AN ANALYSIS OF THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH:
A PLAY BY THORNTON WILDER

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most controversial plays of 1942 was The Skin of Our Teeth by Thornton Wilder. Acclaimed by some as the "best comedy, lampoon and meaningful play" and condemned by others as "the silliest nothing," it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the year 1943.¹

The Skin of Our Teeth will be remembered most frequently for the controversy it aroused among critics, scholars and audiences alike. On one side it was bombarded with attacks from scholars who claimed Wilder was trying to dupe the public; on the other it was praised as the work of a genius. The response of the general public was just as diverse as that of the professional theatre critic. Many bewildered and confused theatre goers walked out in the middle of the production.

For the second time in his career Thornton Wilder was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the outstanding play; and, for the second time in his career he caused the critics and theatre public to respond dynamically to the "Wilder type of theatre." Some years before The Skin of Our Teeth another Wilder play, Our Town, had caused the theatre public to re-evaluate the drama of the period.
The theatre of Thornton Wilder was unconventional—unrealistic. To a theatre steeped in the tradition of conventional realism it offered new scope. It re-awakened the imaginative artist to the innumerable possibilities the stage offers. John Gassner expresses the belief that with the emergence of *The Skin of Our Teeth* "...a halt is being called to retrogression in the theatre..."\(^2\)

The contributions of *The Skin of Our Teeth* were two-fold. It evoked spirit and enthusiasm evidenced by the controversy it aroused; and, it proved a play in the unconventional theatrical form could be a commercial as well as an artistic success. Judging from box office receipts and professional recognition *The Skin of Our Teeth* was both.

Joseph Wood Krutch poses the question: Why has Mr. Wilder been so triumphantly successful with a method which has so seldom gotten beyond the "interesting experiment stage?"\(^3\)

The particular success of *The Skin of Our Teeth* may be due to a number of factors not related in any way to the play itself. The play had the advantages of a well known and successful writer, a popular cast (Tallulah Bankhead, Frederic March and Florence Eldridge), a welcome theme at a time when the world was conscious of the terror and threatening disasters of war, and a large amount of publicity prompted by the differing opinions of the critics.
In addition to the innumerable variables effecting the success of a play, there is the ever present elusive quality which marks a work of art. To ascertain why one artist is successful with a particular method while another equally as competent fails is mostly a question of aesthetics and one which the author is neither prepared nor interested in answering at this time. To disregard the aesthetic appeal of a play does not, however, prohibit an evaluation of its dramatic effectiveness in terms of technique.

Although The Skin of Our Teeth is a success commercially and artistically, there is still reason to question its success as an example of unconventional drama. Sharply conflicting opinions of competent critics of comparable professional standing and ability call into question the dramatic perfection of The Skin of Our Teeth.

Lack of unity among the critics is not so important; they have disagreed before. It is the relatively equal distribution of opinion into diametrically opposed groups and the vehemence and determination with which each defends his position that prompts inquiry into the subject.

Why does criticism of the play inevitably fall into two such separate and distinct categories? Does the wide divergence of opinion reflect some fault within the play? Is there a weakness in structure, in theme or in the style
of production? Each of these elements is a vital and unchangeable part of the construction of The Skin of Our Teeth.

Prior to intensive study of the play, the following questions occurred to the author which will be used as a guide in the study:

1. Is there any single element of construction consistently referred to in the critics reports?

2. Is there a flaw in structure, style or theme or in their combination?

3. Is the circular structure of the play dramatic?

4. Does the treatment diminish the profundity of the theme?

5. What is the author's intent in The Skin of Our Teeth?

6. Does the author's intent intrude upon the dramatic effectiveness of the play?

7. Is the controversy the result of misunderstanding or lack of recognition of the author's intent?

Although all of the above question are to be considered, the main purpose of this study is to analyze the play and examine it for any weakness in structure; and, to determine the validity of Wilder's use of the unconventional style in the construction of The Skin of Our Teeth.

The critics reports will be used as a point of departure since their criticisms suggest a flaw in the play. The remainder of the study will be organized into an analysis of the play, consideration of the author's intent, and a summary and conclusions of the findings.
CHAPTER I

HISTORY AND CRITICISM OF THE PLAY

The Skin of Our Teeth was written 1940-1941. Jed Harris, the producer of another Wilder play--Our Town--acquired the manuscript and after several unsuccessful attempts to have the play produced, abandoned it. Early in 1942 the script went to Michael Myerberg. At least thirty-seven people refused financial support and Mr. Myerberg still owned seventy per cent of the show by the time it went into production.  

The Skin of Our Teeth had its pre-Broadway opening in October of 1942 at Hartford, Connecticut. It then played New Haven, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington and was greeted with the same uncertain and mixed responses that greeted it after its opening in New York.  

The play finally opened on Broadway on November 18, 1942 at the Plymouth Theatre. Frederic March and Florence Eldridge played Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus. Tallulah Bankhead appeared as Sabina. The rest of the cast included:

Announcer . . . . . . . Morton DaCosta
Mr. Fitzpatrick . . . . . E. G. Marshall
Dinosaur . . . . . . . . Remo Buffano
Mammouth . . . . . . . Andrew Rapousheff
Telegraph Boy . . . . . Dickie Van Patten
Gladys . . . . . . . . . Frances Heflin
Henry . . . . . . . . . Montgomery Clift
Doctor . . . . . . . . . Blair Davies
Professor . . . . . . . Ralph Kellard
Judge . . . . . . . . . . . Joseph Smiley
Homer . . . . . . . . . . . . Ralph Cullinan
Miss E Muse . . . . . . Edith Faversham
Miss T Muse . . . . . . Emily Lorraine
Miss M Muse . . . . . . Eva Midge Nelson
Usher . . . . . . . . . . . Stanley Prager
Usher . . . . . . . . . . . Harry Clark
Girl Drum Majorettes . . Elizabeth Scott
Girl . . . . . . . . . . . Patricia Riordan
Fortune Teller . . . . . Florence Reed
Chair Pusher . . . . . . Earl Sydonor
Chair Pusher . . . . . . Carroll Clark
Conveener . . . . . . . . Stanley Weede
Conveener . . . . . . . . Seuman Flynn
Conveener . . . . . . . . Aubrey Fassett
Conveener . . . . . . . . Stanley Prager
Conveener . . . . . . . . Harry Clark
Broadcast Official . . . Morton DaCosta
Defeated Candidate . . Joseph Smiley
Mr. Tremayne . . . . . Ralph Keillard
Hester . . . . . . . . . . . Eulabelle Moore
Ivy . . . . . . . . . . . Viole Dean
Fred Bailey . . . . . . Stanley Prager

The original production was directed by Elia Kazan. The settings were designed by Albert Johnson and the costumes by Mary Percy Schenck.6

In June of 1943, there were a number of replacements in the cast leaving Mr. March, Miss Eldridge and others free to go to new plays. In the more prominent roles, Miriam Hopkins replaced Miss Bankhead; Conrad Nagel stepped into the role of Mr. Antrobus; Viola Frayne took over for Florence Eldridge and Larry Hugo for Montgomery Clift.7

In the spring of 1943 when it came time for the awards to be given for the "best of Broadway" for that season, there was considerable controversy about which play would receive
which award. It was supposed that *The Skin of Our Teeth* would get the Critics' Circle Award and Sidney Kingsley's play, *The Patriots*, would receive the Pulitzer Prize. Therefore, when the announcement was made and the awards were the exact opposite of what was expected, there was a clamour of apologies and explanations emitting mostly from the critics. Wolcott Gibbs devoted an entire article to an apology for choosing *The Patriots* and reconsideration of *The Skin of Our Teeth* as a "possible good."8

It is supposed that part of the reason the critics refused Mr. Wilder their award was because of the controversy started by Joseph Cambell and Henry Morton Robinson. Cambell and Robinson questioned the originality of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. They claimed the play was "...an Americanized recreation, thinly disguised, of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*."9 Since *Finnegan's Wake* was unintelligible to all but some dozen scholars, the critics were left at bay and bowed to the logical and well documented arguments proposed by Robinson and Cambell.

In spite of charges of plagiarism, literary stuffiness and pedagogical clap-trap, *The Skin of Our Teeth* suffered no financial loss. It ran from November 18, 1942 to September 25, 1943.

After its success in New York, *The Skin of Our Teeth* went on to achieve international recognition. There are
numerous accounts of professional and semi-professional performances of the play in Italy, Switzerland, England and Germany. In each case the reactions to the play are as diverse as those to the New York production. This would suggest that the divergent responses to the play in America are not dependent on the particular American production but on a property of the play itself.

What property of the play is responsible for the disagreement? And does the wide divergence of opinion reflect some fault within the play? Analysis of the critics' reports will show whether any specific aspect of the play or its production was consistently criticized. Consistent criticism of a particular element of the production or of the structure of the play would suggest that these elements should be investigated as a possible source of the difficulty.

