therefore, socially unacceptable to the islanders. "All her life she would have to endure something insulting in the manner of the other women on the island."[14] Pamphilus searches his own heart and consults with Chrysis. When he promises to marry Glycerium, Chrysis indicates that the choice of an honorable decision must be made by him: "You have only to be yourself without fear, without doubting, Pamphilus. . . . ."[15] The young Greek undertakes a vow of silence and hunger in order to

[13]Ibid., p. 72.

[14]Ibid., p. 123.

[15]Ibid., p. 106.

meditate on his position. During that interval he sees Glycerium who panics because he will not speak to her. The old servant, Mysis, explains that Pamphilus cannot speak because of a vow, and Glycerium pleads with him to confirm his love by a nod of the head. Pamphilus nods to her and her fears are allayed.

During the span of time of the hero's meditation, Chrysis, who has been ill, dies, and the helpless people who have sought sanctuary in her home are herded into a group to be sold as slaves. Glycerium suffers through the shock of the ordeal as Pamphilus's mother rescues the young girl and takes her into their home. But tragedy ensues, "for on the noon of the third day Glycerium's pains began and by sunset both mother and child were dead."[16] Although her love affair with Pamphilus takes up the final section of the novel, Glycerium is not so important to the development of Wilder's theme as is her sister, Chrysis. Wilder is principally concerned with the situation of the metaphysically helpless and bewildered person. We recognize that Chrysis is stronger, that she embodies the compassion and hope of the Christian spirit in her search for spiritual strength. She serves as a kind of prophet in the pre-Christian society of Greece.

A third prototype of character in Wilder's novels is introduced through the priest. Wilder makes repeated allusions to those who are gifted with spiritual awareness,

[16]Ibid., p. 159.

those of the priest and the poet. A young priest, not yet thirty years of age, is sent by the high priests who have charge of the great Mysteries in Athens. The shrine of Brynos plays a significant role in the old legend of Asclepius and his father Apollo. The healing power and the poetic power are deeply rooted here. By his vow the figure of the priest has been elevated above the general confusion of man: "He had taken the vow of chastity, the vow that forever closes the mind to the matter, without wistful back-glancing and without conceding the possibility that circumstance might yet present a harmless deviation, the vow which, when profoundly compassed, fills the mind with such power that it is forever cut off from the unstable tentative sons of man."[17] The priest is no longer touched by human passions; he gains the bridge to humanity in the confessions of the sick and the confused. The gift of Asclepius to the priest does not do away with grief, as we see in The Woman, but it provides a means of healing by the compassionate sharing of the grief.

Through the characterizations of the priest and Chrysis, Wilder projects the ideal of the Greek society based on the humanistic ideals of a balance between reason and feeling. The Andrian woman is a curious composite of the old Hellenism and the new metropolitan world. Chrysis supports Plato's dictum that philosophy is really seriously supported by youth. "(She cited often the saying of Plato that the true

[17]Ibid., p. 117.

philosophers are the young men of their age. 'Not,' she would add, 'because they do it very well; but because they rush upon ideas with their whole soul. Later one philosophizes for praise, or for apology, or because it is a complicated intellectual game.')"[18]

But the seeds of her philosophical thought flower in the mind of the young Pamphilus. The counsel of Chrysis is difficult for him to grasp; he suffers spiritual doubts, but is finally able to accept the wisdom of her teachings. Mr. Wilder has carefully emphasized the chasm between the pre-Christian and the Christian worlds. Chrysis attempts to translate classical humanistic ideals into action; she searches for a justification in religion. Her humanity had its source in the fifth-century Greece which placed a high value on human dignity. Chrysis yearns for divine sanction; perhaps she anticipates through her need the coming of Christ. "If only the gods were sometimes among us. To have nothing to go by except this idea, this vague idea, that there lies the principle of living."[19]

Wilder's humanism is like classic Greek humanism in that he recognizes the Platonic assumption of dualism in the nature of man, agrees with their concept of the ethical nature and the value of art and literature to society. Above all, Wilder's humanism emphasizes the dignity of man

[18]Ibid., p. 32.

[19]Ibid., p. 49.

when he acts in accord with the Socratic principle of moderation and rejects absolutes, dogmas and extremes of passion. Wilder's vision reveals, also, that the tragic flaw of man's nature, hubris, results in suffering. His literary people reflect the belief that man must be guided by both reason and feelings, proportionately. Through their struggles the characters in his novels reveal Wilder's support of the Platonic view that man can improve himself through the development of his higher, or ethical, nature and from restraint of his lower nature, the animalistic passions.

Wilder deals with death in many of his novels; in The Woman the author describes the lingering illness of Chrysis and a poignant death-bed scene, in which Pamphilus is with her. The youth questions her desperately for some meaning to the suffering and pain of human existence. Her last anguished words are: " . . . I want to say to someone . . . that I have known the worst that the world can do to me, and that nevertheless I praise the world and all the living. . . . Remember me as one who loved all things and accepted from the gods all things, the bright and the dark. And do you likewise."[20]

If the novel ended at this point, the reader would feel depressed and confused by the helplessness which holds Pamphilus captive. But Wilder adds a note of hope through

[20]Ibid., p. 107.

the symbolism of the great rains following the drought in Greece. "Great curtains of rain hung above the plains; in the mountains it fell as snow, and on the sea it printed its countless ephemeral coins upon the water. . . . In the hills the long-dried streambeds began to fill again and the noise of water falling from level to level, warring with the stones in the way, filled the gorges. . . . And in the East the stars shone tranquilly down upon the land that was soon to be called Holy and that even then way preparing its precious burden."[21]

The publication of The Woman of Andros provoked a varied response from the critics. Carl Van Doren praised the novel by saying that it "is first and last a work of art, conscious, skillful, exacting, lucid, and graceful."[22] Henry Seidel Canby wrote, "It is the workmanship of 'The Woman of Andros' (sic) which must arouse admiration, not as preciosity or display, for there is not one self-conscious work or superfluous phrase in the book, but because with a skill and a patience and an understanding of the lofty ideas in a beautiful setting with when he deals, Wilder has been willing to carry his writing over these leagues beyond impressionism which our journalist-novelists have never tried to follow."[23]

[21]Ibid., p. 162.

[22]Carl Van Doren, "Wilder's Third and Best," New York Herald Tribune Books, February 23, 1930, p. 2.

[23]Henry Seidel Canby, "Praise All Living," Saturday Review of Literature, VI (March 1, 1930), 771.

Much of the criticism was unfavorable. Michael Gold was vitriolic in his assessment: "In this devitalized air move the wan ghosts he has called up, each in 'romantic' costume. It is a historic junkshop over which our author presides."[24] In that same article Gold referred to Wilder as "prophet of a genteel Christ!" Such comments as these caused controversy in the literary circles of the time. But Wilder survived the attacks and continued writing experimental novels concerned with time and the cyclical nature of man.

Wilder's examination of the values of society, religion and family are weighed in their respective proportions and given their proper due. The Woman of Andros, then, is an exemplary novel of Wilder's use of dual vision, as it reveals the needs of the inner man and suggests that love is the fulfillment of compassion, while showing a picture of external life in a world of antiquity. I suggest that Wilder embodies the Platonic ideal of love in the figure of Chrysis. A series of trials which divest her of ego ultimately elevate her to a higher level of love; this the reader can experience vicariously with Chrysis. The theme of the cyclical pattern in mankind is related to the portrait of family life on the Aegean island of Andros. As pointed out earlier in this paper, Wilder dramatically insinuates this theme through his use of myth, and bridges the time span of past and present

[24]Michael Gold, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ," New Republic, LXIV (October 22, 1930), p. 266.

by precipitating the reader into believable conflicts and by posing relevant questions to twentieth-century life. The themes of "the curiosity of man growing into love" are dealt with an admirable style of organic unity in this early, elegaic novel of Thornton Wilder.

B. Heaven's My Destination

George Brush is my name;
America's my nation
Ludington's my dwelling-place
And Heaven's my destination.

According to Wilder, the title of this novel comes from "doggeral verse which children of the Middle West were accustomed to write in their schoolbooks."[1] An explanation of the verse along with the doggeral is supplied on the title page by the author. This novel has its setting in the Bible Belt of the United States in the early 1930's. The title has no profound metaphysical significance as one might suppose; the comic, satiric tone of the novel is indicated at once by Mr. Wilder's use of the children's verse. This narrative is Wilder's answer to the critics who had accused him of escaping into the past. Dayton Kohler has neatly summarized the novel: "Heaven's My Destination is a later day Pilgrim's Progress, and Mr. Wilder's answer to critics who had declared him unable to deal with the contemporary American scene. . . . The story of a corn-fed Middle Western Faithful, it is a

[1]Thornton Wilder, Heaven's My Destination, Preface (New York: Harper, 1935), n. pag.

record of his travels through a modern Vanity Fair."[2]

The novel provides an interesting digression from the previous style of the author. He uses a plain, descriptive prose completely free of the aphoristic technique; ideas emerge from the action, and one is not directed toward a specific viewpoint by the comments of an omniscient narrator. Wilder uses dialogue to greater advantage in this novel, and its idiom is the common colloquialism of everyday American speech of the middle class. A sense of spontaneity is achieved through this particular technique. The episodic structure is in the tradition of Tom Jones and Huck Finn as it pictures an innocent taking a journey that brings him into contact with various facets of society. It is Wilder's most realistic novel; his skillful craftsmanship in handling the point of view enables him to achieve a kind of dual vision in which he affirms the same values of The Woman and at the same time satirizes the hero and his society. Wilder has translated the joke of the traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter into a full-length work, but underlying the humor is a serious statement.

The opening quotation is taken from Wilder's earlier novel, The Woman of Andros: "Of all the forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age."[3] Although this is

[2]Dayton Kohler, "Thornton Wilder," English Journal, XXVI (January 1939), 9.

[3]Wilder, Woman, p. 55.

the story of George Brush, traveling salesman, the novel is more adequately described as the picture of America. Henry S. Canby reviewed the novel and suggested this parallel, "'Heaven's My Destination' is an apologue of American life. It is the prudish, ignorant, humorless goodness of the American strain in its awkward age, growing up very slowly, and making a conspicuous ass of itself. And yet there is something impressive in moral goodness, even when dumb, and in George Marvin Brush."[4] A study of this novel in comparison to the earlier novel, The Woman of Andros, provides an interesting contrast, as Chrysis and Pamphilus symbolize the restless yearning of the pre-Christian society, whereas George Brush represents the distortion of the Christian ideal in twentieth-century America. Both novels deal with human beings grappling with metaphysical problems, but the contrast in setting and tone is significantly different.

In an article for The Atlantic Monthly in 1952, Wilder explores the subject of the American loneliness, citing specifically Henry David Thoreau. "Americans constantly feel that the whole world's thinking has to be done over again. They did not only leave the Old World, they repudiated it. Americans start from scratch. This is revolt indeed. . . . Every American is an autodidact; every American feels himself

[4]Henry Seidel Canby, "A Baptist Don Quixote," Saturday Review of Literature, XI (January 5, 1935), 411.

capable of being the founder of his own religion."[5] Wilder explains that a European receives support from his environment, from the traditions and customs which provide a solid background for the growing boy and girl to kick against.

> The American, on the other hand, is at sea--disconnected from place, distrustful of authority, thrown back upon himself. . . . Perceptive visitors to America from Europe are uniformly struck by what they call an "American loneliness" which they find no less present in that fretful and often hollow gregariousness. In America the very word is sentimental and it makes us uncomfortable even to employ it. Yet we see this kind of loneliness about us everywhere; like the loneliness which springs from pride it is a consequence, a deformation, and a malady of that deeper from which we are about to discuss. Both proceed from the fact that the religious ideas current in America are still inadequate to explain the American to himself.[6]

This is the basis, I suggest for Wilder's underlying theme of Heaven's My Destination. Through careful observation the reader can see the novel deals with three themes selected for emphasis in this study. First, it does reflect Wilder's statement that literature must spring from "a curiosity about human beings pushed to such an extreme that it resembles love. . . ." Through his delineation of the character of George Brush whose innate interest in human nature and concern for the souls of his fellow men grows into a love for human beings, the reader can share the compassionate

[5]Thornton Wilder, "The American Loneliness," Atlantic, CXC (August 1952), 66.

[6]Ibid.

insight of Wilder. This insight can be projected to the family of man, providing a broader vision. The need for religious expression in man's existence is the readily apparent second theme, and the third theme of the cyclical pattern of mankind can be determined by the numerous references to earlier figures in religious history.

Critics have compared the hero of this novel, George Brush, to many other literary figures. One of the most interesting is that of Rex Burbank who attempts to show that George Brush is a counterpart to Elmer Gantry. Research for this study revealed a valid source for the characterization from an interview of Wilder by Richard Goldstone. Wilder admitted that Brush is to some extent an autobiographical figure. "I came from a very strict Calvinistic father, was brought up partly among the missionaries of China, and went to that splendid college at Oberlin at a time when the classrooms and student life carried a good deal of that pious didacticism which would now be called narrow Protestantism. And that book is, as it were, an effort to come to terms with those influences. The comic spirit is given to us in order that we may analyze, weigh, and clarify things in us which nettle us, or which we are outgrowing, or trying to reshape. This is a very autobiographical book."[7]

This admission by the author is important as a

[7]Richard H. Goldstone, "Thornton Wilder: The Art of Fiction," Paris Review, XV (Winter 1957), 41.

consideration in the analysis of Heaven's My Destination. Wilder has explained why he has used humor so consistently throughout the novel; George Brush, like Wilder, is looking for a way to understand and put into perspective the things which nettle him as well as those things which he is outgrowing. But George Brush emerges as an individual in his own right, an innocent on a picaresque journey through the Midwest Bible Belt of America. Much of the satirical humor arises from the fact that George Brush represents two aspects of the national image--the Yankee peddler and the Puritan idealist.

The setting for Heaven's My Destination is in the period of the Great Depression in 1930. Wilder uses the technique of introducing his main character indirectly. The manager of the Union Hotel in Crestcrego, Texas, as well as many of his guests are perplexed and annoyed by the Biblical texts written on the blotter of the writing-desk. The reader is told that Brush had won the Annual Bible Question Bee at the First Baptist Church that very day. The next night Brush is bombarded with magazines as he kneels in the aisle of the Pullman car to say his prayers! On this train trip Brush leaves a note on the seat for a young woman who has gone to the platform to smoke a cigarette. The note reads, "Women who smoke are unfit to be mothers."[8] Through these four

[8]Wilder, Heaven's, p. 2.

incidents, Wilder has adroitly identified his young salesman as devout and aggressive with evangelistic tendencies.

As a representative of Caulkins Educational Press, George has various opportunities to put into practice the evangelistic training he had received at Shiloh Baptist College in Walling, South Dakota. Two of his courses were "How to Approach Strangers on the Subject of Salvation" and "Arguments in Sacred Debate." The episodic structure covers one year in the life and travels of George Brush through the Bible Belt of America. Early in the novel he approaches another traveler on the train and launches into the subject of the man's salvation. The traveler succintly responds, "He's nuts!"[9] This is but the first of many people in the narrative who reach the same conclusion about Brush.

The occasion of George's twenty-third birthday occurs on this trip on the train. He meets Doremus Blodgett and his traveling companion, Mrs. Margie McCoy, who extend an invitation to George to visit them at their hotel in Oklahoma City when they arrive. The next day they arrive in Armina, Oklahoma and George determines to do something significant to mark the occasion of his twenty-third birthday! Ultimately he decides to draw out all of his money from the Bank in Armina. George has reached the conclusion that he cannot live by his faith if he "stores money" in banks! In 1930, many people withdrew money from banks, but they were

[9]Ibid., p. 7.

expressing a lack of faith in the banks, not in themselves. George's action brings about his first serious encounter, for he refuses to accept the accrued interest at the time of his withdrawal of funds, as he opposes the collection of interest with the same intensity that he exhibits in his disapproval of smoking and drinking. George leaves without the interest, but the townspeople have started withdrawing their savings as panic spreads among them. The town banker is helped to bed by his wife who assures him that everything will be all right. George Brush sees the bank as an institution of fear; he, in turn, generates fear in the people through his bizarre action.

Born in Ludington, Michigan, Brush exhibits an early receptiveness to verbal fanatics. We are told of the girl preacher who kept herself going by means of drugs. While in school at Shiloh Baptist College, George has the opportunity of hearing a sixteen-year-old girl evangelist who brings about his conversion. This experience, coupled with his religious indoctrination at Shiloh, launches him on his missionary pilgrimage. George evolves his own peculiar religious concepts from a curious blend of fundamentalist teachings and his avid interest in Gandhi's beliefs.

In Oklahoma City George renews his acquaintance with Doremus Blodgett and Mrs. McCoy, whom Doremus calls "cousin." George is shocked to learn that Mrs. McCoy is a divorcee, and he is unsure of the proper way he should conduct himself

around such a person. It is in his conversation with this couple that George reveals his religious background; he continues to tell more of himself, explaining his fine tenor voice and how he offers his services as a soloist at the local church when he is in a town on Sunday. The critic, E. K. Brown, observes:

> His [George's] awkwardness is never greater than when he sets out to minimize his own powers: he declines to be proud of his beautiful tenor voice, and describes it as merely one of nature's gifts to the world, along with Niagara Falls and John McCormack. When he is cornered in argument he falls back upon a source of assurance impregnable to reason: 'Everybody's crazy except me; that's what's the matter. The whole world's nuts!' Small wonder that as many as ten people call George crazy in the course of the novel![10]

Then George tells Doremus and Mrs. McCoy of his one serious mistake--the thing that has kept him from becoming a minister. He tells them about a farmer's daughter about twenty miles from Kansas City with whom he had an affair. Since that night George has searched for the place, as he later reasoned that he and the girl must be married in the sight of God. But he is unable to find the girl--he is not sure of her name, but he thinks it is Roberta!

Wilder withdraws from the narrator's position and allows Mrs. McCoy and Doremus to ask all the questions, thereby providing the reader with the necessary background. George explains several of his theories: a singing voice is

[10] E. K. Brown, "A Christian Humanist: Thornton Wilder," University of Toronto Quarterly, IV (April 1935), 369.

a gift from heaven and, consequently, is to be enjoyed free of charge; the world is full of wonderful people; that sickness is a result of discouragement. The life of Gandhi fascinates George, and he tries to adapt Gandhi's theory of non-resistance to his fundamentalist outlook. This finds expression in several incidents which occur during his travels. One of George's most trying experiences occurs in Ozarksville, Missouri, as he goes into a small store to make a purchase and in his conversation with the proprietress learns the hiding place of her cash. As he is about to leave, a thief enters the store; recognizing this as an opportunity to test the theory of ahimsa [Gandhi's doctrine of non-resistance], George tells the thief where the money is hidden. When the thief is caught, George tries to help him avoid arrest, which he regards as a form of cruelty. George seizes upon Gandhi's term, ahimsa, and he has it ready as an answer for all situations involving conflict.

Wilder provides a dual vision, I believe, in depicting the awkward age of Brush's struggle to relate religion to life, and at the same time to present a larger view suggesting the struggle of young America to formulate a stable expression of religious and moral values. Brush, who has gone into the world with missionary intent, seems to demand too much and has too little to offer in return. Several distressing facts of Brush's past are revealed to the reader by means of questions posed by his friends. From the standpoint of novelist technique, much of this could be said to

be merely Wilder's use of flashback. But considered in relation to Brush's character, these unhappy events indicate certain unintegrated elements of personality. This, I suggest, is Wilder's device to show both Brush's and America's awkward struggle to "clarify things in us which nettle us, or which we are outgrowing, or trying to reshape."[11]

The clash that results when Brush brings his religious and moral principles to bear upon a materialistic society sick with skepticism is at once comical and pitiful. The best and the worst in the American religious tradition is symbolized in the evangelistic salesman, Brush. Wilder makes it clear, it seems to me, that society needs to assess its values and to recognize its weaknesses. The people Brush encounters are often cynical, jaded sophistocates resigned to despair, but their very skepticism is a necessary corrective to the extremes of Brush's faith.

One such example is provided by Burkin, a disillusioned intellectual, who ridicules Brush's religious näivete. Burkin verbally strikes at the vulnerable aspects of Brush's religion. "Burkin plunged into primitive man and the jungle; he came down through the nature myths; he hung the earth in astronomical time. He then exposed the pretensions of subjective religious experience, the absurdity of conflicting prayers, man's egotistic terror before extinction."[12]

[11]See above, (p. 27).

[12]Ibid., pp. 266-267.

Wilder's diagnosis of the human condition is concerned with the moral aspect, the inner needs. He points out the need for moral strength to combat the inequities of American society. On the literal level of the novel, George Brush has experienced enough to make him realize that the world is a complex place. His desire for an "American home" finally becomes a reality after he locates Roberta and convinces her to marry him, although he does not love her. For George the stabilizing influence is his deep conviction that God regards them as being married.

The climax of the story is reached when George's marriage fails, and he goes through a crisis that results in a temporary loss of his faith in God. His health is broken; George suffers a complete moral and physical collapse. The most imaginative part of the novel concerns a Catholic priest, Father Pasziewski, who had been the spiritual adviser of Queenie Craven, the proprietress of a boardinghouse in Kansas City where George keeps a room. Although George never meets Father Pasziewski, the priest represents a mystical importance in Brush's life. Whenever George goes to Kansas City he inquires of Queenie about the priest's health.

At the close of the novel, when George is at the point of death, a minister comes to visit him in the hospital. George reacts violently, "'I've broken all the Ten Commandments, except two. I never killed anybody, and I never made any graven images. Many's the time I almost killed myself,

though, and I'm not joking. . . . I don't say these things to you because I'm sorry, but because I don't like your tone of voice. I'm glad I did these things and I wish I'd done them more. I made the mistake all my life of thinking that you could get better and better until you were perfect.'"[13] He angrily denounces the power of prayer by saying that it had only brought him trouble. "'Everything I did was wrong. Everybody I knew got to hate me.'"[14]

Finally, George agrees to open a package which has been delivered to the hospital. In it there is a silver spoon, a gift from Father Pasziewski, who before his recent death had asked that Queenie give it to the young man who had inquired about him. In her letter Queenie writes, "'I told him you liked to hear about him, Mr. Brush, and he seemed to have a special feeling about you. It's a terrible pity you never met.'"[15]

George asks the nurse what day of the week it is, and when she tells him that it is Friday he remembers that he was on Father Pasziewski's Friday prayer list. The spoon symbolizes Father Pasziewski's prayer for him; George's faith is renewed by an expression of love by another man of faith--a dying Catholic priest. "From that day he began to get well."[16] The novel ends with George's recovery and his

[13]Ibid., p. 299.

[14]Ibid., p. 300.

[15]Ibid., p. 302.

[16]Ibid., p. 303.

return to his work. Some days later George is rebuked for writing Biblical texts on a hotel blotter and is arrested on a "misunderstanding." "He was released and continued on his journey."[17] Thus Wilder permits George Brush to continue on his journey, just as he was when the reader first met him. But the last year has brought about changes in George; there is evidence to suggest that George has his own doubts as to the possibility of perfection as a reality.

The critic, Joseph Firebaugh, points out that the humor is two-fold, both comic and tragic: "One laughs at him [Brush] and then realizes that one should be laughing at oneself. The joke is, after all, on us who laugh at näivete which has resulted only in Christian behavior. The joke suddenly becomes different from the one we had expected--a joke as deep as human tragedy. One might call this effect the humor of human compassion. It has artistic purpose."[18]

George Brush believes in certain fundamentals of life, and he fights to overcome the ills of society. Although Brush's religious and humanitarian principles are infantile, they are humane; and if he exasperates people, he also tries to help them, even though they have mistreated him. It is extremely difficult for Brush to compromise his principles in a society sick with skepticism. It seems to me that

[17] Ibid., p. 304.

[18] Firebaugh, p. 436.

George Brush faces the very opposite of the problem which Chrysis and Pamphilus face. The two Greeks perceive a hope for the future "as through a glass darkly." Pamphilus and Chrysis are forced to look too far into the future to see what Christianity might hold for them; Brush must look too far into the past to see any relevancy for Christianity to his times. Wilder's diagnosis of the human condition is moral, inner. In my opinion, he is making a statement on the immorality of a social system which preys upon human frailties of fear and greed. The dual vision provided by Wilder's portrait of Brush being purged of his worst elements of ignorance and narrowness can be observed in the emergence of America from its scarring depression. The great chasm between the humanistic ideal as Wilder conceives it and the state of American life in the 1930's is not bridged in this novel. But Wilder leaves no doubt that it can be. The author seems to be suggesting that America can emerge from her "awkward age" into meaningful maturity through faith based upon humanistic ethics.

C. The Bridge of San Luis Rey

"Some say that we shall never know and that to the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger

of God."[1] Once more Wilder asks "Why?" to the age-old questions of life and death. Is it chance or is it destiny that governs mankind? The Bridge of San Luis Rey is a pattern novel; its structural motif concerns a group of people who have shared the same fatal accident. "On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below."[2]

The only witness to this spectacular accident is Brother Juniper, a red-headed North Italian Franciscan monk who happens to be in Peru on a missionary assignment with the Indians. Brother Juniper is mentioned in only the first and last chapters, for he is the one whom Wilder uses as a tool to provide the evidence and raise the speculations. The novel is structured in five chapters. The first chapter is entitled "Perhaps an Accident" while the last chapter is "Perhaps an Intention." The three intervening chapters deal with the lives of the victims of the disaster, and with their friends and relatives who are left to grieve for them. Brother Juniper presents his evidence in an attempt to prove his theory that theology belongs among the exact sciences.

Earlier in this paper I suggested that the Stage Manager from Our Town could be seen in a different guise in

[1]Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey (New York: Washington Square Press, 1939), p. 10.