The New York critics who reviewed The Skin of Our Teeth immediately after its opening were fairly evenly divided in their response to the play. Wilella Waldorf,10 who was one of dissenters, says:

Mr. Wilder decided if Olsen and Johnson can get away with it so could he—with a dash of philosophy and lofty thinking.

She goes on to say the play was

...neither a profound nor particularly impressive drama.

It is merely a stunt show with everything tossed into it that the author could dream up.
Mr. Lewis Nichols\textsuperscript{11} of the New York Times strongly disagrees with Miss Waldorf for he believes that Wilder has "...written a comedy about man which is the best play the Forties have seen in many months, the best pure theatre." He comments further:

Mr. Wilder is no pedantic philosopher.../The play is/presented with pathos and broad comedy with gentle irony and sometimes a sly self-raillery.

Concerning the style of production Mr. Nichols thinks the informal settings are "a perfect cover to the play."

Brooks Atkinson\textsuperscript{12} of the Sunday New York Times supports Mr. Nichols' evaluation of the play. Says Mr. Atkinson, The Skin of Our Teeth is "...one of the wisest and friskiest comedies written in a long time." He feels the "inspired first act" compensates for the second act which is rather "static and labored." Acknowledging that some of the humor seems "a little pedagogical," he says, "What difference does that make? For The Skin of Our Teeth has its heart in the right place."

Critics of the professional and popular periodicals who had more time to consider their reactions to the play are no less diverse in their opinions.

James Vaughan\textsuperscript{13} of Commonweal magazine devotes most of his article to reviewing the theme of the play 'tongue in cheek'.

He concludes his commentary by stating:
The device, freely employed, of bringing the audience into the play need not destroy continuity of audience feeling. But the same technique fails in the present play because it is too overt, too garish, too sensational in the literal sense.

Euphemia Van Renaselaer Wyatt reviewed the play for Catholic World. Although in a later article Mrs. Wyatt claims: "Ever since 1942, I have been pretty certain Thornton Wilder had written the finest American play...", in the article here referred to she appears a little less certain of its greatness. She finds the style of the play unsatisfactory. "From the viewpoint of style it threatens to slip into the artificiality of an older French theatre." But she says it "...settles down to more solid fare than first meets the eye..." and is redeemed by "...a powerful lot of human nature and some deep chuckles."

Stark Young agrees with Mrs. Wyatt in her view that the theme is the redeeming feature of the play. Mr. Young, however, is a little more conservative in his estimation of the extent to which it atones for the style of the production. He says:

...serious motifs and more or less pathetic moments of the play itself are constantly being laughed at and snatched out of joint by a nicer derangement of theatre epitaphs than Mrs. Malaprop herself could have thought of.

Meanwhile a good many of these shake-ups, overturned devices and carefully naive bits of business and stage properties are fairly threadbare, and the humor of them is academic, if not collegiate even.
The reviewer for *Time* magazine goes one step further than any of the others in his condemnation of the play; he does not even find the theme a redeeming feature. States this critic:

The Skin of Our Teeth is a cockeyed and impudent vaudeville littered with asides and swarming with premeditated anachronism...

Wilder's jumbled résumé of man's history should mystify only those who worry their heads over hidden meanings instead of adjusting their imaginations to spectacular stagecraft... Provocative, unusual but often unsatisfying, *The Skin of Our Teeth* dolls up its theme rather than dramatizes it.17

One of the first critics to defend Wilder's choice of style for the production is John Gassner.18 Gassner says because of *The Skin of Our Teeth* "...a halt is being called to retrogression in the theatre." Praising the theme he says:

...orientation toward the whole of civilization affects every branch of theater...All of this is beautifully demonstrated by the most important play of the season thus far, Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*...This is a creative attempt to state a noble truism...

In defense of the style Mr. Gassner states:

Wilder has been waging a one-man war against realistic dramaturgy for a long time...His justification lies of course in the notion that there are many things that can be conveyed better by montage than by a straight photography, and that a little playfulness does not necessarily detract from the truth and significance of an artist's ideas and aims.
This last comment might very well be a retort to a statement by Brooks Atkinson. Atkinson says the theme "...would be profound if Mr. Wilder were writing didactically." 19

Joseph Wood Krutch, 20 agreeing with Gassner, attributes Wilder's success in conveying the theme to his ability to keep the whole play humorous and to make it "serious but never solemn." Applauding both the theme and style, Krutch claims:

Meyerhold and Piscator, putting their heads together in the late twenties, could hardly have done such violence to conventional dramatic form. And yet the whole wild project comes off with astonishing success.

He also says that the play is "more imaginative" and has a "less merely neurotic tone than most of the Russian or German experimenters."

The Skin of Our Teeth is "a giddy proof of the theatre's own imperishable vitality" says Rosamond Gilder 21 of Theater Arts. Miss Gilder believes the play achieves the "impossible by being sublimely ridiculous and keeping its fantasy pure and undefiled."

In Alexander Woolcott's 22 review The Skin of Our Teeth acquires the "stature...of Cyrano de Bergerac or Peer Gynt or The Cherry Orchard or Heartbreak House." Mr. Woolcott designates it a "war play." "Only those who had forgotten The Trojan Women would have thought it impossible that a
play could be at once so topical and so timeless."

Of Wilder and his use of style Woolcott says:

Here is a theatrical craftsman every bit as bold, as impatient, as ingenious, and as sovereign in his field as Frank Lloyd Wright is in the field of architecture.

...briskly shattering all those comfortably familiar conventions of the theater which would only be in his way.

Wolcott Gibbs\textsuperscript{23} disagrees with Woolcott's evaluation of the production style. Although he finds it "...by far the most interesting and exciting play I've seen this year," he feels the "...comic invention is being pushed just a little beyond its reasonable limits."

Many other reviews are available but, because of their general nature, are of no value in our particular study. For the most part they merely reiterate the plot, acknowledge acquaintance with the theme, and make ejaculatory comments either praising or condemning the play. For example: one reviewer thinks the play "...provocative and stimulating;"\textsuperscript{24} another finds "...the whole effect original and exciting..." and says "Its novelty was hugely enjoyed."\textsuperscript{25}

We have mentioned that fact that the divergent response to \textit{The Skin of Our Teeth} is not peculiar to the American production but is also evidenced on the continent and in England. This point is demonstrated in the reactions of Sewell Stokes\textsuperscript{26} and Henry Adler,\textsuperscript{27} British critics who saw the Laurence Olivier production.
Mr. Stokes says the production presented "a simple story in a complicated manner" and used a "technique and presentation unfamiliar to our stage." He feels "Laurence Olivier's production of this History of Mankind in Comic Strip is a success in London at the moment for one reason—Vivien Leigh."

He states further that he is thankful to Wilder for "stating ideas on survival in such incredibly dramatic terms." However he finds it hard to take the more "bizarre flights of fancy" because an English audience fails to "appreciate 'craziness', no matter how high the level reached."

Mr. Adler takes an opposite viewpoint in his evaluation of The Skin of Our Teeth. Adler says that although the play is "typically American," it exhibits "the primitive instincts of pre-history." Throughout the article Adler assiduously defends the theme and style of the production. He feels that each device is used for a purpose. It is not mere "flight of fancy" which prompts Wilder to employ tilting set and other theatrical devices. He says, for example, the device of actors stepping out of character does not destroy illusion, it heightens it. Rather than jolting the serious moments of the play out of place, Adler believes that by saying grave things lightly Wilder achieved an effect which was "by contrast starker."
Finally he says:

By demanding imagination in the theatre, he has shown how the drama may be freed from strict chronological sequence and the static scene to achieve a new agility and scope and poetry that celebrates the miracle of life.

Before concluding the chapter on the reactions to the play it should be noted that the critics were not the only members of the audience who took violent stands in their admiration or denunciation of the play. In the Stadium Theatre production at Ohio State University it was noted that every night, despite a full house at the beginning of the play, a number of seats were vacant at the end of the first act and even a greater number were empty at the end of the second.

A similar situation occurred during the Broadway run of the show. About one month after its opening a cab driver pointed out to Frederic March that his play, The Skin of Our Teeth, was losing a number of its audience every night. People were walking out in the middle of the show. Undisturbed, Mr. March replied:

Our play...either makes people so mad they want to throw bricks, or they love it. I think that's a good sign.28

Unfortunately it is impossible to survey the general audience and record their specific reactions to the play. However, it is significant that their response was so strong that it provoked positive action on their part.
Conclusions. Having examined the reports of the critics, we are now prepared to return to one of our original questions: Is there any single element consistently referred to in the critics' reports?

There are two elements mentioned in all of the reviews. These are theme and style. Reference to structure was made only twice, in Mr. Gassner's review and in Mr. Adler's analysis of the play.

In addition to the continual reference to theme and style, there is a uniformity of attitude toward these elements. Criticisms of The Skin of Our Teeth fall into two categories, rejection of the play or intense approval of the play; it is within these categories that the conforming attitudes predominate.

Enthusiasts of the play (with the exception of one or two border line cases such as Miss Wyatt) enjoyed both the theme and the manner of presentation. Reactions of the critics opposing the play are more diversified but, none the less, fall into a pattern.