[2]Ibid., p. 3.

various of Wilder's novels. I suggest that Brother Juniper serves this function in The Bridge, as through his evidence we glimpse a living picture of eighteenth-century Peru. The remoteness of setting, the romance of the symbolism, and the merging of the past with the present combine as an artistic triumph which won the author the Pulitzer Prize. Again, in this novel Wilder shows his concern for the universal questions which have plagued mankind from the ancient civilizations to the present hydrogen age. What is man's place in the universe? Is it by accident or design that we live, we struggle, we love, we die? The illiterate as well as the educated, the young and the old, the ancient Egyptian and the contemporary existentialist--all have pondered these questions through the ages. Wilder's use of the cyclical pattern of mankind is clearly evident in this novel; the basis of the appeal of The Bridge is that we can identify with its characters.

Another powerful theme is apparent throughout the novel. Love is the dominant theme, and variations of the nature of love are delineated for the reader. Brother Juniper examines the lives of the victims, like spokes from a wheel extending from the hub of love: parental love, brotherly love, erotic love, narcissism, friendship, and finally, selfless love. Wilder is attempting, it seems to me, to determine a basic truth that not all things in life can be explained in terms of the scientific method.

But what about the meaning? Brother Juniper resolves "to inquire into the secret lives of those five persons, that moment falling through the air, and to surprise the reason of their taking off. It seemed to Brother Juniper that it was high time for theology to take its place among the exact sciences and he had long intended putting it there. . . . But this collapse of the bridge of San Luis Rey was a sheer Act of God. It afforded a perfect laboratory. Here at last one could suprise His intentions in a pure state."[3] The little monk was so sincere, not conscious of an act of blasphemy "to surprise His intentions" so that he might explain God.

The reaction of the critics to the publication of The Bridge of San Luis Rey was markedly favorable. Edmund Fuller praised Wilder: "His vision and celebration of man is harmonious with Christian humanism. He gives us a creature, touched with the divine image, but scarred and maimed somewhat in his human state, perishable in his flesh and eternal in his soul; a creature variously perverse and responsible, despicable and indomitable, vulgar and rarefied."[4]

Indeed, the gallery of portraits exhibited by Wilder in The Bridge provides the reader with a little laboratory of various types of human beings. Through Brother Juniper's

[3]Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[4]Edmund Fuller, "Thornton Wilder" The Notation of the Heart," The American Scholar, XXVIII (1959), 212.

careful analysis each one exposes weak, despicable traits of human nature; Wilder strips each character of his emotional and worldly attributes to reveal the "scarred and maimed" spirit. Wilder's optimism, his affirmative appeal, is apparent in the suggestion he leaves with the reader that there is an eternal mysticism of the soul which cannot be articulated, but it survives all else.

The reader shares the eyewitness and earwitness reports which Brother Juniper ferrets out from the people of Lima. The judgment, however, is made by Wilder, himself, through his aphoristic style. The Franciscan monk points out the significant events and the author insinuates his viewpoint with subtlety and restraint. One of the glowing reviews of the novel at the time of its publication was given by Agnes Repplier. "It was a genuine inspiration which prompted Mr. Wilder to locate his strange and beautiful story in the Lima of two centuries ago. . . . Lima is pictured as enjoying a sort of degraded Renaissance. . . . Over all there broods the shadow of the Inquisition, sinister but casual and inept. Against this background Mr. Wilder has etched with exquisite art a little group of men and women whose fates are linked."[5]

The five victims of the bridge provide a variety of character studies: the old Marquesa who writes beautiful letters to her estranged daughter, a lonely adolescent girl

[5]Agnes Repplier, "Exquisite Imperfection," Commonweal, VII (March 7, 1928), 1156.

from a convent, an orphan grieving for his dead twin brother, a sickly child born of a famous actress and the Spanish viceroy, and a rascally, subdued old man who had trained the actress. The theme of love is explored from many levels--each of which refines to a selfless love; symbolically each bridges the chasm between the mortal and the eternal.

Brother Juniper describes the Marquesa as a mother who smothered her daughter with an undisciplined love and who reaped the heartache of a rebellious daughter. The girl was harsh in her retaliation. The Marquesa, it seems to the reader, is guilty of hubris and suffers accordingly. The daughter, retaliates by marrying a Spanish nobleman and moving to Spain. Rex Burbank has pointed out that Wilder borrowed some of his material for this novel from La Carosse du Saint Sacrement by Prosper Mérimée. The "eclectic Mr. Wilder" freely admits that he further developed the characterization of the Marquesa by patterning her after the celebrated Madame Sévigne, who actually acquired a posthumous literary fame for her personal letters. Wilder's Marquesa eloquently pours out her heart in her letters to her daughter in an effort to ease the frustrations of estrangement. A pathetic portrait of the Marquesa emerges from the evidence of Brother Juniper. Left alone, the old lady finally seeks a companion from the convent and engages the services of a young orphan girl, Pepita, who unselfishly leaves her happy home in the convent with the Abbess, whom she adores. Through Pepita,

the Marquesa finally realizes the nature of selfless love and, consequently, experiences a kind of spiritual atonement before she and Pepita plunge to their deaths in the collapse of the bridge.

The third victim upon whom Wilder directs our attention is Estaban. Wilder admitted he had a special interest in the twins of this novel. He said, "I was an identical twin, my brother having died at the age of two hours. That left me very attentive to twinship."[6] The twins of The Bridge, Manuel and Esteban, are discovered one morning at the door of the Convent of Santa Maria de las Rosas. The sisters rear them as their own children and the Abbess becomes quite close to them. Through the years the boys develop a deep dependence upon each other and they move to the city of Lima to find employment through a series of odd jobs, but particularly as copyists. Their services are engaged to write letters, copy plays for the theatre, and to prepare legal documents. Although both boys had known women sexually, neither had experienced love until they met La Perichole, the famous actress. "Both brothers had possessed women, and often, especially during their years at the waterfront; but simply, latinly. . . ."[7] They had been so dependent on each other that they were able to communicate through mental

[6]Quoted in Paul Friedman, "The Bridge: A Study in Symbolism," Psychoanalytic Quarterly, XXI (January 1952), 72.

[7]Wilder, The Bridge, p. 70.

telepathy, a secret language. "This language was the symbol of their profound identity with one another. . . . And yet side by side with this there existed a need of one another so terrible that it produced miracles as naturally as the charged air of a sultry day produces lightning."[8]

The dramatic conflict between the brothers develops as Manuel falls in love with La Perichole. There is little indication that the famous Limean actress returns Manuel's love, as she is the mistress of the Viceroy. But Manuel experiences a higher level of love, above the mere promptings of nature. Still, she is cynical about love and tells him it is only in the theater one finds such things! Manuel, however, rises to a further plateau of love, as he manages to give her up to ease the isolation his twin, Esteban, is feeling. Helmut Papajewski, the noted German critic, has noted the strong theme of isolation apparent in the novel: "Of the five people who lost their lives in the bridge's collapse, not one grew up in a normal parental home. . . . Isolation is a favorite theme of Wilder's which he never relinquishes. With striking frequency one or another of his characters laments, 'I am alone.' The consciousness of personality and thereby of the greatest possible knowledge of identity is accompanied by the painful experience of solitude."[9]

[8]Ibid., pp. 66-67.

[9]Helmut Papjewski, Thornton Wilder (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), p. 20.

One evening Manuel cuts his knee and a serious infection results. In his feverish pain Manuel reveals that he holds Esteban responsible for shattering his hope for love with La Perichole. A few days later Manuel dies and Esteban refuses to enter the house. The Abbess is sent for to appeal to him and when she asks him which twin he is, he tells her he is Manuel, as he tries to submerge his own personality as an act of penance. The stage is set for the introduction of a Captain Alvarado, who has also lost a loved one (his daughter) in death. The Abbess persuades Captain Alvarado to offer Esteban a job on his ship. But Esteban cannot cope with his grief and he attempts suicide. The Captain saves him and pleads with him to accept the death of Manuel and to reconcile himself to life without his brother, but Esteban cannot. He symbolizes the courage of man at the mercy of circumstance, for he finally agrees to accompany the Captain on his ship. At the bridge, Captain Alvarado descends the mountain for supplies while Esteban starts across the bridge. He never reaches the other side.

In Part Four of the novel Wilder leads the reader into the world of the theater, which has always proved a source of intrigue for the author. His references to the classical Spanish theater set the backdrop for the brilliant characters of Uncle Pio and La Perichole. The Marquesa describes him in one of her letters to her daughter: "My dear, Uncle Pio is the most delightful man in the world, your husband

excepted. . . . If he weren't so disreputable, I should make him my secretary. Alas, however, he is so moth-eaten by disease and bad company, that I shall have to leave him to his underworld. He is not only like an ant, he is like a soiled pack of cards. . . . But what divine Spanish he speaks and what exquisite things he says in it. That's what one gets by hanging around a theater and hearing nothing but the conversation of Calderon."[10] Successful in the theater, in politics and in commerce, Uncle Pio enjoys financial success. He can afford to indulge his three great loves: he desires independence, always to be near beautiful women, and to share the company of those who love beautiful Spanish literature. Endowed with the gifts of an entrepreneur, Uncle Pio comes to Lima because of personal misfortunes in Spain. He discovers a young actress, Camila, and determines to play Pygmalion with her. He loves her, without profound passion, and through years of patient efforts helps her develop into a great actress. He watches her dally through several love affairs, including a long affair with the Viceroy for whom she bears three children. Selfish and decadent, Camila grows tired of Uncle Pio and rids herself of his guidance. Misfortune claims her as a victim of smallpox and La Perichole suffers physical disfigurement through the scarring effects of the pox. She withdraws from the world of the theater and Uncle Pio comes to her asking

[10] Wilder, The Bridge, p. 108.

permission to take her son, Don Jaime, a sensitive child back to Lima for an education worthy of his aristocratic position. Both Uncle Pio and Don Jaime perish with the other three on the fateful Bridge of San Luis Rey.

Along with the five major characters, the Abbess and Camila assume importance in this novel. The Abbess loses two "children" in the fall, Pepita and Esteban. Camila loses her son, as well as Uncle Pio. Wilder's first chapter is entitled "Perhaps an Accident" while the last chapter is "Perhaps an Intention." Between the two "perhaps" lies the test-tube evidence of Brother Juniper. His efforts to rank theology with the exact sciences are useless. His completed work is judged heretical by the Church and Brother Juniper is burned at the stake. Wilder uses irony in this instance as Brother Juniper is burned by the Church for attempting to make faith easier for his people. But his effort to understand the great "Why?" of life is more than the mind can grasp.

The tragedy at the bridge did not end with the deaths of the five victims. Brother Juniper discovers that the Abbess learns to accept tragedy through her work caring for the sick, the infirm, and the dying. She is like Chrysis of <u>The Woman of Andros</u>, Wilder's symbolic character of selfless love. Another who finds a similar kind of understanding is the Marquesa's daughter, Dona Clara, who seeks out the Abbess to assuage her guilt. The Abbess consoles Dona Clara: "All,

all of us have failed. One wishes to be punished. One is willing to assume all kinds of penance, but do you know, my daughter, that in love--I scarcely dare say it--but in love our very mistakes don't seem to be able to last long?"[11] The abbess learns a value for selfless love from the children, Pepita and Don Jaime. One does not force love; love is a gift, not a commodity.

In a letter to Paul Friedman, Wilder states: "The recurrent pattern of the book is 'unrequited love.' I was not fully aware of it at the time."[12] Each had offered love and had been rejected: the Marquesa loved her daughter, Pepita adored the Abbess, Esteban loved his twin, Uncle Pio loved La Perichole, and Don Jaime longed for his mother's love. The organic unity of Wilder's narrative is apparent in the symbolic loves, unrequited and finally refined through suffering. In that same letter to Friedman, Wilder made these observations concerning his novel: "Though there are several historical characters in The Bridge of San Luis Rey, the accident of the bridge breaking was entirely of my own invention. (Certain travel agencies, however, now take tourists to see the very site!) . . . At the close, I use the bridge as a connection to a 'meaning of life,' i.e., via love. Only one reader in a thousand notices that I have asserted a denial of the survival of identity after death."[13]

[11]Ibid., pp. 176-177.

[12]Friedman, p. 72.

[13]Ibid.

The Bridge is not a religious work in the orthodox sense; its religious significance lies in its message of the meaning of love for man with his fellow man. Wilder will not speak for God. Wilder speaks for man. He develops the theme of human imperfection and presents the viewpoint that suffering is an essential mark of human existence. Tragic circumstance causes suffering and sorrow, and death is the inevitable fate of man. Reason cannot explain this to the satisfaction of mankind. Metaphysical questions remain a mystery to man no matter how long he puzzles and questions the meaning. In his introduction to The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Wilder describes Brother Juniper's diligent efforts to probe the mysteries, and then Wilder adds, "And I who claim to know so much more, isn't it possible that even I have missed the very spring within the spring?"[14]

Yet Wilder offers an affirmative point of view--despair is not the answer; acceptance of suffering and death is necessary to human existence. Like Hawthorne he believes that suffering is necessary for spiritual growth. The metaphysical foundation in his work has a kind of transcendental basis in that Wilder uses descriptions of nature where a human being has to make a decision. For example, shortly before the five victims reach the bridge they behold the stars. Wilder contrasts the eternal order of nature with the transcient state of man. The humanism of Wilder's belief

[14]Wilder, Bridge, p. 10.

is expressed through his powerful suggestion that the source of love is God. Wilder affirmed the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis on the occasion of a theater performance of one of his plays: "We come from a world where we have known incredible standards of excellence, and we dimly remember beauties which we have not seized again; and we go back to that world."[15] Human and humanistic thoughts provide the wistful quality of "déjà vu" which I indicated earlier in this paper. If God cannot be explained to man, perhaps man can be explained to man. Wilder focuses the reader's attention on an enlarged vision of mankind, and he is not embittered by Brother Juniper's failure to make theology an exact science. The holy mystery is a mystery and Wilder encompasses it all in his word "perhaps." The "magic unity" is a mysterious synthesis of circumstance and the "spring within the spring."

There is no "perhaps" in the last sentence of the novel. Wilder's commitment to love, the theme of the selfless heart, is the foundation for the bridge that will endure. "But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning."[16]

[15]E. K. Brown, p. 87.

[16]Wilder, Bridge, p. 180.

Chapter III

Three Novels: Human Worth

In one way or another, all of Wilder's literary works deal with love and religion. His solution to the problem of life is a Christian solution, based on humanistic ethics, as I pointed out earlier in this paper. As a conscientious craftsman, Wilder has grown steadily in strength and taste. His novels reflect his mature vision, in which he examines truths of human behavior evidenced by the cyclical patterns of man and civilizations. This section of my paper will be devoted to an analysis of three of his novels from the standpoint of the larger theme of human worth. By this term, I mean man's relationship to man, how he meets his problems and conflicts with others in a manner to give meaning to his personal existence, as well as to society. Wilder's concern with human worth is directly related to his philosophic vision. In an effort to achieve a better understanding of the human condition, Wilder probes the lives of the ancients for comparable meaning to twentieth-century man: "After I'd graduated from college I was sent to Europe to study archaeology. One day our class in Rome was taken out into the country to dig up a bit of the Etruscan world, a street. Once thousands of persons walked it. The rut was very deep. Those who have uncovered such a spot are never the same again."[1] Thornton Wilder was never the same again. His

[1]Wilder, "Joyce and the Modern Novel," pp. 13-14.

curiosity about human beings was elevated to a feeling of awe, as a result of his actual experience of digging in the clay of the ancient Etruscan civilization. Like Janus, Wilder has one face gazing into the past and the other face looking at the living civilizations of man, enabling him to view the human race in a time scale of centuries. Wilder is convinced that the rich heritage from the past provides meaningful lessons on the art of living.

An examination of these three novels, then, will be from the standpoint of the theme of human worth. The repetitive acts of human existence are repeated with dramatic variations in The Cabala (1926), The Ides of March (1948), and The Eighth Day (1967). The theme of human worth is contrasted in settings of twentieth-century Rome, Caesar's Rome in 45 B.C., and America in the twentieth century. Wilder's concern with the problems of freedom and choice is evident in these narratives, as he presents several views authentically. He neither scorns nor adores the common man; rather, he accepts him for what he is. As I have indicated earlier, Wilder's viewpoint is an affirmative one in which he voices hope for all, as well as for the individual. But he does not bury his head in the sands of time to ignore the anguish of man's existence; rather, Wilder grapples with the littleness and the loneliness of human nature to arrive at a significant understanding. The purpose of this chapter will be to examine the three novels from the standpoint of human

worth and to determine how the author structures his theme through myth and symbol. Variations on the theme of human worth are achieved through an artistic counterpoint of past and present. In 1924, Wilder told André Maurois: "'In the whole of the world's literature there are only seven or eight great subjects. By the time of Euripides they had all been dealt with already, and all one can do is to pick them up again. . . . There is nothing new that a writer can hope to bring except a certain way of looking at live.'"[2]

My second purpose in this chapter will be concerned with the experimental techniques Wilder uses in these novels. As I observed in his other novels, Wilder is relying on the use of myth or the historical past to serve as a foundation for his narratives, suiting the fable to the idea. Through a consideration of the experimental techniques Wilder uses, one can observe the development of his craftsmanship.

At this point I feel it is necessary to review a segment of Wilder's personal life to provide a better understanding of the changes which can be observed in his philosophical viewpoint. Wilder was close to forty-five years of age when Europe went to war in 1939, and after America's declaration of war, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps Intelligence, a position for which his knowledge of languages and experience in travel abroad were excellent qualifications. In addition to his sense of fulfilling a moral obligation for

[2]André Maurois, A Private Universe, tr. Hamish Miles (New York, 1932), p. 39.

his country, Wilder believed that he military experience would prove helpful to him as a literary artist: "One of the benefits of military service is being thrown into contact with non-artists, something a young American writer should consciously seek--his acquaintance should include those who have read only Treasure Island and have forgotten that."[3] Wilder served the Air Corps in both North Africa and Italy, where he earned the Bronze Star and the Legion of Merit. His wartime experiences greatly influenced his writing, particularly as he had made the acquaintance of Jean-Paul Sartre, and had been intellectually stimulated by Sartre's views on existentialism. It is important to recognize that Wilder could not accept the atheistic implications of Sartre's philosophy, but the commitment to life, the demand upon the human spirit to engage itself to circumstance, was in accord with Wilder's own pattern of thought and action. In his post-war novels one can detect overtones of existentialism, but a Christian existentialism closer to that of Sören Kierkegaard. For Wilder, the religious hero is the person who is most intimately related with his everyday existence. In his later novels Wilder pays more attention to humanity and less to religion per se. But the faith is apparent by implication. These three novels emphasize Wilder's constant theme--the eternity of human values.

[3]Goldstone, p. 103.

A. The Cabala

Chronologically, this is the first of Thornton Wilder's novels, published in 1926. The Cabala is a gallery of portraits of five principal members of an ultraconservative clique exercising its power in Rome in the 1920's. This novel provides us with a rich example of Wilder's use of myth as symbol. The romantic re-creation of mythical characters is seen as modern incarnations of Jupiter (Cardinal Vaini), Demeter (Miss Grier), Pan (Marcantonio), Venus and Adonis (Alix and Blair), and Mercury (the narrator). Although The Cabala was written as a pattern novel, many critics find its pattern motif a severe handicap. Yet, from the standpoint of character development this is a remarkable first novel.

Critics recognize the influence on Wilder's novel of Proust and Henry James, who had gone beyond literary realism to a more subjective art based upon intuition. Certainly, the "eclectic Mr. Wilder" was well-acquainted with the literary works of his contemporaries, as well as with those of the ancients. I suggest the influence of Henry James can be seen in the general plot in which a young American cultural pilgrim goes to Europe. But the biographical footnote is there as well, as the young author studied in Europe; the novel is dedicated "To my friends at the American Academy in Rome, 1920-1921." The episodic structure deals with the young American's naïve involvement with highly cultivated

people; Wilder's narrator, Samuele, serves as the interlocutor and the confidant of the principal characters who reveal the sources of their moral conflicts. The classical past of mythical gods serves to penetrate the inner world of the characters' motives and desires. Wilder provides an ironic twist, however, to the well-worked theme of the American abroad, in that Wilder's narrator has a different concept of European culture from that of the Jamesian hero. For Wilder's American gains a new appreciation of the potential of growth in American culture. Although he is impressed by the European tradition, he is not overwhelmed by it. At the conclusion of the novel, the narrator recognizes the need to bring the best of the old tradition to bear on the new. The theme of human worth is didactically declared by the admonition from Virgil, a spirit from the Past, who tells the young American, "The secret is to make a city, not to rest in it. When you have found one, drink in the illusion that she too is eternal."[4] Samuele realizes the past is dead and that his responsibility is to the present, to the future and to America. Wilder makes it clear in this first novel that the young country of America has a vital responsibility to the future of mankind. It is a concept which he explores at greater length in a later novel, The Eighth Day.

The lack of narrative action is one of the weaknesses of this first novel, but the pungency of its social criticism

[4]Thornton Wilder, The Cabala (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1928), p. 229.

reveals Wilder's early interest in the human condition. Rex Burbank has pointed out the two dialectically developed conflicts in The Cabala: a historical conflict between past and present, and a moral conflict between the modernistic spirit of rationalism and the humanistic spirit of the past.[5] Wilder's attempts to weave together the conflicts between past and present and between traditional moral values and the rationalism of the modernistic spirit are only partly successful. The historical theme is not adequately developed, and the sudden shift from fantasy to explicit statement reduces the effectiveness of the irony. Yet, from the standpoint of character development, this is a remarkable first novel. The dialogue between the Cabalists and Samuele authentically develops the moral conflict between the past and the present.

In establishing his motif Wilder introduces two young Americans on their way to Rome. The narrator is unnamed, although later in the novel he is given a nickname, Samuele; his companion is James Blair who is assigned to an archaeological study for a Hollywood studio. Samuele is the principal character who provides the unifying element of the episodic structure. An introductory chapter and an epilogue frame the episodic chapters which take place in Rome within the span of one year. Wilder uses the same technique in The Bridge of San Luis Rey and Heaven's My Destination,

[5]Burbank, p. 37.

which show the development of his craftsmanship. The Cabala links the various episodes in a contrived fashion compared to the unified structure of his later novels.

Samuele's traveling companion, Blair, initially describes the Cabala to the narrator: "Fierce intellectual snobs they are. . . . Each one of them has some prodigious gift, and together they're miles above the next social stratum below them. They're so wonderful that they're lonely. I quote. They sit off there in Tivoli getting what comfort they can out of each other's excellence."[6] The tone of the novel expresses awe for the intellectual superiority of this group, yet Wilder seems to suggest regret that the Cabalists cannot find more satisfying means of using their talents. Living in the past, the Cabalists are in constant conflict with the forces of modernism. The narrator who has come to Rome to study the "ancients" finds them incarnate in the Cabala. The five episodes serve to develop the moral themes and to show the impact of change on the social order of the Cabalists. Our narrator allows us to view the decay and the fall of their culture through the allegorical significance of the characters.

The theme of human worth is explored, then, through the narrator. Wilder carefully points out the limitations of Samuele, as well as those of the aristocratic Cabalists. Although the young American has come to Rome to study ancient history, he loses interest in formal study as the year

[6]Wilder, Cabala, p. 11.

progresses. Like the Cabalists, Samuele is quite satisfied with his own taste and smugly pleased with his general knowledge of the arts. By demonstrating similarities of interests and knowledge, Samuele is able to win their confidence, and consequently, each pours out his story to the rapt listener.

On their first evening in Rome, Blair takes Samuele to call on a young English poet who is dying of consumption. Wilder clearly parallels the identity of the poet with Keats, who died in just such quarters a century before. Samuele offers to bring him some books and unfortunately makes a poignant blunder: "Here I offered to bring in Homer in the original and stammer out an improvised translation. Oh, I should like that most of all, he cried. I know Chapman's well. I replied, unthinking, that Chapman's was scarcely Homer at all, and suddenly beheld a look of pain as of a mortal wound, appear upon his face. To regain control of himself he bit his finger and tried to smile. I hastened to add that in its way it was very beautiful, but I could not recall my cruelty; his heart seemed to have commenced bleeding within him."[7] Thus, Wilder literally translates into plot what the archaeologist finds, by exposing simultaneously several important layers in the history of Rome. John Keats lives alongside a Renaissance princess, yet the actual time

[7]Ibid., p. 46.

of the novel is set in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Wilder reveals his propensity for the past in using this experimental technique in his very first novel. Allusions to the downfall of Europe become explicit: "Europe is dying. . . . All the voices of nature kept repeating: Europe is Dying."[8] Wilder uses the picture of the decadent decline of Europe to pose the question as to the kind of social order twentieth-century man is making for himself. This is his means of projecting his theme of human worth into the narrative for the reader's consideration.

The three central sections of the novel, which follow Samuele's interview with the dying poet, present each of the Cabalists as gross parodies of human behavior. In each case, Samuele responds to a plea for help, only to find that his inherent Puritanism has rendered him too insensitive to counsel those reared in another tradition. The Romans are too complex to be understood by the näive American. The first confidant is Marcantonio, the youngest son of an impoverished aristocratic lady. Marcantonio is afflicted with an intense hatred of women and he delights in degrading them sexually; his moral corruption is an inevitable result of the decline of the aristocratic order into religious and political impotence. The boy's mother, the Duchess d'Aquilenera, asks Samuele to counsel the boy, whose sex orgies are becoming a Roman scandal. She is not concerned with the immorality of his actions, as her primary goal is to divert

[8]Ibid., p. 179.