The opposing group unanimously rejects the style of production. The same group, however, disagrees in its acceptance of the theme. Varying attitudes toward the theme defies specific classification but two general trends might be noted. These are: (1) The attitude that Wilder was attempting to be profound but was merely
pedagogical and, (2) the belief that the theme was profound but the comic devices and general style lessened its value and 'punch'.

Work in this chapter suggests theme and style as the stumbling blocks to a generally favorable reception of The Skin of Our Teeth. Therefore, analysis of the play with particular emphasis on these two elements will reveal any technical flaw in the construction.
CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

The *Skin of Our Teeth* is the story of man--Everyman--in the person of Mr. Antrobus and his struggle for survival. Its theme is the indestructability of the human race.

Ignoring chronological sequence and realistic representation, Thornton Wilder presents a resumé of the history of man's struggle with the natural, social and moral forces of the world. Within these forces he sees both the promise of man's survival and the threat of his destruction. Commenting on his relationship with these forces, Wilder says man will surmount the evil they contain because of his essential goodness. Because of his determination and faith, in spite of war, flood or famine, man's search for truth and perfection will continue.

Protected from final destruction by the guiding force of his own inherent goodness, throughout the play man repeatedly overcomes the obstacles that threaten his life and happiness. However, in the end, he discovers that it is not enough merely to possess "goodness"; he must recognize it and understand from whence it came.

Having survived the threat of destruction at the hand of nature and society, man is faced with the possibility of
self-annihilation through war. Previously guided by the fundamental goodness of his own being, he seems powerless in the face of this new threat; the enemy is Cain—man's son. The appearance of Cain, the force of evil—the unresolved element in man's nature, calls into question the fundamental goodness of man.

Confronted with the weakness of his own evil, man realizes he is not "sufficient unto himself." He recognizes the existence of a Good greater than himself and realizes that his own strength is but a reflection of that Good. This new awareness enables him to surmount the threat of self-annihilation and renews his strength and determination to "begin again." With his new found knowledge, man not only regains the spirit he thought he had lost but discovers a thing even more vital to his struggle for existence. He knows a little better why he must continue and he has found the source of his strength for the future.

Because of the evil in man's nature—original sin—man will never be completely free from the threat of disaster. But, because of his fundamental goodness and his new awareness of the power of Love, his struggles will probably be less difficult and his survival more assured.

Finally, The Skin of Our Teeth asserts Wilder's own intense belief that man, despite his "tragic background,"
is full of joy and excitement. It is unquestionably this belief that prompted Wilder to choose the comic form for his play.

"The Spirit of true comedy is a spirit of critical and witty rationality." It is concerned with man's entanglement in the meshes of society in contrast to tragedy in which the emphasis is on the "pathos and terror of man's lonely isolation." The difference between comedy and tragedy is in interpretation rather than subject matter. Comedy sees life as essentially agreeable while tragedy views it as a serious and not always too satisfying experience. Comedy assumes that there is a just and proper manner of behaviour and any deviation from the norm is the result of irrationality, misunderstanding or accident. The logical conclusion is, therefore, that to persist in action not in accord with the norm is folly and deserves its reward of absurdity.

Of the various forms, Social Comedy comes closest to the true comic spirit. This is so because the comedy takes precedence over the sentiment of the individual. It concentrates on the importance of the social structure and uses this structure as a point of reference to reveal the ridiculous incongruities in man's behavior.

In many respects The Skin of Our Teeth conforms to the pattern established in the Social Comedy. That is, the characters represent social types placed in situations which
reveal the absurdity of many of their actions. The entire play is designed as a gentle satire of the human. However, there is a basic difference in approach between the two. Social Comedy relies on the objectivity of reason and negates the validity of individual emotional consideration within the characters; in *The Skin of Our Teeth* Wilder takes into account the element of emotion without consistently criticizing it as foolish and ridiculous.

As many other writers have tried to do, Wilder attempts to compromise between the extremes of comedy and tragedy. Commenting on the essentially comic character of man's existence, he portrays him as a buffoon stumbling toward his objective, but, at the same time, shows him as a hero with the dignity, courage and intelligence which distinguishes man from the rest of creation.

Harold Walley points out that, although writers have endeavored for ages to find an intermediate type of drama in which to present both the seriousness of tragedy and the entertainment of comedy, no really successful method has yet been devised. The reason is psychologically sound one: no audience can be grave and gay at the same time without confusion. "Dramatic effect may be either amusing or profoundly moving but it cannot be both at the same time without ambiguity and consequent loss of force."31

The argument against compromising the techniques of
comedy and tragedy is certainly logical but its truth is not so readily determined. Like most questions involving an emotional reaction, the final answer depends on the subjective response of the individual. This is clearly illustrated in the reactions to The Skin of Our Teeth. Mr. Young says "...serious motifs...are constantly being laughed at and snatched out of joint..."32 On the other hand Henry Adler says, "Wilder says grave things lightly and the effect is by contrast starker."33

Whether wise or not, the fact remains that the whole of The Skin of Our Teeth is based on the assumption that the comic form does not detract from the profundity of the work but to the contrary; the serious and deeper meaning is pointed and made more intense through the technique of contrast. Throughout the play man's foolishness is placed in juxtaposition to this sagacity.

One example of the use of contrast can be seen in Sabina's comment concerning war. In Act II she has just returned from her travels as camp follower. She says:

Yes, peace will be here before we know it. In a week or two we'll be asking the Parkinses in for a quiet evening of bridge. We'll turn on the radio and hear how to be big successes with a new tooth paste. We'll trot down to the movies and see how the girls with wax faces live--

(aims gun)

all that will begin again.
(Shoots in the air)

Oh, Mrs. Antrobus, God forgive me but I enjoyed the war. Everybody's at their best in wartime.

The force and truth of her last statement receives impetus from the preceding remark which displays the ridiculousness, indifference, and pretentiousness that marks man during peace time.

By placing the comic next to the serious, Wilder intensifies the effect of both. He uses the device of contrast in terms of situation as well as in individual speeches. For example: In Act I, the comic scene with the Telegraph Boy is followed by the episode with the children during which the audience is made to realize the terrible mark of Cain which indebly mars mankind.

In addition to the device of contrast, Wilder achieves comic effect through his use of scenery and by the anacrucous placement of objects, persons and ideas. The walls tilt and slide, pictures and chandeliers disappear, contributing to the general gaiety and lightness of the play. The appearance of the Dinosaur and the Mammouth in the living room of the New Jersey household causes a great deal of merriment and laughter.

In almost every case, the comic devices have a deeper and more profound significance than may be immediately perceived. The moving walls symbolize man's insecurity;
the tilted walls and fallen chandelier signify the destruc-
tive aftermath of war; the introduction of elements without
regard to proper place or time reinforces the universality
and timelessness of man's struggle for survival. In all,
the general effect created by the comic inventions in The
Skin of Our Teeth is one in which "the audience is laughed
into profoundness."

In time The Skin of Our Teeth moves from the pre-
historic ice age to the famous "deluge" recorded in the
Bible and then to the "war age," our present era. Although
seeming to follow this relatively logical time sequence,
it is only a few concrete representations and timely
references that suggest an historical account of man. The
contemporary setting, language and "flavor" of the play
obviate an interpretation of "history" in the usual sense
of the word. And, of course, the whole point is that the
philosophical implications of each age depicted are as
applicable today as they were in the "ancient city of
Babylon."

Wilder uses the "historical approach" to point up
the similarities between men, regardless of time or place.
The overt method of placing characters and ideas anacron-
cously reinforced their universality and timelessness.
The historical approach also permitted Wilder a wider
scope than was possible in the traditional play form.
History deals with a series of events rather than a single event with closely knit cause and effect relationships. Therefore, he was able to portray man in varying aspects of his relationship with society.

The plot of The Skin of Our Teeth is episode in form; that is, the final effect is achieved by a series of events, loosely related but illustrating successive phases of the theme. In method, it employs the "unfolding" plot technique. Most of the dramatic factors already exist at the opening of the play as potential dramatic material. The plot then clarifies their dramatic significance by progressive revelation.

The Skin of Our Teeth is divided into three distinct episodes. These are readily recognized by the act divisions. The first episode or act deals with man's attempt to overcome the threatening hand of nature. The opening scene is in Excelsior, New Jersey at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus. Household affairs are in the general state of confusion. Mr. Antrobus is late coming home from work; Mrs. Antrobus and the maid, Sabina, have their daily argument; the family pets are "ready" to come in; a telegram from Mr. Antrobus arrives saying he will be late for dinner; the children enter and all attention is devoted to making them ready for their father's arrival. And there is concern over the unusually cold weather.
Mr. Antrobus enters in high spirits. He has finished the alphabet and just invented the wheel. "He has arrived!" But a new task confronts him. He must meet the challenge of nature. An ice glacier is moving in on New Jersey. All will be lost.