Marcantonio from debauchery until she can arrange a suitable aristocratic marriage. Cardinal Vaini is summoned to talk with the boy, and Samuele is shocked to learn that the Cardinal no longer believes in moral behavior. When Samuele accuses the Cardinal of not really believing in temperance, the Cardinal reveals the decline of the traditional values:

> Believe in it. Of course I do. Am I not a priest? Then why make the boy . . . ?
> But after all, we are in the world.
> I laughed. I shouted with a laughter that would have been insulting, if it hadn't contained a touch of hysteria. Oh, I thank thee, dear Father Vaini, I said to myself. I thank thee for that word. How clear it makes all Italy, all Europe. Never try to do anything against the bent of human nature. I came from a colony guided by exactly the opposite principle.[9]

Cardinal Vaini, this Prince of the Church, is one of the strongest characters in the novel, as he serves as a focal point for the Cabalists' views towards religion. Old and wise, he is tolerant of the excesses of his friends and hopeful that they will ultimately gain self-knowledge in order to cope with the problems of human existence. To the American Puritan, Samuele, Cardinal Vaini's attitudes seem decadent. The moral decay that leads to Marcantonio's death is directly related to the decline of religion faith. Samuele forces the boy to realize that he has fallen so deeply into lust that his mind is disintegrating. Shocked by Samuele's Puritannical tirade, Marcantonio reacts violently. In a fit of rage, he makes a sexual conquest of his own

[9]Ibid., pp. 86-87.

half-sister; then, overcome by shame, he commits suicide. The tragedy of the young nobleman is that he has no firm moral and religious code by which to discipline his passionate nature. Wilder suggests that his death, like the death of the mythical Pan, marks the end of an historical era, as he is the only male heir of the Cabalists. Wilder's theme of human worth is woven into the narrative; the intense symbolic structure provides a complex network of forces, inner and outer, to develop the theme of a decadent society bent upon destroying itself.

The second episode introduces Alix d'Espoli, the charming French lady, wife of an Italian prince. Wilder suggests that Alix is representative of the seventeenth-century aristocracy. It is her misfortune to meet and to fall in love with the young American, Blair. Her profound need for love is never satisfied, and her sensitive nature is damaged by the cold intellectualism of Blair. The tension of this episode is between sensibility and intellect, but the intended tension between the past and the present is unsatisfactory, as the historical theme is not adequately developed.

Samuele observes the death of the old aristocratic order (as symbolized by Marcantonio); the clinical probings of scholarship without the humanistic spirit (his fellow American, Blair); the impotence of the humane sensibility (Alix); and the decline of the old Augustinian faith (the Cardinal) in a Church that has lost touch with life. The

novel ends with a brief epilogue which signifies the moral of the allegory; the reincarnations of the Olympian gods have lost their strength. Wilder directs his criticism at the twentieth-century rationalism which has devitalized the Church, as well as at the decadent Cabala. Samuele, caught up in the spell of the gods, boards a ship for America and invokes the spirit of Virgil, who counsels him to give of himself with intense devotion to the new city of the present age. Wilder's theme on human worth is a recognition of the best of the old tradition which can be applied to the new order in a spirit of confidence. Wilder makes an indictment against a static and predetermined society which can offer no hope for the future. As cultures and civilizations repeat themselves in the cyclical framework of man's existence, those who continue, be they gods or men, must evolve new approaches to establish meaningful existence. "The secret is to make a city, not to rest in it."

B. The Ides of March

There is an interval of twenty-two years between Wilder's first novel and the publication of The Ides of March. During this time Wilder was enjoying extraordinary success from his experimentalist plays, as the critics and public alike hailed Our Town and Skin of Our Teeth. The innovative techniques in these dramas deal with allegory and a departure from traditional staging in an attempt to draw

the audience into the drama. Wilder adapts experimentalist techniques to the genre of the novel as well. The structure of The Ides of March, ostensibly a collection of documents, shows Wilder's respect for scholarship, as the narrative is told through a complex arrangement of letters, diary entries and journal notes. It is in this novel that one observes Wilder's most ambitious image of the ancient world. He gives one a sense of a living Rome and a living Caesar, although he admittedly takes liberties with literal, factual matters and with time sequence. Through the adroit device of imaginary letters and documents, Wilder depicts a complex Caesar. Wilder asks his readers not so much "'to believe me as to "play the game" with me.'"[10] Shakespeare and Shaw had previously asked that the reader play the same game. Wilder does a remarkable job in persuading the reader that it is all happening for the first time. Even though the conclusion is apparent, the odds seem favorable for Caesar.

Edmund Fuller has compared this characterization to Shaw's: "This Julius' closest relative is Shaw's--that is, as idealizations of a point of view. . . . These Caesars have in common a detached, deliberative calm. Yet, Shaw's Caesar is a one-dimensional cartoon, withal brilliant, while Wilder's is complexly human with the special dimensions of genius."[11] This is a valid appraisal, in my opinion, as

[10]Quoted in The World's Best, ed. Whit Burnett (New York: Dial Press, 1950), p. 105.

[11]Fuller, p. 216.

Wilder has depicted a Caesar who is governed in part by the metaphysical and ethical necessity which his public demands, yet he, himself, chooses to accept isolation and a total commitment to action. The real essence of his tragedy is his excess in isolation and responsibility, which detaches him from the aristocracy and generates their hostility.

It is my intention to show Wilder's aim to affirm the presence of God within the existential framework of The Ides of March. As I indicated earlier in this paper, Wilder was influenced by Sartre. Although he does not accept the atheistic implications of Sartre's philosophy, Wilder does agree with the existential view of man's isolation, anguish, and commitment. Sartre declares that among the major tenets of existentialism are the propositions that existence precedes essence, that man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself, that he is responsible for all his fellowmen, that he is condemned to be free, that there is no reality of morality except in commitment to action, and that there are no a priori values. Therefore, the "moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art"; for man, like the artist, is forced to create his own moral world.[12] Although Wilder's hero, Caesar, embodies the Sartrean hero in these aspects, he suffers a measure of doubt concerning the existence of God. Through his characterization of Caesar, Wilder presents a Christian existential point of view, closer to that of Kierkegaard.

[12]Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, tr. with and Introduction by Philip Mairet (London: Mathuen and Co., Ltd., 1949), pp. 70-83.

The novel is divided into four sections made up of documents which are organized by theme and time; each succeeding chapter is linked to the previous one by relating successive misfortunes of Caesar, foreshadowing the final disaster of March fifteenth. The first chapter begins with a report by the College of Augurs concerning the behavior of the birds of prophecy, and it ends with Caesar's epileptic seizure after the first assassination attempt. The second chapter begins with a letter from Servilia to Pompeia about the expected arrival of Cleopatra, and it ends with the discovery of Antony and Cleopatra in a romantic embrace. The third part begins with Caesar's letter to the College of the Vestal Virgins asking for purification of the rituals, and it ends with the profanation of the rites. This chapter deals with Caesar's divorce from Pompeia, because of her part in the profanation rituals. The final chapter opens with Servilia's letter to Brutus asking for his return to Rome, and it closes with the assassination. Each succeeding chapter tends to heighten a feeling of foreboding in the reader.

It is necessary to examine the dual vision provided by Wilder, in order to prove his view of Christian existentialism. Wilder is suggesting that the people of Rome have a direct relationship with human destiny. As the reader knows Caesar's fate in advance, attention is focused on its causes. This is a similar technique to that which Wilder uses in The Bridge of San Luis Rey which compels one to carefully

examine details of character and action in order to determine the reasons for the disaster. The reader is allowed to share Caesar's inner thoughts, as well as to participate in the external events of the last months of his life.

Wilder clearly affirms his belief in God by use of an artistic device, a quotation from Goethe's Faust, which he uses to introduce his novel: "The shudder of awe is humanity's highest faculty / Even though this world is forever altering its values. . . ." In the gloss following the quotation, Wilder explains his interpretation of the lines: "Out of man's recognition in fear and awe that there is an Unknowable comes all that is best in the exploration of his mind,--even though that recognition is often misled into superstition, enslavement, and over-confidence."[13] If Wilder and Caesar had not that belief in the Unknowable, skeptical though this belief might appear, there would be no need for the "exploration" of the mind. As Wilder explores the mind of Caesar, the reader feels that Wilder is exploring his own mind as well. The easy answers which Wilder expounded in The Woman, The Bridge, and Heaven's My Destination are no longer appropriate. Wilder has not only developed his literary craftsmanship through the years; he has expanded his philosophical concepts, as well. The fears of Caesar concerning the Mind are the fears of twentieth-century man,

[13]Thornton Wilder, The Ides of March (New York: Harper, 1948), p. vi.

as well, in his search for the Unknowable. Caesar's searching and hoping are the same attempts that have been tried for centuries. Wilder's novel indicates, I suggest, that tragedy comes to those who are afraid to search. This is his statement on human worth.

Each of the four chapters reveals Caesar in times of crisis, as he meditates on religion, power, love and destiny. His thoughts are determined, in part, by his contemporaries. In essence, Caesar's questions center on the problem of transcending the demands of his position, in order to achieve personal satisfaction from life. He writes to his beloved aunt, Julia Marcia: "You talk of the past. I do not let my thoughts dwell on it for long. All of it, all of it, seems of a beauty that I shall not see again. . . . Can other men weave past joy into their thoughts in the present and their plans for the future? Perhaps only the poets can; they alone use all of themselves in every moment of their work."[14]

Book One, which concentrates on events of September 45 B.C., gives the reader an intimate look at Caesar through his thoughts expressed in his letters. A kind of dialogue of action is provided by the letters between such correspondents as Brutus and Servilia, Clodia and Catullus, and Caesar and Cleopatra. Governmental actions mentioned in Book One are the establishment of public libraries, the shifting of the

[14]Ibid., p. 20.

course of the Tiber, and revisions of the penal code. Yet Caesar is not satisfied; he is plagued with inner doubts. He questions the existence of the gods and is ready to abandon state religion altogether in an effort to strengthen the belief of the people that he, Caesar, is the center of the universe. He writes to his friend, Lucius Mamilius Turrinus: "I must be certain in no corner of my being there lingers the recognition that there is a possibility of a mind in and behind the universe which influences our minds and shapes our actions."[15] The poet, Catullus, delivers an impromptu version of the legend of Alcestis, that it is impossible to distinguish between the spirit of the gods and the spirit of man. The chapter ends with a description of Caesar suffering an epileptic seizure, a physical collapse which for him is a kind of ecstacy.

Contrasted to Cleopatra in Book Two are two other women: Clodia Pulcer, the "Lesbia" of Catullus's poems, and Cytheris, the mistress of Mark Antony. A vivid portrait of of Clodia is drawn by Wilder, who reveals her keen intelligence and her hatred of humanity. Clodia, as a child, has been violated by her uncle; as an adult, she develops a destructive frenzy by which she torments not only the poet, but Caesar as well, whom she envies for his self-possession. Both Clodia and Caesar are skeptical and dissatisfied, but Clodia cannot control her passionate nature.

[15]Ibid., p. 38.

Wilder has sharply delineated the characters of the women in this novel. It is the women who make the greatest impact upon the life of Rome and upon Caesar. Cytheris, the greatest actress of her time, provides a contrast in personality, as she is content with the present and has control of her emotions. Servilia, the mother of Brutus, exerts a strong influence over her son. Wilder has drawn a keen portrait of woman determined to retaliate against a lover who has rejected her. Servilia cannot forget that Caesar once loved her, and that as a token of his love he has given her a present of an extraordinary rose-colored pearl, which she continues to wear. Wilder brings up the question of Brutus' unknown father. Was it Caesar? He hints at this possibility through the strong affection Caesar has for Brutus. Motivated by her feeling of refjection, Servilia writes the letter to Brutus which incites the idea of resistance to Caesar.

The notorious Clodia Pulcher incites Claudius, her brother, to profane the rites, and she inspires Catullus' great lyrics to "Lesbia," which affect Caesar so deeply that he proclaims great poetry as one of the real mysteries of life. This chapter deals as well with Caesar's divorce from Pompeia because of her part in the profanation of the mysteries.

The appearance and the status of Cleopatra cause the question of religion to become a topic of conversation. Much of her correspondence is devoted to her claim to divine

origin. As Caesar, himself, is threatened with deification, he ponders her dramatic claims and disagrees with her. He does not think of exploiting this sort of godlike feeling politically, as he writes: "Nothing seems to me to be more dangerous--not only for us rulers, but for those who gaze upon us with varying degrees of adoration--than this ascription of divine attributes."[16] In Caesar's opinion, the gods and demi-gods are mere ancestors who were finally deified by the reverence of posterity.

Caesar's skeptical attitude is apparent in the first document, in which he expresses his opinion to the College of Augurs: "I have inherited this burden of superstition and nonsense. I govern innumerable men but must acknowledge that I am governed by birds and thunderclaps."[17] Caesar views the College of Augurs as a hindrance to the affairs of state, as well as an intellectual vexation. Privately, Caesar reflects what would happen if he abolished superstition and closed all temples except those of Capitoline Jove, thus introducing monotheism into the Roman world. He recalls Homer's ancient idea that God pours out from his urns his good and evil gifts, but this does not fill the world entirely, as circumstance exists. Caesar believes that divinity exerts no influence on circumstance and begins to approach the belief

[16]Ibid., p. 134.