The people come pounding on the door for help—a doctor, Homer, Moses and the Muses. Antrobus welcomes them but only after turning out the house pets, the Dinosaur and the Mammoth, at the insistence of his wife. He assures his guests all will be well. However, his fight against the cold is thwarted. Henry, his son, has thrown a stone. The same act had caused the death of another son many years ago. All seems hopeless. In despair Antrobus cried "Put out the fires!"

Mrs. Antrobus and Sabina plead with him but to no avail. It is Gladys, his daughter, showing her love who persuades him to continue. Placing his faith in his children Antrobus fights to survive the threat of the glacier.

Having succeeded in his battle with the elements of nature, in the second episode man becomes materially prosperous and socially conscious; but, in his new found pleasure he loses sight of the meaning and purpose of life. Mr. Antrobus has been elected president of the "Fraternal Order of Mammals." He and his family are at the annual convention of the group in Atlantic City. Among the many
affairs during the convention was a beauty contest in which Mr. Antrobus awarded the prize to Miss Lily Sabina. Lily, as she is now referred to, aspires to something more than a beauty queen and seduces Mr. Antrobus. She convinces him that he should leave his wife.

Antrobus tells his wife of his intentions. Mrs. Antrobus reminds him of a "promise"—the promise that has always protected and saved them. She tells him that nothing good can happen after that promise is broken. At this point Antrobus is not sure what to do. Gladys has put on the red stockings worn by Sabina; Henry has thrown another stone. Antrobus starts to go to his family but is wooed back by Sabina and the call of the announcer saying the public is waiting.

As Antrobus begins his message to the world the fourth light on the storm signal lights up indicating the end of the world. Having adopted the twisted values of a completely materialistic society, man is again threatened with disaster. However, Antrobus' immediate thought is of his family. He calls to them. Made aware of his evil by the threat of destruction, Antrobus recaptures his waning integrity and man again survives.

It is in the third and final episode that man comes to grip with the force of evil that is within himself. In the last act the Great War is over. Mrs. Antrobus and
Gladys are home. The house is disheveled but they are safe. Sabina is home after her years as camp follower and is quickly made to resume her duties and position as maid of the Antrobus household. Soon Mr. Antrobus returns, leg wounded and dispirited but alive. The only member of the family not present is Henry.

Throughout the play Cain (Henry) has symbolized the evil inherent in man. He is, in a sense, original sin. When he enters in this last episode the unending struggle between Antrobus and Henry--between good and evil--is made manifest. The struggle reaches its climax in the fight between the two in which Henry almost kills his father.

The play stops and the actors step out of their roles. Through Henry's explanation we are made to feel that somehow it is the parents who are partly responsible for the evil. The audience is also made to feel that they too are involved in the problems of Henry and Antrobus.

The play then resumes and Antrobus, conscious of his own blood-guilt, is able to forgive. He can forgive but can not forget his own guilt and in remembering loses the spirit to begin again. He is tired and wants to rest. Mrs. Antrobus pleads with him. Gladys and her baby remind him of their need. Finally it is through Sabina's protest that he recognizes what it was that always made him want to keep going.
He remembers it as three things:

The voice of the people in their confusion and their need. And the thought of you and the children and this house--And--Maggie! I didn't dare ask you: my books!

Although Sabina tells us the story is not yet finished because man will "go on and on" we somehow feel his journey will not be as difficult in the future. Antrobus has not only regained the spirit and desire to begin again, he now knows why he must continue.

In analyzing the basic plot of The Skin of Our Teeth we discover the dramatic structure of the play is circular in design; that is, each episode ends in a state of equilibrium with the character in approximately the same relative position to his desired goal as he was at the beginning. The design of the play as a whole reinforces the circular structure by leaving us with the idea that man will go on encountering difficulties and overcoming them "by the skin of his teeth."

Mention of structure recalls another of our original questions. Is the circular structure of the play dramatic?

Aristotle says complete dramatic action is marked by a beginning, a middle and an end; that is, the beginning has nothing preceding it, the end has nothing following it and the middle is that which has something both preceding it and following it. Does The Skin of Our Teeth fulfill
the requirements for complete dramatic action?

In his book on the Art of Drama, Harold Walley points out that "a good plot begins and ends in a state of equilibrium; its course marks the progress from an initial disturbance to a final restoration of this equilibrium."36

Certain facts are presented at the beginning of The Skin of Our Teeth which suggest an already unbalanced situation. However, study shows that the threat of the ice glacier, the loss of fire, the question of Mr. Antrobus' safety and the quarrel between Sabina and Mrs. Antrobus are only exposition. Although potentially dramatic these facts and events have not disturbed the equilibrium. Actual movement of plot has not yet begun.

It is some time after the entrance of Mr. Antrobus that the inciting incident occurs. On his entrance Antrobus assures his family and the audience that "all is right with the world." The initial balance is disturbed only after he recognizes and admits the threat of the ice. His awareness presents the first complication in the Minor Dramatic Question—Will he and can he do anything about the threat to man's survival?

There are numerous complications which arise before the restoration of proper balance at the end of the scene. Antrobus' initial uncertainty and apathy to the threat of destruction is dispelled by the pleas of the people crying
for help. Thwarting his efforts to help is his concern for the children, Mrs. Antrobus' protests against the "tramps" and Sabina's indignation at having to serve refugees. Mrs. Antrobus finally agrees to allow the people to stay on the condition that the animals go. Mr. Antrobus then works on a way to prevent the disaster but is again deterred by a more immediate family problem. Henry has thrown another stone.

Antrobus is thrown into the depths of despair. He sees no sense in continuing the fight for survival if the children in whom he had found reason for survival fail him. However, the warmth and desire to learn displayed by Gladys convinces him he must continue.

Act II also begins at a state of equilibrium. Man has survived the tests of nature. Now it is the evils of society and the flesh which he must conquer. The philosophy of "enjoy yourself" has taken hold. In adopting hedonism, Antrobus forfeits the happiness of his home and marriage. It is only after he discovers what is happening to his children that he begins to question his decision. When disaster again threatens man, he doffs the new found philosophy and returns to his family. The human race--human decency--again survives.

At the beginning of Act III Sabina tells us Mr. Antrobus is "at it again." He has just posted a recipe
for grave soup. However when he enters he is dejected and weary of war. He has lost the spirit and fight which he had possessed at all other times. Now that spirit—"the desire to begin again"—is gone.

Always it was his children who had renewed his desire to start anew but now his son is his enemy. It is only after Antrobus realizes that the evil within his son is part of him too that he regains the spirit and fight he thought he had lost. He realizes that it is not love of one person but love of all mankind and all things which is the force that supplies the power to seek for perfection and truth.

The play, although circular in structure, still fulfills the requirements of "complete dramatic action." Each act begins at an equilibrium with the potentials of dramatic conflict. The conflict develops and is resolved to a degree at the end of each act; that is, the question "Will man survive?" is answered. However the Major Dramatic Question--Will he continue to want to survive?--is left unanswered until the resolution of the entire play. Only after man consciously recognizes 'why' he must "begin again" is the Major Dramatic Question resolved.

The structure of The Skin of Our Teeth proves to be dramatically effective on several accounts. It fulfills the technical requirements for complete dramatic action;
it successfully suggests a "History of Mankind;" and, it provides a suitable framework for the theme.

There has been no question among the critics about the meaning of the play. The theme is clear to all of them. Indeed it would be hard to misinterpret it since the design of the play repeatedly reinforces it. Each cycle or episode treats a specific aspect of the theme. The first cycle concerns physical survival; the second, moral and social survival; and, the third deals with the intellectual survival of man. Expressed in relation to the play as a whole, the theme acquires a more generalized meaning. Each episode is linked by the question which remains unanswered until the end of the play—Will man continue to survive?

At the end of each act the audience is aware that it is love which renews man's determination to overcome any obstacle to survival. At the close of the play Antrobus also knows what that force is which urges him to "begin again."

The third element of construction referred to in the critics' reports of The Skin of Our Teeth is style. The Skin of Our Teeth is unconventional—non-realistic. It cannot be classified under any one of the recognized experimental or unconventional techniques. It is, rather, a combination of these techniques.
The Skin of Our Teeth is a composite of Symbolism, Expressionism and Epic Theatre. It is impossible to say whether Mr. Wilder consciously used the various techniques of the experimental groups. It is far more likely that the technique he devised for his own plays is a product of assimilation and integration rather than imitation. Whatever the process, there is no question of the influence of the experimental groups.

Wilder drew upon the Symbolists for the poetic conception he gave his play. The Symbolist said "...the condition of dramatic life is poetic truth and not reality..."37 He felt the theatre must look for eternal values in life. "It is the realm of the soul which must be portrayed..."38 Wilder expressed a similar aim when he said the theatre, in order to achieve its highest function, must look beyond the realities of "abject truth" to the ultimate form and meaning of life.39

In addition to the basic philosophy of Symbolism Wilder adopted some of its techniques. To be certain he did not go to the extreme that the Symbolists did in enforcing their precepts but, as is the case with each of the experimental schools, he modified and re-interpreted their principles in accordance with his own concept of theatre.