[17]Ibid., p. 14.

that there is no mind behind our existence. Only then does man's role seem to possess the great tragic dignity: "How terrifying and glorious the role of man if, indeed, without guidance and without consolation he must create from his own vitals the meaning for his existence and writes the rules whereby he lives."[18] It is not cowardice or fear that holds Caesar back from total negation of religion. He is not certain about the world's being divested of myth, as he recalls Cicero's political maxim that the absence of a state religion would leave the field open to superstition in clandestine and perverted forms. The ultimate uncertainty that prevents Caesar from abolishing religion is revealed in his own admission: " . . . It was something in and of myself. In myself I was not certain that I was certain."[19] Caesar grapples with the idea of the Unknowable, yet he is unable to make a final statement about the absence of any mind behind our existence. Caesar recognizes a power and a mystery present in the realms of poetry, love, and his epilepsy. Although his epilepsy may be simply a physical disorder, during his seizures he envisions a fair harmony of the world. The paradox of these experiences troubles him with their implications of mystery. Through actions which spring from the lowest in his nature, Caesar has observed or felt the

[18]Ibid., p. 30.

[19]Ibid. p. 38.

highest human experiences. Through this characterization of Caesar, Wilder projects the Platonic doctrine of duality in man's nature.

The Third Book deals with the destructive effect of Clodia's hatred on the religious sphere of Roman life. Her long-planned profanation of the Mysteries of the Good Goddess are successfully executed. A second disaster of significance is the death of Catullus, whose Roman poetry has achieved recognition. The reader sees Clodia driving Catullus to the point of collapse, which renders him vulnerable to a fatal disease. Deprived of the power to love deeply, Clodia delights in making Catullus miserable, reserving her greatest affection for her brother, Clodius, with whom she is reported to have had incestuous relations. It is Clodia Pulcher who exerts the destructive forces against Caesar.

Book Three presents Caesar's thoughts on religion and the welfare of the state, similar to those discussed in Book One. Many of his letters are directed to Lucius Mamilius Turrinius, an extraordinarily gifted man. Turrinus, a friend of Caesar from boyhood, has suffered mutilation and blinding at the hands of the Gauls, and is living in seclusion in Capri. Only Cytheris, Caesar, and Julia Marcia are the confidants of the noble Turrinus. This extremely sensitive man, although bed-ridden for many years, is the confidante and adviser to Caesar. The old questions concerning the value of superstition to the Romans are bothering Caesar,

and he doubts the wisdom of permitting a ritual to exist which is noted for its immorality and obscenity. In his journal entry for Turrinus, Caesar justifies his decision to recommend changes. In the midst of these exchanges in the discussion of God and man, word is brought to Caesar that Catullus is quite sick. Caesar rushes to his bedside, but the poet is dying.

Book Four brings together all the topics on which Caesar speculates in the first three books and presents a summation of his thought in the few months before his death. Caesar's feeling for Brutus is reviewed and the reader recognizes that Caesar considers Brutus to be a strong asset to the state. He offers a praetorship to Brutus and also writes of his hope that Brutus will be his successor. The catastrophe is brought about as Brutus, who represents the younger generation, actively intervenes. Caesar admits in his journal his own feelings on the plots against his life. Convinced that he will be assassinated, he expresses the wish that his death may be at the hands of a patriot and not at the hands of a madman. The last entry in the book is one of the few genuine items included. Wilder ends the novel with a quotation from Suetonius' account of the death of Caesar. The reader is left with only the historical record.

The tone of the novel reflects Wilder's admiration for his hero, as one can detect that the author plots the action document by document and carefully reshapes history to

deepen the tragedy. Wilder's Caesar is a counterpart of the man of faith; where the man of faith is troubled with doubt, Caesar's disbelief is troubled by uncertainty of the existence of God. His ethical convictions, that man is compelled to be free and that life has no meaning save that which we confer upon it, reflect his existential viewpoint. Although Caesar is quite sure that man is alone in a universe that does not know he exists, he is not certain, and he refrains from issuing an edict he has written abolishing religion.

Wilder's statement on human worth has a new dimension in this novel, as he incorporates aspects of existentialism into his Christian Humanist viewpoint. Wilder maintains the position that ethics have to be defined in an exclusively human context, rather than by a prescribed set of rules and doctrines. This view is implicit in The Bridge, The Woman of Andros, and Heaven's My Destination, where he maintains that any meaning that life is to have will have to come from the individuals themselves, and that a meaningful existence is possible through commitment to love with responsibility to other human beings. Wilder is careful to point out that any meaningful prescription for human conduct has to be grounded in experience rather than a priori philosophical concepts. The new dimention apparent in Wilder's outlook is apparent in his characterization of Caesar, who is the embodiment of the Sartrean hero.

The philosophical framework of The Ides of March is

grounded in the lives, both inner and outer, of the characters. The thematic tensions that spring from the conflicts in Caesar's mind grow between him and his antagonists. These conflicts deal with the larger theme of human worth, as they concern choices between belief and disbelief, tyranny and benevolence, freedom and responsibility. While Caesar embodies the free man in existential terms, he is hampered by his capacity as a Roman leader. The preoccupation of the existentialists with anguish is never absent from the character of Caesar in the novel. His commitment to a course of action on behalf of the state leads him to constant frustration and sorrow. He is accustomed to being hated and recognizes that the course of his life is perilous; still he does not shrink from "engagement." In a letter to Lucius Mamilius Turrinus, Caesar writes:

> Already in early youth I discovered that I did not require the good opinion of other men, even of the best, to confirm me in my actions. . . . I hold that we cannot be said to be aware of our minds save under responsibility and that no greater danger could befall mine than that it should reflect an effort to incur the approval of any man, be it a Brutus or a Cato. I must arrive at my decisions as though they were not subject to the comment of other men, as though no one were watching.[10]

There is a tragic nobility about Wilder's Caesar as he takes the path of most resistance, knowing life only by living it, as he proceeds toward the fatal day in March, as determined to measure life by experience as the Orestes of

[10]Wilder, Ides, p. 34.

Sartre's Les Mouches. The complexity of Wilder's vision and the intricacy of the documentary structure place The Ides of March well above his other four novels. It reflects Wilder's growth in craftsmanship and character development, as well as adding a new dimension to his philosophical viewpoint. Wilder's picture of the human everyday life of antiquity emphasizes the polarity of human existence, as antiquity has here become the background for feeling that is very much a part of modern life. As in his previous novels, Wilder reveals the bridge between the past and the present in his affirmative vision of human values, of human worth.

C. The Eighth Day

According to all accounts, Wilder worked a long time on his latest novel, The Eighth Day, which was published in 1967, twenty years after his Ides of March. The title seems enigmatic and provocative, but Wilder explains it in the Prologue. In the religious tradition, the number seven has significance as the number of Biblical days of creation. The narrative begins at the turn of the century, December 31, 1899, at a New Year's Eve party in Coaltown, Illinois. The town physician, Dr. Gillies, toasts the New Year:

> Nature never sleeps. The process of life never stands still. The creation has not come to an end. The Bible says that God created man on the sixth day and rested, but each of those days was many million of years long. That day of rest must have been a short one. Man is not an end but

> a beginning. We are children of the eighth day. . . . In this new century we shall be able to see that mankind is entering a new stage of development--the Man of the Eighth Day.[1]

Dr. Gillies proceeds to give his dramatic account of the process of evolution and to predict a glorious future for the human race. Through the omnisicient voice of the narrator, Wilder comments, ironically: "Dr. Gillies was lying for all he was worth. He had no doubt that the coming century would be too direful to contemplate. . . . Dr. Gillies had no faith in progress, in the future of mankind."[2] The Prologue offers more than a kind of humorous ideological introduction. It also suggests a hint of the fable itself, namely, the murder of Breckenridge Lansing in the American mining village of Coaltown, Illinois. The strange beginning wins the reader by its use of humor and irony.

This new novel has once again an American theme. Although The Eighth Day is set at the turn of the twentieth century, Wilder enlarges on that time more fully than he has is any of his other works. Wilder's use of a unique time technique allows the reader to move forward and into the past, which contributes to a feeling of vastness for the plan of the novel. Wilder comments on America as the hope for the future of the world and, thus, reiterates much of

[1]Thornton Wilder, The Eighth Day (New York, Evanston and London, 1967), pp. 16-17.

[2]Ibid., p. 18.

the spirit of Virgil who admonishes Samuele in The Cabala to "seek out some city that is young."[3] There is a conviction expressed that the children of this century--"the children of the eighth day"--were created for some purpose. In a style reminiscent of Faulkner and Joyce, Wilder moves his characters as pawns to various points of time and geography so that his narrative may develop naturally, rather than chronologically.

The novel begins with a factual statement similar to the one with which Wilder had begun The Bridge of San Luis Rey. "In the early summer of 1902, John Barrington Ashley of Coaltown, a small mining center in southern Illinois, was tried for murder of Breckenridge Lansing, also of Coaltown."[4] The story which unfolds from this rather journalistic account is much more complex than the introductory sentence suggests. The conviction of Ashley, his sentence, and the mysterious escape from the train carrying him to his execution set the stage for this unusual narrative. Six sections of the book follow the prologue, which introduces the reader to the members of the Ashley family: John, the accused; his wife, Beata; and their four children, Roger, Lily, Sophia, and Constance. Early in the novel, the omniscient voice of the narrator assures the reader that Ashley has been falsely accused and convicted. The narrative deals with the mystery

[3]Wilder, Cabala, p. 229.

[4]Wilder, Eighth Day, p. 3.

of Breckenridge Lansing's murder and the strange rescue of his convicted murderer, John Ashley. Coaltown is the diametrical opposite of the ideology of progress. The local mining industry has dissipated into a dreary, unprofitable state. Through flashbacks we delve into the history of the two families.

This latest novel of Wilder's encompasses many of the techniques, repetitive patterns and characters of his earlier works, with the same moral vision. Yet something new has been added, as I suggested, in the scope of his philosophical belief. This is a family novel in which Wilder examines the individuals, as well as the group, through the device of the dual vision he used in his earlier novels. Wilder is making a statement on human worth related to the twentieth-century American family. There are evidences of naturalism in this novel, as early in the narrative, Wilder expends considerable effort to establish the conviction that human beings are made up of the qualities which they acquire from their heredity and environment. He does not choose between these two forces, but recognizes the mutual significance of each. The children of John and Beata Ashley are the composites of their ancestors, as well as their parents. The adult life of each child is traced in the novel to reveal the effects of these forces in his life. His statement on human worth unfolds as the narrative progresses; each member of the family makes a significant contribution to this statement. Wilder reveals that

the remarkable children of John and Beata are going to help bring about changes in the world.

The first chapter deals with the rehabilitation and the life of the Ashley family, after the father's conviction and flight. Their home, The Elms, has been turned into a boardinghouse. The reader has an opportunity to become acquainted with each member of the family, and to view their struggle for existence as they are left without means of financial support.

In the second chapter the mystery story receives some illumination, as the early life of the fugitive Ashley is traced in retrospect. The reader learns that as a young man Ashley had lost his Christian faith. Wilder makes the pertinent observation that Ashley's newly gained atheistic position only committed him to a "more abject superstition."[5] The remarkable development of Ashley's character is based on re-awakening of faith, which he acquires through his suffering. Wilder's hero, John Ashley, has some of the same existential qualities of the character of Caesar in The Ides of March. Both men experience a keen sense of isolation, of anguish; both determine that man is "nothing else but that which he makes of himself"; and each protagonist feels a responsibility for his fellowmen, a commitment to action.

[5]Ibid., p. 146.

Wilder clearly defines Ashley's temperament in his description of the man, as a fugitive, during his stay in New Orleans: "Ashley was a man of faith and did not know it. . . . Men of faith and men of genius have this in common: they know (observe and remember) many things they are not conscious of knowing. They are attentive to relationships, recurrences, patterns and 'laws.' There is no impurity in this operation of their minds--neither self-advancement nor pride nor self-justification."[6] The man of faith, by Wilder's characterization is committed to the active life and is granted a clarity of vision.

John Ashley is able to establish rapport with his new environment, the remote setting of a mining settlement in Chile. The necessity of Ashley's adapting himself as an "outcast" in a strange environment leads Wilder to employ his old "identification" schema, in which the recurrent types appear. Through the prototype of literary tradition, Ashley, the "family man" is the father buffeted by fate, an Odysseus. Wilder tells the story of Ashley's flight from the character's point of view, and the reader discovers that Ashley knows no more of his deliverers than anyone else. He only knows that a group of men overpower his guards on the train and effect his escape.

The aphoristic style is apparent in this latest novel, as Wilder insinuates his comments from time to time, through

[6]Ibid., p. 123.

the voice of the narrator: "Faith is an ever-widening pool of clarity, fed from springs beyond the margin of consciousness."[7] Juxtaposed to this epigrammatic statement is Wilder's suggestion that those who consciously demand clarity show a dry and narrow spirit.

The second chapter of the novel deals with the adjustments of Ashley's children to their fatherless home. Critics have pointed out that Wilder shows each of the daughters as a personification of one of the Christian graces. Sophia is characterized by hope, as Wilder says: "Hope (deep-grounded hope, not those sporadic cries and promptings wrung from us in extremity that more resemble despair) is a climate of the mind and an organ of apprehension."[8] Sophia is able to overcome the despair of her family through her childish enthusiasm and embodiment of hope. Later in the novel, Wilder reveals that hope alone is not enough to face the trials of human existence, for Sophia eventually breaks under her work load. She suffers a nervous breakdown, and then finally a total mental collapse in which she is able to pretend she is achieving her lifetime dream of nursing others.

A second daughter, Lily, is a beautiful young girl endowed with a compelling voice, who dreams of becoming a great concert singer. Lily is moved by a deep faith in

[7]Ibid., p. 124.

[8]Ibid., p. 57.

herself and in her future, which Wilder attributes to her heredity: "Lily had her mother's beauty and her mother's freedom from any trace of provincialism or vulgarity; but above that she had her father's inner quiet, his at-homeness in existence. This was the voice of faith, selfless faith."[9] Lily does not always find personal happiness, but she does acquire the training and find the opportunities to achieve the fame she aspires to; in time she becomes internationally acclaimed.

Constance, the youngest child of the family, is the personification of the third grace, love. After the disappearance of her father, Constance is sheltered from the gossip of the townspeople by keeping her at home, apart from people. This proves to be a misfortune for the child, as she later confides in her brother, Roger, that one of the four things she wants most in the world is to know hundreds and thousands of people everywhere. In her maturity, Constance fulfills this need as she moves into social work. Among her many causes are "Votes for Women," "Rights of Married Women," "Supervision of Prostitution," and "Eye Clinics for Children." She achieves international acclaim through her social work. It is interesting to note here that Wilder seems to have predicted the social reforms worked by Americans of the '70's, as he traces the work of Constance in these various aspects. One might say that

[9]Ibid., p. 85.

Wilder, himself, proves to be a man of great faith as he reveals a clarity and farness of vision. In the first two chapters of this novel, then, we see evidences of a new dimension of Wilder's work in his careful consideration of the effects of environment and heredity on the individual. Wilder's concern with the strength of the individual's will to overcome the weaknesses of his background, as well as his ability to utilize his natural attributes, is manifested in the characterizations of the Ashley children.

Chapter two provides us with further details of the two families. The reader learns more about the murder victim, Breckenridge Lansing, and of his family. Lansing is characterized as a smooth-talking, idea-filled, young American destined for success. A native of Crystal Lake, Iowa, Lansing goes to the island of St. Kitts in the Caribbean to work, and during his stay he meets a beautiful girl, Eustacia Sims, with who he falls in love. He persuades her to marry him and to return to the United States to live. Although Lansing presents a forceful first impression, Eustacia learns too late that the kind of life she has had described through word pictures is not a reality. In Coaltown where Lansing eventually comes to represent the mining company's interests, their children are born. They have a son, George, and two daughters, Félicité and Anne. The son is a quiet boy who is pressured by his father into being the All-American type of son. Each failure which

George experiences deepens his intense hatred of his father. George turns to the sensitive Ashley for reassurance.

Breckenridge Lansing suffers an emotional illness which precipitates his family into a state of fear. The mother, Eustacia, persuades her son to leave home and he boards the train on Saturday before the fatal accident. The next afternoon the Ashleys are invited to the Lansing home so that John and Breck may practice their marksmanship with rifles. During that practice session Lansing is mysteriously killed. It is in the final section, "Coaltown, Illinois," that Wilder answers all of the pertinent questions.

The two men, Ashley and Lansing, are poles apart in every aspect of their personalities, and Wilder provides a dramatic study in contrasts. Goldstone points out that they are a representation of the Dionysian and Apollonian spirits.[10] Ashley is representative of the "American head of the family who quietly, almost unknowingly, assumed moral leadership in every community from Maine to Oregon during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth."[11] In contrast, Breckenridge Lansing is presented as the other American, ". . . the breezy managing, careless, self-absorbed windbag, the one-of-the-boys who is tolerated in his managerial role because

[10]Richard H. Goldstone, "Wilder, Studying and Studies," Antioch Review, XXVII (Summer 1967), p. 166.

[11]Ibid.

he doesn't rock the boat, and secretly despised because of his ineffectuality, his vapidness, his below-surface brutality."[12] This dramatic contrast serves the further purpose, I suggest, of reinforcing Wilder's emphasis on the force of heredity in shaping man's existence.

Chapter three introduces two didactic scholars in Chile, Dr. MacKenzie from Scotland and a German professor. High up in the Andes Mountains, these two men pursue their studies of the history of the remote region. Wilder stresses, with a tone of irony, that the professors cannot achieve an adequately detached view of the world, as they are lacking in broadness of vision. In contrast to their pedantic activities, Wilder presents Ashley, who is committed to a personal sense of responsibility to others. He brings to the mining people a renewed hope and faith in themselves, as he initiates improvements in the mines. Further, he persuades the mining company to build a chapel and bring a priest to the region. Although Ashley does not practice formal religion, the villagers assume that he is a man of God and prevail on him to pray over a deceased infant, as they have no priest. Knowing no Catholic prayers, Ashley solemnly combines lines from the Gettysburg Address, "The Village Blacksmith," and part of Portia's speech "The quality of mercy is not strained." This is not done in a mocking manner but in deep piety, for Ashley senses the

[12]Ibid., p. 267.

profound need of these people for their faith. The influence of Ashley continues to be exerted throughout the novel, and through his isolation, his anguish, and his commitment to others, Ashley experiences meaning in his life. The existential overtones are present in this latest novel of Thornton Wilder. Through his alienation from his family, Ashley exemplifies the dual principle of existentialist "anguish" and "freedom." He expresses the suffering of the disillusioned man who is aware of the absurdity of the universe, in which he tries to maintain a sense of self. His freedom is self-made, and he relies on no one's opinion. Yet, at the same time, he does "engage" himself to humanity, to social action.

Chapters four and five offer Wilder the opportunity for flashback into the history of the two families. This section shows Beata's immigrant background. Her parents are Dutch and German and have settled in a Dutch section of Hoboken. Following his graduation from college, Ashley and Beata leave town together determined to be married. Ashley is of English and French descent, so their children represent the melting pot of American nationalities. Earlier in the novel Wilder has hinted that these two never married, and now he clarifies this point. "John and Beata were never married. There was no time for it then, and a suitable occasion never presented itself. John happened to have found a bride as independent of tribal forms as himself."[13]

[13]Wilder, Eighth Day, p. 300.

All the family ties are severed, and both families renounce the young couple. Wilder uses this section to show that the qualities of the Ashley children are composite natures from their hereditary strain. Also, Wilder pictures the unfolding of a truly American character--one which emerges from the willingness to wrench oneself from the traditional values to move into a new way of life.

The adolescent struggles and early problems of adult life are effectively traced in the lives of the two sons, George Lansing and Roger Ashley. The characters in Wilder's novel are looking for answers to the old problems of faith, hope, love, art, duty and the submission to one's fate. They reveal in their actions the courage and ingenuity which can accompany adversity and, in this sense, reflect the hope of the children of "the eighth day." Motivated by inner sources of strength and purpose, they emerge as real people. In constructing his novel, Wilder makes a typological comparison of the two family groups. Beata Ashley, the German girl, is called a "child of the ear," while Eustacia Lansing is the "child of the eye." Sound and color respectively govern the two women in their conduct and their forms of expression. The interaction of their lives with their children's lives affords Wilder the opportunity to relate the effects of heredity, as well as of environment, to human endeavor.

The Epilogue rounds out his narrative, unifies the

structure and encompasses Wilder's moral vision. The Lansing and Ashley families are united through the marriage of Roger and Félicité. Through flashbacks we learn that Breckenridge Lansing had a kind of assassination complex, and that he was the object of scorn and fear by his family. His power complex caused him to treat his wife and children with contempt. We also learn more about the real murderer, his son, George, who committed the act of patricide to prevent something worse from happening. The ending is a curious combination of questions and answers. Wilder does not make a definitive statement, but the tone of optimism is there for the reader. The last word, some, stands alone, leaving the reader poised in reflective thought. Wilder uses the metaphor of the tapestry of life in relating the historical threads of the family of man:

> History is one tapestry. No eye can venture to compass more than a hand's breadth. . . . There is much talk of a design in the arras. Some are certain they see it. Some see what they have been told to see. Some remember that they saw it once but have lost it. Some are strengthened by seeing a pattern wherein the oppressed and exploited of the earth are gradually emerging from their bondage. Some find strength in the conviction that there is nothing to see.[14]

Life is not made up of many designs and motifs, but one "tapestry" which began with the creation and continues to unfold. Each individual contributes a small part to the larger design of the tapestry of man's history. Although

[14]Ibid., p. 435.

some people claim to see a design, others do not. Nevertheless, Wilder suggests, the influences of the countless numbers of people can be seen in the ultimate design.

Wilder's statement on human worth in this novel embraces the family of man, as well as the children of "the eighth day." This novel protrays Wilder's greatest panorama of characters, many of whom are similar to characters in earlier works. Dr. Gillies, for instance, has the skepticism of Brother Juniper and reflects a similar scientific spirit of inquiry. The responsibilities for the improvement of the twentieth century are grave ones.

A second character, Constance, has her prototype in previous novels as the figure who represents the highest level of love in the care of other human beings. This embodiment of the virtue of Christian charity can be observed in the Andrian woman, Chrysis, who administers to the sick, the old, and the outcasts of society in the same manner as the Abbess of The Bridge of San Luis Rey. In this fashion Wilder reiterates one of the most important attributes of human worth, charity (love), as exemplified by these characters in his novels. John Ashley embodies this quality, as well, as he makes a new life for himself in the remote Andean Mountains of Chile. His concern for the uneducated and the oppressed people of the mining community is translated into action.

A second important value in Wilder's statement on human worth is the need for faith in man's life. One of the most

interesting anecdotes in the novel is related to Ashley's son, Roger, by an aging Archbishop. The old man tells of a group of Christian missionaries imprisoned in China; each man was placed in a separate cell and allowed no communication with others. Through the long years of imprisonment, these people maintained their hope and faith through the ingenious plan of a Bishop who started tapping out the letters of the alphabet on the wall of his cell. Messages of hope and love and courage and faith were passed back and forth to each other through this slow and tedious process. The amazing part of the Archbishop's story was the fact that when other people were placed in intervening cells, people who did not know the language being used managed to pass the message on. Roger relates the anecdote to life and realizes that perhaps his own parents are like that man--passing on hope and faith that possibly could never mean anything to them. The Archbishop says: "Life is surrounded by mysteries beyond the comprehension of our limited minds. We transmit (we hope) fairer things than we can fully grasp."[15] Wilder's philosophy reflects the Christian humanism apparent in his earlier novels; still he has added the dimension of existentialism through his characterizations of John Ashley, who represents the man of faith, exiled, suffering the anguish of isolation, yet establishing a new meaning for his life through a sense of responsibility to others. Through this

[15]Ibid., p. 250.

commitment, founded on his personal experience, Ashley emerges as the twentieth-century existential hero of the novel.

Hope for the future is expressed in Wilder's vision, and at the same time, he expresses a firm conviction in the sense of purpose and design evident in the tapestry of the history of mankind. The pattern of the repetition of life is such an obvious theme, as it is in his other novels, yet the reader is impressed with the refinement of his craftsmanship in determining the best uses of it in The Eighth Day. The reference to the tapestry motif in a generalized way threads its way throughout the novel to the specific use of it at the conclusion. Wilder shows us that a design exists, that the influences of countless numbers of people exert changes in the pattern of the design. In his message of hope for the children of the "eighth day," Wilder suggests that there is a purpose. Sometimes it has been an almost hidden message, but Wilder's conviction of a purpose is revealed at the close of the novel. Ashley's son, Roger, is speaking with an older man, a Deacon of a small Covenant Church in Coaltown. Together the two examine a small rug, which the Deacon has asked Roger to turn over:

> No figure could be traced on the reverse. It presented a mass of knots and of frayed and dangling threads. With a gesture of the hand the Deacon directed Roger to replace it. "You are a newspaperman in Chicago. Your sister is a singer there. Your mother conducts a boardinghouse in Coaltown. Your father is in some distant country. Those are the threads

> and knots of human life. You cannot see the design." . . . "It is said that on the ocean every ninth wave is larger than the others. . . . So on the sea of human lives one wave in many hundreds of thousands rises, gathers together the strength--the power--of many souls to bear a Messiah. . . . Can it be that this country is singled out for so high a destiny--God's ways are mysterious.[16]

Wilder suggests that America has been put on the earth with a mission to improve the world. The young people are the children of the "eighth day" who will find the way to bring this about.

As I pointed out earlier in this paper, Wilder has a profound sense of the significance of myth. In this novel, the reader can observe his use of myth as symbol in the Odysseus figure of the wandering father, Ashley. The children of the "eighth day" provide another use of myth for Wilder, the myth of the future. Although The Eighth Day was not published until 1967, Wilder indicated that he was working on it much earlier. At that time he declared his interest in the "American" subject. In a speech delivered in Germany in 1957, Wilder said:

> Culture in a democracy has its dangers --but also a duty and a promise.
>
> Through it a new, tremendous theme opens up, which must be described, deeply thought out, expressed and explored: Man with his head up.
>
> This attitude and this expectation can be confusing as the works of literature of the last years have shown us. They can even lead to despair.
>
> Democracy has a great duty: to create new

[16] Ibid., pp. 430-431.