The Symbolists proposed a synthesis of theatrical elements in production. They also felt the best means of
representing life was through symbols. Wilder recognized
the validity of their argument for synthesis but expressed
it in different terms. He says, "The theater is an art
which repose upon the work of many collaborators."\(^{40}\) This
is a fact the Symbolists' recognized when they proposed
their theory of synthesis. However while they turned to
scenic technique to unify the "many collaborators," Wilder
looked to the playscript.

Wilder says, "The dramatist through working in the
theater gradually learns not merely to take account of the
presence of collaborators but to derive advantage from
them."\(^{41}\) Paying close attention to the laws of narration--
its logic and its deep necessity of presenting a unifying
idea, concentrating on "highly characteristic utterances
and concrete occasions in which the character defines it-
self under action"\(^{42}\) were the methods by which Wilder
sought to synthesize the efforts of his collaborators.

He felt the play should be designed so that it did
not inhibit the imaginative artist but, at the same time,
he felt its technique and meaning should be explicit
enough to prohibit misinterpretations. In order to accom-
plish this end in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder closely
united the dramatic action and the dialogue with the scenic
technique. For example: in the opening lines of the play
Sabina tells us "The whole world is at sixes and sevens,
and why the house hasn't fallen down about our ears long ago is a miracle to me." At this point the walls of the house lean "precariously over the stage."

The comic value of the line depends on the scenic technique thus enforcing the relationship between setting and script. Movement of the scenery points the dialogue. It also symbolically suggests the insecurity of man's existence. The following passage serves a similar purpose. Sabina begins dusting. As she dusts the motto which is hanging on the wall, she repeats its message, "In the midst of life we are in the midst of death..." The stage direction reads: "The fragment of scenery...flies up into the lofts."

There are numerous examples of "symbolic action" throughout the play. In most cases the action is inextricably tied to the dialogue and action of the actors. Another example may be cited from Act III: Mrs. Antrobus is telling Sabina to get on with her work. When Sabina objects and says to "right the house" is just a waste of time, Mrs. Antrobus takes hold of a rope which is hanging from the ceiling and with one pull the walls become straight, the chandelier is pulled into its proper position and Mrs. Antrobus again resumes her position as mistress of the home.

There is some question as to what extent Mr. Wilder followed the Symbolists theories regarding the use of
symbols. As mentioned previously Joseph Cambell and Henry Robinson said The Skin of Our Teeth was a recreation of James Joyce's Finnegans Wake. To support their argument they drew several parallels between the two works. They also suggested that many of the objects and incidents used by Wilder in The Skin of Our Teeth were symbols extracted from or based on the novel.

They said, for instance, the wheel referred to in Act I was intended to represent "James Joyce's circular book of circle wheeling history, the Book of Doublends Jived; Mr. Wilder has cleverly fixed a chair to it, wherein the public can ride."45

If Robinson and Cambell are right in their suggestion that Mr. Wilder has interpreted and, in a sense, symbolized Joyce's novel it would seem that a complete understanding of the former would not be possible without an understanding of the latter. If this is the case then the extent to which Wilder adopted the principles of the Symbolists is greater than we initially believed and Wilder has fallen into the same error as his predecessors have.

In attempting to live up to their original tenets the Symbolists began using symbols which were so personal and subjective that they become meaningless and confused. Likewise, if a correct interpretation of The Skin of Our
Teeth is dependent on an understanding of *Finnegan's Wake* much of its meaning would remain obscure to all but a few scholars.

Whether Mr. Wilder intended such symbolism or not we do not know. When asked about the reported similarities "All I can say, is to urge those who are interested to read *Finnegan's Wake* and make up their minds for themselves."\(^4\)

However, there is no question that Thornton Wilder did accept the basic premise of the Symbolists. Throughout *The Skin of Our Teeth* there is the mystical and poetic interpretation which he gives to the meaning of marriage. Mr. Antrobus tells his wife he is leaving her for Sabina. Mrs. Antrobus calmly replies:

I didn't marry you because you were perfect, George. I didn't even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage.\(^7\)

A few speeches later this theme and, in fact, the theme of the entire play becomes crystallized in a few sentences. Before leaving, Mrs. Antrobus says she has a letter—

I have a message to throw into the ocean. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

It's a bottle. And in the bottle's a letter. And in the letter is written all
the things that a woman knows. It's never been told to any woman and if it finds its destination, a new time will come. We're not what advertisements say we are. We're not in the movies and we're not on the radio. We're not what you're all told and what you think we are: We're ourselves. And if any man can find one of us he'll learn why the whole universe was set in motion. And if any man harm any of us, his soul—the only soul he's got—had better be at the bottom of that ocean, and that's the only way to put it.⁴⁸

The Symbolists felt the drama must be poetic not only in concept but in its language as well. This, of course, did not necessarily mean verse. What they desired was a return to the lyricism and beauty of language which had been abandoned by the Naturalists in their efforts to achieve the ultimate in objective truth and reality.

The lyric quality of the lines, as seen in Mrs. Antrobus' speech, is typical of Mr. Wilder's work. Another of Mrs. Antrobus' speeches will illustrate this point. In retort to Sabina's charge of disinterest in Mr. Antrobus' affairs she says:

Oh, Sabina, I know you. When Mr. Antrobus raped you home from your Sabine hills, he did it to insult me. He did it for your pretty face and to insult me. You were the new wife, weren't you? For a year or two you lay on your bed all day and polished the nails on your hands and feet: You made puff-balls of the combings of your hair and blew them up to the ceiling.

Thus far we have seen four of the Symbolists' theories
embodied in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. These are: the poetic concept which the Symbolists gave to drama, synthesis, the use of symbols and poetic language. And yet there is another theory of the Symbolists which can be found in Wilder's play.

The Symbolist said dramatic action should go halfway to meet its public. To accomplish this end they again turned to scenic technique. In an account of the first Symbolist production of Goethe's *Faust* at the "new Munich Artists' Theatre," Moriecai Gorelik describes the methods used. He notes the forestage ledge sweeps in front of the proscenium in an arc close to the front seats. Instead of the expected elaborate display of scenery...at either side of the stage, stood huge square inner portals capable of sliding noiselessly onstage and off...In the rear, instead of painted backdrops, four differently colored cycloramas rolled across when needed..."51

Georg Fuchs, regarded as the founder of the Munich Kunstlertheater, felt the audience should no longer have to watch "costumed actors moving inside a gilt picture-frame...The actors work far out on that ledge of forestage, so that their bodies loom up in relief against the setting behind them."52 Thus the Symbolists attempted to unite actor and audience—to make the dramatic action go halfway to meet its public.
Wilder was a strong believer in a close relationship between audience and actor. He expressed the belief that an important function of the theatre was to provoke the imagination of the audience.\(^5\)\(^4\) He wanted the audience to realize his own place and responsibility in the staging of the drama. To this end Wilder went one step further than Symbolists in carrying out his objective.

His approach to the problem was again through the playscript rather than scenic invention. He permitted the actors to break out of character and talk directly to the audience; many of the speeches were addressed to the audience in such a manner as to suggest that they too should react overtly to the issues presented. At one point the play is stopped and the audience witnesses a rehearsal of a portion of the last act; another time Miss Somers\(^4\) (Sabina), the temperamental actress, refuses to continue for fear of hurting the feelings of a friend in the audience.

The device of addressing the audience directly serves several purposes. It emphasizes a point the author is trying to make; it draws the audience into the play; and, it reinforces the theatrical nature of the drama.

While the idea of achieving a greater unity and cooperation between audience and actor may have stemmed from the Symbolists, the origin of the device as used by
Wilder is found in a movement begun by Piscator and popularized by Bertolt Brecht. This movement was called Epic Theatre.

Erwin Piscator launched the new type of theatre with a production of *The Good Soldier Schweik*. The play was a dramatization of a satirical novel of the first World War. First in a series of plays to incur the wrath of the reactionary newspapers in Berlin, it contains many of the techniques which are now associated with the Epic style. Projections, the treadmill and other mobile units, episodic construction, and the propagandistic nature of the play presented in a clinical rather than emotional manner are all to be found in the Epic plays that succeeded *Schweik*.

As Epic theatre progressed its purpose and techniques became more specifically defined. Non-illusion and utility became the fundamental scenic principles. Function was the first consideration in stage design. Education of the audience "even against its will" was its prime objective.

The influence of Epic Theatre upon Thornton Wilder is apparent in many of the devices he used and in the dramatic form of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. We have already mentioned one of these devices; that is, the technique of having the actor step out of character and address the audience directly.
Certainly the device of addressing the audience is not a new innovation in the theatre. It was used by Shakespeare in the form of a soliloquy. It was called an "aside" as it appeared in the plays of Goldsmith and Sheridan in the eighteenth century. However, the particular form it took in Epic Theatre was unique. To a theatre in which a scriptless play (Commedia dell'Arte) had long since vanished, the technique of permitting an actor to ad-lib an explanation to the audience when he felt it necessary was a new invention.