> myths, new metaphors, and new images and to show the new condition of dignity into which Man is entering.[17]

The children of the "eighth day" have a responsibility to the future, and Wilder confirms his belief that they will fulfill their part in the tapestry of history through faith, hope and charity.

[17]Haberman, pp. 124-125.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

In the introduction it is stated that the intent of this thesis is to analyze the six novels of Thornton Wilder from the standpoint of theme and symbol through his technique of dual vision. Artistically, Wilder achieves this by revealing the inner man, his spiritual nature, and at the same time, the outer man, fulfilling his physical life. Fascinated by the cyclical structure of civilizations, he is able to relate the past to the present in a Janus-like vision, in which he has one gaze examining the past and the other looking into the future. There is a sense of the timeless and the universal in human affairs in the content of these six novels, each of which is concerned with the way man views his world and how he chooses to deal with the problems of human existence. On closer scrutiny his themes fuse into a single metaphysical attitude, reflecting Wilder's statement that he is trying to describe "this magic unity of purpose and chance, of destiny and accident."[1] His study of man is presented in various settings from different points of view, but collectively, his six novels urge man to prevail over the perpetual uncertainty of his human condition by celebrating the constancy of the human apirit.

First of all, it is interesting to note Wilder's

[1]See above, p. 9.

significant treatment of time, in which one observes the essential quality of his artistic purpose. Through his skillful use of myth and allegory, he manages to combine all levels of time and space, relating the life of the mind to the life of the universe. Wilder expresses a deep conviction that the repetitive patterns of experience expressed through his use of myth validate his vision of the purpose of man's existence. He justifies his practice of the art of contaminatio by declaring its merits as serving his artistic purposes.

It has been pointed out that three of his novels are allegorical; their thematic structure is similar in that each envisions a larger picture of mankind, while relating the narrative. As many of the characters represent philosophical concepts, the analysis is from the metaphysical viewpoint, i.e., Wilder's cosmic view of the mystery of the apparent design of the universe. The anguish of the individual experience is the focal point for Wilder to project his Christian Humanism views. Each of the three novels voices the Platonic and Christian mysticism of Wilder's beliefs. Wilder's humanism is like classic Greek humanism, in that he recognizes the Platonic assumption of dualism in the nature of man, agrees with their concept of the ethical nature, and the value of art and literature to society. Above all, Wilder's humanism emphasizes the dignity of man when he acts in accord with the Aristotelian principle of

moderation and rejects dogmas, absolutes, and extremes of passion. Wilder's vision reveals, also, that the tragic flaw of man's nature, hubris, results in suffering.

Chrysis, in The Woman of Andros, symbolizes the religious propensities of classical Greek humanism and embodies the Platonic ideal of love. The setting for this novel is a beautiful Aegean island in pre-Christian Greece. Chrysis serves as a prototype of a familiar character-type found in many of Wilder's novels, as she represents the human being who has struggled to a higher plateau of spiritual understanding through her suffering and, consequently, finds love through service to others. Her counterpart, the Abbess (Madre Maria), in The Bridge of San Luis Rey, finds her salvation through the care of the sick and the homeless. One identifies this same type of character in Constance, a child of The Eighth Day, who dedicates her life to the service of others through her social work.

An interesting contrast in setting and style is presented in Heaven's My Destination, an amusing, provocative novel set in the Bible Belt of the United States in the early 1930's. This contrast in setting and style reflects Wilder's interest in experimental literary techniques, as he uses a plain, descriptive prose, free of the aphoristic device, to satirize the hero, George Brush, and society. Yet, Wilder is able to achieve a kind of dual vision in which he affirms the same values of The Woman of Andros.

Both novels deal with human beings grappling with metaphysical problems; Wilder's diagnosis of the human condition is concerned with the moral aspect, the inner needs. The dual vision provided by Wilder's portrait of George Brush being purged of his worst elements of ignorance and narrowness can be related to the larger perspective of the emergence of America from its scarring depression and its "awkward age." The great chasm between the humanistic ideal as Wilder conceives it and the state of American life in the 1930's is not bridged in this novel. Wilder seems to suggest that America can reach meaningful maturity through faith based upon humanistic ethics.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, one can observe the development of Wilder's craftsmanship. The thematic structure, brilliant characterizations, and romance of the symbolism merge the past with the present in an artistic triumph. Again, in this novel Wilder shows his concern for the universal questions of design and chance in man's existence. Wilder's optimism is apparent in his suggestion that there is an eternal mysticism of the soul which cannot be articulated, yet it survives all else. At the close of the novel, Madre Maria speaks to Dona Clara:

> "Even now," she thought, "almost no one remembers Esteban and Pepita, but myself. Camila alone remembers her Uncle Pio and her son; this woman, her mother. But soon we shall die and all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ouselves shall be

> loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning."[2]

It is interesting to observe the changes in Wilder's philosophical viewpoint, as well as the development of his craftsmanship in a comparison of his other three novels. An added dimension to his philosophical outlook is apparent in his post-war novels, The Ides of March and The Eighth Day. As a result of Wilder's personal experiences in World War II and of his acquaintance with Jean-Paul Sartre, he acquired a profound interest in the philosophy of existentialism.

Wilder's very first novel, The Cabala, was published in 1926. This narrative is an interesting combination of myth and symbol, in which the romantic reincarnation of gods and goddesses occurs in an early twentieth-century Roman setting. Although the episodic structure of this narrative lacks the polished style of his later works, it is a remarkable first novel from the standpoint of characterization and theme. The narrator, a young American, views the traditions and culture of Europe through the eyes of a powerful, ultraconservative clique, the Cabala. Living in the past, the Cabalists are in constant opposition with the forces of modernism. Wilder uses his allegory to depict the decadence

[2]Wilder, Bridge, p. 180.

and apathy of the declining European aristocracy, which, in turn, is reflected in the decline of its culture. Through the admonition of Virgil, the young American is advised: "The secret is to make a city, not to rest in it."[3] Thus, Wilder emphasizes the need for America to recognize her responsibility to build for the future. This concept is developed more fully in his later work, The Eighth Day.

As indicated earlier in this paper, the post-war novels reflect a new dimension in Wilder's philosophical viewpoint. There are overtones of existentialism in the later novels which reveal Wilder's beliefs that man finds the meaning of life through his own experience and that, through isolation and resultant anguish, one determines his commitment to his fellowmen. Wilder explains this in an interview with Robert Van Gelder:

> On returning from the war, I took up a theme which I had already partially developed before the war. I spent almost a year on it, only to find that my basic ideas about the human situation had undergone a drastic change. I was not able to define the change myself until the writings of Kierkegaard were called to my attention by my theologian brother. All my life I have passed from enthusiasm to enthusiasm and gratitude to gratitude. "The Ides of March," (sic) my new novel, can be said to be written under the sign of Kierkegaard.[4]

Although the impact of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy had a profound influence on Wilder's outlook, Wilder was not

[3] See above, p. 56 .

[4] Robert Van Gelder, "Interview with a Best-Selling Author: Thornton Wilder," Cosmopolitan, CXXIV (April 1948), p. 122.

able to accept the atheistic implications. Therefore, as Wilder, himself, expresses, his existential outlook is closer to that of Kierkegaard, in his affirmation of God.

The doubts which beset Caesar in The Ides of March are not the denials of many of the existentialists. Although Wilder intimates a strong feeling of skepticism, he, nevertheless, indicates a belief in the "Unknowable," through his portrait of Caesar. Caesar's ethical conviction that life has no meaning save that which one confers upon it parallels that of the modern existentialists. But Caesar has some doubts; although he is quite sure that life is meaningless, he is not certain. Caesar is constrained from issuing an edict he has written abolishing religion because an element of doubt remains in his mind. As I indicated earlier in this paper, Caesar is thus a counterpart of the man of faith; where the believer's faith is troubled by doubt, Caesar's disbelief is troubled by uncertainty. Caesar recognizes the power of mysterious forces in his life, e.g., love, epilepsy, and his position as ruler of the Roman Empire. It is in this respect that Wilder's existentialism is closer to that of Kierkegaard's than to Sartre's. The Ides provides us with a digression from Wilder's usual style, as it is an epistolary novel, comprised of imaginary letters and documents of Julius Caesar. Wilder's characterization of Caesar is a beautiful example of the existential hero who suffers the anguish of isolation and of doubt in his struggle to

determine a meaning for his existence, and who finds this meaning in his commitment to his fellowmen. The reader feels that as Wilder explores the mind of Caesar, Wilder is exploring his own mind. The easy answers to the complexity of life as they were expounded in The Woman, The Bridge, and The Cabala are no longer appropriate. Still, existentialism, particularly Kierkegaard's conception of it, does not destroy Wilder's belief in the hope for the future of mankind. Caesar's searching and hoping are the same attempts that have been tried for centuries. Man will continue to err, but as long as he continues his search for purpose in this life, he will survive and he will achieve. Wilder seems to be saying that the tragedy comes to those who are afraid to search. He substantiates this view in his essay on James Joyce:

> Though I realize that my joy or my grief is but "one" in the ocean of human life, nevertheless it has its reality. I know that the existential thing pouring up in me, my joy or my fear, is a real thing and yet the intensity with which I feel it can be called absurd. It is absurd to claim that "I," in the vast reaches of time and place and repetition, is worth an assertion. . . . The terrible thing is to live in our 20th century with 19th century mentality. To be "out of phase"--that's what is frightening. That's what starves and frightens and shipwrecks so many souls. The realizations of new dimensions and new obligations pour in on us from the world of science, but we would rather retreat into the accustomed and soothing.[5]

[5]Wilder, Joyce Miscellany, pp. 15, 19.

Wilder recognizes that 20th century man is faced with new dimensions in his world, as well as new obligations.

The theme of human worth, a keen examination of human values, is presented as a tapestry of history in his latest novel, The Eighth Day. A combination of the family novel and the mystery novel, this latest work pulls together all of his earlier motifs. Wilder's use of a unique time technique allows the reader to move backward and forward with equal grace in a study of twentieth-century America. In the novel, Wilder comments on America as the hope for the future of the world and in that statement reiterates the admonition of Virgil to Samuele in The Cabala. John Ashley, the father, is Wilder's second example of a twentieth-century hero who is, as well, a man of faith. Through the account of Ashley's isolation, anguish, and struggle for a meaning for his very existence, Wilder voices his affirmative views on the human condition. The remarkable Ashley family symbolizes a mixture of many races, many cultures, and many forces. In their reactions to the hardships of family life they are symbolic of the family of man. Wilder's use of dual vision is refined to a clear view of the larger perspective of mankind in relation to the smaller picture of the Ashley family. This novel contains Wilder's greatest panorama of characterizations, articulates the growth of his moral vision, and reflects the development of his craftsmanship as a writer.

In these novels, then, Thornton Wilder presents his views of man grappling with the problems of everyday existence, as well as with the metaphysical questions of destiny and chance. Early in his career Wilder wrote a letter to a friend in which he expressed his literary creed: "'It seems to me that my books are about: What is the worst thing that the world can do to you, and what are the last resources one has to oppose it? In other words: When a human being is made to bear more than human beings can bear, what then?'"[5] This type of approach is used, as well, by those who see little hope for man's future. The existentialism represented by Sartre and Camus fits this category, but one must recognize that Wilder's outlook does not incorporate the cynicism or hopelessness of Sartre or Camus. Rather, as indicated earlier in this paper, Wilder adds the dimension of Christian existentialism to his Christian Humanist viewpoint. His moral vision for mankind is refreshingly affirmative in these dire days of nuclear fission.

Critics have suggested that Wilder, more than any other novelist in the twentieth century, has accepted the charge given by William Faulkner in his Nobel Prize Address:

> Our tragedy today is a general and universal fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. . . . Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten

[5]Quoted in Edward Weeks, "The Atlantic Book-Shelf: A Guide to Good Books," Atlantic Monthly, CXLV (March 1930), 14.

> the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself. . . . He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed--love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. . . . He writes not of the heart but of the glands. . . . Until he relearns these things, he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man. . . . I decline to accept the end of man.[6]

Wilder has taken upon himself the task of revealing the heart of man in conflict with himself, and he reveals that heart in all its anguish. Wilder shares Faulkner's conviction that man will survive because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The souls of the characters in Wilder's novels are enduring: Chrysis, Madre Maria, Samuele, George Brush, Julius Caesar and John Ashley experience the capacity for compassion, sacrifice, and endurance. These people have an abiding faith in a purpose for their existence.

The bleakness and blackness of the twentieth century have frightened many writers into foretelling doom and destruction for mankind. While others have seen only the blackness of night, Wilder has raised his head to view the stars. The mystery of the purpose and design of man's existence is apparent for him in the order of the Universe. His vision is one of promise; his message is one of hope.

[6]William Faulkner, The Faulkner Reader (New York: (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 3-4.

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