The device, as proposed by Bertolt Brecht, was designed to destroy illusion. Herr Brecht told his actors that whenever they felt the audience was getting emotionally involved or whenever they thought the words of the play were insufficient and were not conveying the intended meaning, they should step out of their roles and explain to the audience.54

Wilder also had his actors step out of character and comment on the meaning of the play. However, Wilder intended the actor to step out of his role as one character and into his role as another, playing the actor. For example: in The Skin of Our Teeth Sabina repeatedly drops the role of Sabina the maid and becomes Miss Somerset, the actress. As the actress she comments on the meaning of the play, her role as Sabina, her personal
life and numerous other minor details concerning the production. The lines Wilder's actors speak are written for them and are an integral part of the play script. Although the techniques differ somewhat, the main distinction between Wilder's and Brecht's use of the device lies in its aim and purpose.

The device as proposed by Brecht was tied up with his concept of alienation; that is, as he designed the device it was supposed to destroy empathy and provoke intellectual awareness. As Wilder employed the technique, it did not destroy empathy, (however, there is some disagreement on this point.) It merely reinforced the frankly theatrical nature of the stage. Its appeal was not restricted to the intellect but was broadened to include the imagination as well.

Several Epic scenic techniques were also employed in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Again the intention or ends were different but the devices were basically the same. Although the Epic theory of non-illusion and utility in stage setting is more prominent in *Cur Town* than it is in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, some aspects of the theory are found in the latter play. Wilder employed a non-illusionistic setting with many of the scenic units--walls, chandelier, and some furniture such as the bird cage--fulfilling a very specific function in terms of dramatic
action, dialogue and theme.

Brecht's theory of alienation and the various scenic devices just mentioned are a relatively minor feature of Epic Theatre and have often been altered or completely eliminated in recent Epic productions." However, the dramatic form of Epic Theatre has not changed and it is this form which is probably most responsible for the basic design of The Skin of Our Teeth.

As its name implies, Epic Theatre is concerned with problems of tremendous scope. Its subject is that of events rather than "personal fate." In The Skin of Our Teeth the same idea is manifested. The play takes the form of a chronicle and the vastness of its scope is evidenced in the subject—the history of mankind.

Gorelick says that Epic writing looks beyond personal tragedy or comedy to the relationships which are bigger than people." All great drama recognizes these relationships. The difference between the Epic theory and other stage techniques is that in Epic the larger relationships receive the emphasis.

Epic believes, "These sociological—sometimes even technological—relationships are the fundamental cause of comic and tragic events." Wilder adds a third relationship—spiritual—and it is this that he emphasizes.

In the addition of a third relationship a sharp
distinction arises between the Epic and the Wilder theories. Epic concerns itself with fact—with reason, the intellect and logic. The subject of Wilder's drama is the soul.

Despite the distinction, the basic tenet remains the same; that is, it is the relationships which look beyond personal tragedy and comedy that are worthy of dramatization. Therefore, in The Skin of Our Teeth the emphasis in not on Antrobus' struggle with his disobedient child, his seduction by a beauty queen or his personal disintegration after the war. Neither is it the broader sociological question of a family's struggle with nature and society which concerns Wilder—as it might very well be if Wilder had adopted Epic in total. Man, in the person of Mr. Antrobus, and his relationship to the eternal values in life is the main subject of The Skin of Our Teeth.

Wilder views these eternal values in their spiritual aspect. They find expression in man's unending search for truth and in his perennial struggle for survival. Man's relationship with the eternal is dramatized by contrasting it with the unhappy and transitory nature of his relationship with the temporal.

Antrobus is repeatedly reminded of the ephemeral character of worldly pleasures and possessions. Having
considerable success in his struggle to improve the world, man becomes complacent. He accepts his progress and his mundane achievements as the ultimate. The repeated threats to his survival remind him of the transitory nature of his achievements and the instability of the values he has accepted. The threat of destruction re-awakens his awareness and desire for the Infinite and the Eternal.

Thus Wilder adopts the Epic principle and deals with the relationships which are beyond personal comedy and tragedy but, in doing so, takes exception to the emphasis on sociological relationships and directs attention to spiritual relationships—man and eternity—man and his place in the search for the "ultimate form and meaning of life."

In evolving the form of Epic drama, Brecht and Piscator discarded the Aristotelian concept of tragedy and comedy and classified Epic in the "knowledge-seeking tradition." They felt the elaborate system of suspense and climax associated with the Aristotelian theories of drama was invalid because its use was often illogical and seldom had any relation to the theme. Brecht has taken the extreme position that suspense and climax should be eliminated as much as possible. He says the play should be developed on a narrative basis.58

According to Ferguson, narration is the "unfolding"
of an idea. It is "a series of episodes or events which are so arranged that they elucidate the Idea." This was the precise effect which Epic hoped to achieve. Although the narrative technique belongs more properly to the novel or short story, Brecht believed that the cumulative effect of the total number of scenes could achieve dramatic power in the theatre.

Wilder also insists upon the importance of the narrative in drama. He says the strength of a play lies "...in the succession of events and in the unfolding of an idea, in narration." A dramatist must learn to turn his attention to the laws of narration, "its logic and its deep necessity of presenting a unifying idea stronger than its mere collection of happenings." It is impossible to determine whether Mr. Wilder was influenced by Epic theorists on the point of narration because his own career as a novelist precludes much speculation on the issue. However, since Epic was so influential in determining the general form of The Skin of Our Teeth, the similarities in the use of the narrative technique cannot be overlooked.

In The Skin of Our Teeth the application of the principle of narration is seen mostly clearly in the structural design. The play is structured in terms of episodes--every episode being functionally necessary. Each episode presents
a new phase of the central theme; each "bears its own particular emphasis and makes its own particular contribution to the total effect" of the play. Brecht used the same basic structure in The Private Life of the Master Race.

Epic turned to the narrative technique to rid the drama of the illogical and often irrelevant system of suspense and climax. It felt such a system weakened drama and appealed to the emotional and often irrational element in man.

Wilder uses the narrative technique to unify the play and to make it more logical but, unlike Brecht, he does not eliminate the elements of suspense and climax; he merely minimizes their importance. It must be remembered that Wilder did not object to an emotional appeal and therefore suspense and climax would not be as objectionable to him as they are to Brecht.

There are still other similarities between Epic Theatre and the technique in The Skin of Our Teeth. It is highly probable that many of the similarities result because certain techniques develop naturally once a basic theory is formulated. One such technique is the treatment of characters.

Gorelik points out:

In the best of Brecht's work all the responses of the characters, whether inner or outer, are
related to the theme of the play as tactics
primarily, rather than as mental attributes.61

This means that a character, defined in terms of
outer circumstances, acts in direct relation to his goal.
His actions—mental and physical—are emphasized only as
they express an active tendency toward that goal. Thus,
Brecht's characters are contrasted with the characters
of conventional drama in which the psychological proces-
ses, as such, are emphasized.

The minor characters in The Skin of Our Teeth are
beautifully drawn in terms of this technique. Gladys
and the Fortune Teller are also effective and consistent
with the theory. But Sabina proves to be the best exam-
ple of an "Epic" character in The Skin of Our Teeth.

The style in which Sabina is written is consistent
with that of the other characters and, just as important,
it is consistent within the character. Even when she
breaks into the role of Miss Somerset her responses are
related to the theme; that is, her responses demonstrate
a lack of direction and purpose having an affinity with
man's search for security.

Throughout the play Sabina retains the theatrical
nature in which she was conceived. Her responses are not
"mental attributes" as the psychological dramatist might
device theme; they are the responses of a "character"—
an abstraction. This does not mean she is not real or not believable; it merely means that she is "theatrical." Actually, much of her effectiveness stems from the theatrically and the consistency with which her character is drawn.

Mr. Wilder is not as successful in the delineation of Mr. Antrobus, Mrs. Antrobus and Henry as he was with the other characters. The technique is inconsistent in these characters and as a result there appears a lack of unity and directness.

The inconsistency is particularly notable in Mr. Antrobus because it lies within the character. There is a progression from the Brecht approach, that is stylized and mimetic characterization, to a realistic, almost Stanislavskian technique.

In contrast to the first part of the play in which Antrobus is unquestionably a theatricalized abstraction of man, the later stages of the play reveal him as a specific individual whose personal fate is the central problem. He becomes introspective and his responses are expressed in terms of his own psychological makeup.

The nature of the theme demands a certain amount of introspection. Man is trying to find the meaning of life and one place he must look is within himself. Recognition of this fact justifies, to some extent, the shift of emphasis from circumstances to the psychological state of
the character. One might even defend Mr. Wilder by saying the shift in emphasis is essential to a complete understanding of the theme. However, the shift causes real difficulty in actual production.

The actor is faced with the problem of a smooth transition from the stylized to a realistic type of acting. The difficulty of the transition was clearly demonstrated in the Ohio State University production. In order to cope with the inconsistency, the actor portraying Mr. Antrobus attempted to fuse the two styles and as a result his performance was unsteady and lacked force of direction.

A similar problem arose in the role of Henry but in this case the director had the task of integration. Unlike any other character in the play the treatment of Henry is almost wholly conventional. He is a character of subtle motivation and his personal psychology determines his responses.

Other characters in the play are abstractions of human nature; Henry is an example of one facet of that nature. In relation to the theme he represents the tormented and unsatisfied elements in man but as he is treated in the play he is more than a symbol—he is an individual of infinite complexities.

The manner in which a character is written determines
to a great extent the style in which it is to be acted; as a result, the director was faced with the problem of integrating the realistic Henry into a stylistic play.

Thus far we have seen the influence of two theatrical styles upon The Skin of Our Teeth--Symbolism and Epic Theatre. There is still another which affected the style of Mr. Wilder's play. This is Expressionism.

Expressionism, in its broadest connotation, refers to the general movement against Naturalism. Used in this sense it includes all of the non-illusionistic and anti-realistic styles that have developed since the revolt against the "Theatre of Illusion." Such a broad application of the term is meaningless and also erroneous. Like the other theatre styles which have developed from the general movement against Naturalism and Realism, Expressionism has devised its own particular system of theories and techniques.

In theory and aim Expressionism is closely associated with Symbolism. Some critics even suggest it is merely the literary counterpart of the Symbolist movement. But, in fact, Expressionism is an outgrowth or, rather, an extension of Symbolism. The aims of the Expressionists have become specialized and their methods restrictive. It is in its narrowest sense that we use the term and it is methods of Expressionism rather than
its aims with which we are primarily concerned.

A distinguishing mark of Expressionism is the emphasis placed on the "inner conflicts" of man's mind. The Expressionists wanted to penetrate the subconscious—the "reactions and mental states which could not be included in the external observations of the camera." They concentrated on the psychological processes and attempted to dramatize events as they appeared to the mind of the principle character.

The Expressionists sought a freer method of presentation than the illusionistic stage permitted and demanded a wider range of narrative than the well-made play allowed. Discarding the illusionistic setting and ignoring the unities of time and place they turned to the novelist and the "stream of consciousness" technique which he employed.

In their search for methods with which to express their theories, they devised several techniques which were so unique and characteristic that whenever a play uses one or more of them, it is usually termed "Expressionistic". The Skin of Our Teeth, although not really an example of Expressionism, is such a play.

Staccato and stylized dialogue, symbolic and "type" characters, distortion and exaggeration, heightening of the emotions by acceleration and a freedom in time and place are techniques, characteristic of Expressionism
found in *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Staccato and stylized dialogue is most obvious in the lines of the conveeners and the Fortune Teller. For example, at the beginning of Act II the Fortune Teller predicts the fate of the world and at the end of her speech the conveeners converge upon the stage:

**Fortune Teller:** ...The survival of a handful. From destruction, total destruction.

(The crowd of conveeners enter...)

Even of the animals, a few will be saved: two of a kind, male and female, two of a kind.

**Conveeners:** (Man down left) Charlatan!  
(Man down right) Madam Kill-Joy!

(Man up right) Mrs. Jeremiah!  
(Man up left) Charlatan!

**Fortune Teller:** And you! Mark my words before it's too late. Where'll you be?

**Conveeners:** (Man off right) The croaking raven.  
(Girl down right) Old dust and ashes.  
(Men down left) Rags, bottles, sacks.

At the end of Act I Wilder uses the device of acceleration to heighten the emotional effect. After a long pause during which Mr. Antrobus decides to continue his fight for survival, the dialogue becomes sharp and decisive and the action is slowly accelerated so that by the end of the scene the emotional pitch is one of the most
intense in the play.

Certain aspects of Expressionistic treatment of characters is seen in one way or another in all of the characters of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. In the main characters it is evidenced in the symbolic names: Mr. Antrobus is Everyman; Mrs. Antrobus is every wife; Sabina is the eternal vamp; the Fortune Teller is the prophet. In the minor characters it is seen in the personification of the Muses and in the stock types of the conveeners.

In regard to time and space, Wilder achieved the same freedom as the Expressionists by placing events, places and characters anachronously. For example: Homer and Moses appear in the New Jersey household along with the Dinosaur and the Mammoth. The discovery of the wheel and the alphabet is followed by a convention in Atlantic City and the "great deluge."

*The Skin of Our Teeth* even includes the Expressionistic device of dramatizing man's thoughts. At the end of the play Antrobus begins reading and his thoughts, the words of great thinkers, are dramatized by the appearance of actors who speak the line of the philosophers.

Finally, the gentle satire displayed in the opening speeches of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus in Act II recalls the satirical treatment of business personalities in *Beggar on Horseback*. In the latter play the satire was more
sharp and the technique more Expressionistic but the idea was essentially the same as in *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Analysis of the style of *The Skin of Our Teeth* shows that the genesis of Wilder's technique was in the new movement against Realism and Naturalism. Like Wagner, Craig, Appia, and the other revolutionists, Wilder objected to the limitations of Realism. He desired a wider scope and a greater freedom than the well-made play permitted. He also felt that truth went beyond "abject reality" and wanted to express the poetry and richness of life. As a consequence, he did not imitate, but assimilated the techniques and theories of the revolution and accepted the basic tenets of its revolt.

Analysis also shows that the techniques and devices in *The Skin of Our Teeth* were not merely used for the sake of novelty but have a definite purpose and are intimately associated with the dramatic concepts of the play itself.

Conclusions: Analysis of the play has provided the answer to several of our initial questions. Is there a flaw in structure, style or theme, or in their combination? Is the circular structure of the play dramatic? Does the treatment diminish the profundity of the theme?

The theme of *The Skin of Our Teeth* is the indestructibility of the human race. It says that because of his
essential goodness, humanity and integrity man has survived and will continue to survive the threats to his existence. Sound and provocative, it provides one of the most important unifying elements of the play.

At no time during the play does Wilder lose sight of this central idea. Each scene, each episode contributes to the varying aspects of the theme. The play is so designed that each act unfolds a particular phase of the theme, thus elucidating the overall meaning. Although the meaning is manifold, its development is consistent and logical.

In regard to structure, we have discovered that the circular structure is dramatic. Based on the episodic plot and the "unfolding" technique it moves forward in terms of theme. What is lost in sustained effect is made up in variety.

In spite of the circularity in terms of the basic plot, that is, the unending struggle of man's fight for existence, the structure itself is not really circular but accumulative. The structure is designed to clarify the theme and it does this not through circularity but by presenting a series of successive phases of that theme.

The third element questioned was the style. The unconventional style of The Skin of Our Teeth proves to be an essential part of the concept of the play. The various
devices are not used for purely sensational reasons but aid in the understanding of the play.

John Mason Brown points out that the way in which a play is presented is as important as the story which it tells.65 This is particularly true in The Skin of Our Teeth. Although it may be enjoyed merely because of its comic spirit, a more complete and satisfying experience results from an understanding of the basic symbolism and the implications implicit in the play.

In regard to the success of the combination of elements, the results are not so positive. There is considerable question as to whether the comic spirit detracts from the profundity of the play. The differing opinions of the critics seem to confirm the view that the attempt to fuse the elements of comedy and tragedy leads to confusion and dissatisfaction.

The confusion also becomes apparent in the character of Mr. Antrobus. While the defect may have been simply a question of unskillful handling, the possibility also exists that, in attempting to express the seriousness of the theme, Wilder forced the character into a role for which he was not completely prepared.

Findings show, therefore, that the play is not weak in structure, style or theme. However there is question as to whether the combination of theme and style detracts
the dramatic effectiveness of the play as a whole.

There is yet another possible reason for the confusion and disagreement among the critics. Goethe says that criticism is based on three considerations: Knowing and understanding the intent of the artist; consideration of the effectiveness of the play in terms of the author's intent; and, deciding whether it was worth doing.

Perhaps the controversy was the result of misunderstanding or lack of recognition of the author's intent. Therefore, the next chapter will be devoted to clarifying that intent.
CHAPTER III
INTENT OF THE AUTHOR

Wilder's dramatic technique emerged from a combination of several elements: his pre-occupation with the desire to express the "ultimate form and meaning of life;" the influence of his career as a novelist; and, familiarity with the continental theatre which he acquired while traveling abroad.

Wilder began his world wide education while traveling with his father in The Orient. The elder Wilder's career as diplomat and writer had a profound influence on Thornton's orientation to world problems and consequently on his plays and novels. It left its mark not only on the philosophical approach to his work but on the more practical technical methods which he later employed as a dramatist.

Two features characterize the formal education of Thornton Wilder--"the touch of many lands" and the predominance of religious education. Wilder began his formal education in a German school in Hong Kong. Later he attended a missionary school in Chefoo, Tatcher secondary school in California, Berkeley High School, Oberlin College, and Yale University. His study at Yale was interrupted for a short time when he joined the army during World War I but after

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the war he returned to Yale and received his degree. 66

After graduation Wilder continued his world travel and enrolled in the American Academy at Rome to study archeology. A year later he returned to the United States to become house master and teacher of French at Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. While teaching, he acquired his Master's degree in French literature at Princeton.

"Determined to write for pleasure rather than for profit he devoted his spare time to creative literature." 67 He wrote two novels and one play while still teaching at Lawrenceville. The play, The Trumpet Shall Sound, was produced by the American Laboratory Theatre; one of the novels, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928.

After his success with The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Wilder gave up teaching, at least temporarily, and traveled through England and the continent until 1930. At that time he accepted a position in the English department at the University of Chicago where he taught six months of the year. He remained there for six years and during that time published his collection of one act plays, The Long Christmas Dinner, and a novel, Heaven Is My Destination. The novel caused so much comment that he forewrote the novel for the theatre which he claimed was "free from editorial comment."
That Wilder should abandon the novel for the theatre is not at all surprising. He has always professed an intense interest in the theatre. In addition to this professed interest, all of his works exemplify his attachment for the dramatic form.

In study of the dramatic technique and purpose of Thornton Wilder, Rita Thomas found that all of his novels are essentially dramatic in their concept and that conversely, his plays show the influence of his previous experience as a novelist.68

Rosamond Gilder also alludes to the interacting influences of each medium, one upon the other. Miss Gilder notes that all of his works "lean toward the theater" and that there is "...not a single one of his books that is far away from it in matter or in manner, in characterization or dialogue, in plot or arrangement, and sometimes in all of them."69

An example of his dramatic orientation is apparent in his novel the Cabala. Miss Thomas points out:

The condensation, the stripping away of all verbiage, the neat metaphor, the concentration upon dramatic situations and their spiritual overtones, the vital epitomes, the "atmosphere of classic restraint,"--all these show the hand of a potential dramatist who confesses to a "passion for compression" and who is aware of "the tragic background of life."70
The ability for compression, to condense and yet to catch the essence of a character or situation is, as all beginning playwrights know, the signpost of a good dramatist. It has been said that the virtue of his novel, The Woman of Andros, is in its compactness and simplicity.

In one sense it seems strange that Wilder should have first received recognition as a novelist since he has always professed the belief that the dramatic form of further consideration of the novelistic influence on his drama demonstrates the importance of his previous career as a novelist. It is partly through his novelistic experience that Wilder was able to devise what was for him, a satisfactory dramatic technique and style.

In the last chapter we have discussed the influence of the continental theatre on Wilder's technique. And although this was a predominate factor in devising a technique for his plays, the influence of his career as a novelistic can not be disregarded.

Wilder applied the technique of the novel to the play. The necessity of presenting a unifying idea "rather than a mere collection of happenings" provided continuity and a basic structure for his plays.

In addition to the narrative, he used several other novelistic techniques. He initiated a stage manager, not really a new idea because the stage manager assumed many
of the duties previously assigned to the chorus in the Greek play. He used the stage manager in the same way in which the novelist uses 'the third person viewpoint'. With this technique he was able to stop the action where he wished and fill in vital statistics. He used the device in the same way the Summary is used in a novel. It may be seen in several of the one act plays before it was perfected in Our Town.

In The Skin of Our Teeth the device is not as obvious as in the previous plays but it is still evidenced in the comments of the announcer and in the remarks of Sabina when she steps out of character and comments on the meaning of the play.

By using the novelistic devices, Wilder was able to do with place and time whatever he wished. There was no longer a need for verisimilitude in stage setting. By recognizing and even insisting upon a theatrical attitude Wilder negated the necessity of a realistic stage. Thus he accomplished two of his purposes: he was no longer confined by the limitations of realism and the audience was forced to use their imagination and participate in the drama.

These initial tamperings with the unities of time and place and the technique of bringing the audience into the play reached their height in The Skin of Our Teeth.
While *Our Town* used little scenery, the scenery it did use was not distorted. In *The Skin of Our Teeth* Wilder went one step further and introduced exaggerated and distorted scenic elements. In regard to time and place he discarded even a semblance of chronological order by placing the elements anachronously.

It is not our purpose to examine each of Wilder's works but brief consideration shows that each exhibits a similar purpose. All of his works deal with a similar theme; and, demonstrates a desire to express this theme in terms of its fundamental meaning. Finally Wilder himself expressed the desire to "give ideal expression to those abiding realities for which the outward and visible world serves as but the hush and the symbol..."72

It is not by chance that all of Wilder's works are concerned to a lesser or greater degree with the question of religion and the place and purpose of man in the universe. His whole orientation had been toward a consciousness of the eternal and universal. This orientation, prompted by his schooling in many lands and nearly always in a religious atmosphere, shows itself in all of his works from his first attempts at Yale to the play with which we are concerned, *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Dilly Tente, editor of *Living Authors*, says that all
of the works of Thornton Wilder deal with the "mystery of death and judgment, the tragedy of beauty, and pity of the ending of life's comedy..." "If he has a favorite subject, it is the human soul." This is illustrated by Wilder's own statement of the purpose of drama and also by consideration of his works.

Wilder believes it is the prime function of drama (and the novel because he believes the essential aim of both are the same) to provide a union between the temporal and the eternal, between the changing and the permanent.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth* we see the theme of the power of love and man's search for the eternal values recurring throughout the play. It is love for his daughter and her expression of love which prompts Antrobus to continue at the end of Act I. It is the recognition of what the loss of his family and their love would mean that saves him at the end of Act II. Finally, it is love raised to a level encompassing all man and extending into all time which Antrobus not only recognizes but realizes.

Thus Wilder's concern for the universal and eternal which runs through his play, *The Long Christmas Dinner*, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, and *Our Town* and through his novels *Heaven is My Destination*, *The Woman of Andros*, and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, is expressed in the recurring
theme—love and man's unending search for the eternal.

In his attempt to express the "eternal" and the ultimate form and meaning of life, Wilder found the techniques of realism inadequate. His earliest works, The Long Christmas Dinner and The Angel that Troubled the Waters, are examples of his experimentation with non-realistic techniques. These early works show his struggle to apply his philosophy.

Miss Thomas points out "...technique-wise it is apparent that Wilder had not wedded theories to stage medium." These plays hint at tremendous potential for the stage but present no practical solution. Each suggests the devices and techniques which were later perfected in Our Town and in The Skin of Our Teeth.

Conclusions: Thornton Wilder seems to have been theatrically inclined from the moment he began to write. Even his novels reflect his dramatic orientation. The basic theme common to all of his works indicates his preoccupation with the desire to express the "eternal values in life." He felt the unconventional technique expressed his ideas more fully.

This conclusion is reinforced in his answer to a question submitted to Mr. Wilder by Miss Thomas. Concerning his purpose in using unconventional methods of production he says:
One writes what one knows in the most suitable way; one tells. I'm not trying to undermine anyone else's way of telling. For me, however, the well made tightly constructed realistic play could never serve to describe what "it feels like to be alive."
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It was the purpose of this paper to analyze The Skin of Our Teeth and to examine the play for any weakness in structure, style or theme and to determine the validity of Wilder's use of the unconventional style in the construction of the play.

The conflicting reports of the critics which suggest a defect within the play points to two elements of construction as the possible source of the difficulty. These are theme and style.

Analysis of the play shows that the theme is sound and provocative. It also provides one of the most important unifying elements in the play. And at no time does Wilder lose sight of this central idea.

The structure of the play is dramatic and is designed so that it elucidates the theme of the play. Although circular in design, the structure fulfills the requirements for complete dramatic action. Based on the episodic plot and the "unfolding" technique it moves forward in terms of theme, rather than plot. In each episode the plot is essentially the same although the specific circumstances vary.

In terms of style analysis has shown that the style
of The Skin of Our Teeth is an essential part of the concept of the play. Contrary to what many critics believe, the technique and the devices are not used merely because they are "different"; the techniques help explain and add to the general dramatic effectiveness of the play as a whole.

Not wholly successful in regard to style, the play proves defective in mood. Wilder attempts to fuse the elements of comedy and tragedy and as a result the effect is confusing and diffused. Examination of the author's intent clarifies the reason for the fusion of the two elements. However, the fact remains that Wilder was not entirely successful in his attempts.

Returning to the critics reports it becomes apparent that most of the adverse criticism results from a lack of understanding of what the author is trying to do. The devices Wilder uses are not merely "sensationalism" but are inextricably tied to the play in such a way that they illuminate its essential meaning. In fact, the very things which the critics dislike in the play prove to be the reason for the effectiveness of the theme--that element which they so greatly admire.
FOOTNOTES


34. Thornton Wilder, The Skin of Our Teeth. New York: Samuel French, 1942. p. 120.

35. Loc. cit.


41. Loc. cit., p. 86.

42. Loc. cit., p. 89.


44. Loc. cit.


49. Loc. cit., p. 16.


52. Loc. cit., p. 178.


55. Loc. cit., p. 430.


57. Loc. cit.

58. Loc. cit., p. 413.


63. Loc. cit.


70. Rita Thomas, loc. cit., p. 3.


72. Loc. cit., p. 15.


74. Rita Thomas, loc. cit., p. 31.

75. Loc. cit., p. xix.
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