

“To Live Happier is to Grasp the Meaning of Life”: Thornton Wilder’s  
Philosophy of Life in *Our Town*□



Assist Prof Dr Hasan Mohammed Saleh  
Mosul University / College of Education for Humanities

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### Abstract

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) is one of the most acclaimed American dramatists in the twentieth century. His plays are characterized by in-depth analysis of the American reality at that time. This research is an attempt to cast light on Thornton Wilder’s philosophy which affirms that one can lead a very happy life if the meaning of life is well-understood. In *Our Town* (1938) Wilder embodies such a philosophical conception in the framework of a family institution in the Great Depression of the 1930s. The play emphasizes the fact that there are many ways in which happiness can be achieved. Such a philosophy springs from the fact that Wilder found the American community breaking into pieces, believing that the main task of the artist resides in the attempt to diagnose the social problems and to insemminate the spirit of optimism, hope, and patience.

In sum, life is supposed to be about *more* than happiness. We are supposed to do something important, adhere to some ethic, and serve a greater good. We live for a goal, a principle, or a destiny—not just for pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

The epigraph succinctly exemplifies Wilder’s philosophy of life during the turbulent years of his age which witnessed the emergence of a plethora of problems in the different wakes of life. The repercussions of the Great Depression were rather disastrous on all domains of life. There were widespread problems such as unemployment, high rates of organized crime, breakdown of family and social relationships, the individual’s disintegration, political unrest at home and abroad, etc. At that time, the American family suffered greatly from the economic hardships which crushed the spirit of collaboration and integration. Wilder saw the American society, best configured in the family, scattering into pieces before his eyes. Amos, Wilder’s brother, gives a lively account of the pattern of modern society:

In contemporary society large numbers of men live without roots and without the natural ties that are essential for psychological health. The organic bonds with nature and the community are broken, and the primordial institution of the family is attained. <sup>2</sup>

The then community under such inappropriate circumstances became rather disconnected and vulnerable to the fatal downfall. Such being the case, the American elite found it necessary to inculcate in people subtle values which would enable them to accept life and to have a goal or ambition in life. In other words, understanding the meaning of life is a jumping off point for leading a happy and stable life.

Thornton Wilder lived in an age which focused on building solid familial and societal relationships. He himself paid a lot of attention to such a matter. In his essay entitled "Some Thoughts on Playwriting" (1941), Wilder argued that there are four principles which make drama very distinctive and different from the other arts. The most relevant of these principles of the dramatic genre is that "it is addressed to the group-mind;" <sup>3</sup> which means that drama orientates its message towards a very broad audience. Stresau affirms that it is not possible to exclude the fact that Thornton Wilder paid a lot of attention to the future in his work which "contains the man of twentieth century who, in the maelstrom of toppling orders, has frighteningly lost his orientation. Faced with the question of how to live, what is left for him but to trust ... the promise that grows out of the unknowable?" <sup>4</sup>

Wilder is, moreover, much concerned about finding a value or an ethical commitment in life in order that life may be happily lived. In his preface to his plays, he views his play *Our Town* as "...an attempt to find a value above all the price for the smallest events in our daily life. I have made the claim as preposterous as possible. For I have set the village against the largest dimensions of time and place."<sup>5</sup> "Wilder, Bennet says, ...invests living with value by forcing the attention of his characters and thus of his audience on the horror of its absence."<sup>6</sup> Goethe had greatly influenced Wilder's mind-set because of his illuminating ideas. Linda Simon, enumerating Goethe's favours to his time, asserts that he "illustrates in a thousand ways that we learn the nature of life not by speculation but by fulfilling our immediate needs."<sup>7</sup> Such a view finds an echo in Wilder's dramatic representations, especially in his *Our Town*.

Humanity is also highlighted in the dramatic world of Thornton Wilder. In his essays, interviews, novels, and plays, Wilder always stressed such a humanitarian tendency. As a dramatist, Wilder believes that the real function of theatre must be to provide "the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being...." <sup>8</sup> Intimately connected to this point is that Wilder wanted to globalize this sense of humanity to extend to the whole world and bring it out of the American borders. He once said, "In my plays I attempted to raise ordinary daily conversation between ordinary people to the level of the universal human experience."<sup>9</sup> Thus contextualized, his plays underscore this humanity, and his characters, male and female, typically show their own humanitarianism in their behaviour.

Incontestably, the family is the cornerstone of any society without which values are to fall apart. Eric Bentley says that “since the family is at the center of our culture, gross wishes are mainly directed against the family.”<sup>10</sup> Wilder seems to be possessed by the idea of enjoying and accepting life as it is. Wilder says, “For God’s sake, live your life! Live it with as much joy as you can muster because it won’t come around twice. There will be sorrow - but pass on the joy!”<sup>11</sup> He promised that he would do his utmost to keep the American more unified and concordant through setting the motto that life is very liveable and sustained if we understand its significance disregarding the formidable circumstances. This is very conspicuously demonstrated in *Our Town*, which draws on the foundations of the typical family in the twentieth century America.

*Our Town* basically tracks the progression of universal human experience- birth and growth, marriage, death, and such events form the essence of the life of the individual.<sup>12</sup> The play explores the engaging story of the life of the two families, the Gibbs and the Webbs. The play is composed of three acts which follow up the rhythmic cycle of life- in Grovers Corners, a village in New Hampshire. Act I, the Daily Life, takes the audience to get more details about how people live in Grover’s Corners. It gives a picture of the normal course of life led by people. Act II, Love and Marriage, is a narrative description of people who feel happy since they envisage the meaning of love and marriage. Eventually, act III, Life after Death, represents an eschatological journey into the realm of life after death. It shows how dead people wish to come back to life in order to live only moments of happiness regardless of the difficult situations experienced in their mundane existence.

The play starts with the Stage Manager who assumes the role of the narrator, recounting the daily events of people. The Stage Manager acts as the spokesman for Wilder’s propaganda to bring to light what is positive and encouraging in American society. He will show what happens in Grover’s Corners, “In our town we like to know the facts about everybody”(I.9)<sup>13</sup>. The society here is depicted as conducting a very happy life. As a matter of fact, “Living in “our town” includes a social unity and harmony with nature, the fulfillment of the individual within the community.”<sup>14</sup> Such a harmony stands behind the source of happiness strongly felt by the people in this town.

*Our Town* is rightly dubbed as “a piece of isolationist propaganda that promotes the virtues of a simple, unhurried, unthreatened life in the isolated small towns of America—where for one place the virtues of such a life need no such promoting, despite Emily’s criticisms of her fellow townspeople and to the detriment of the play’s artistic wholeness or thematic unity.”<sup>15</sup>

Setting the importance of building an ideal society against the background of women’s vital role, Wilder once described the woman in an interview with Jeanine Delpuch saying , “ I believe ... that woman inspires man to his noblest actions. She sees further. Man...occupied with his little affairs, is more short-sighted ”<sup>16</sup> The role of female characters in this play has much in common to illustrate how life is an entertaining journey if one is able to absorb the different facets of it. In this regard, women as mothers are a good exemplar to embody the spirit of happiness through achieving homely obligations perfectly. In his book

*On Purpose: How We Create the Meaning of Life*, Paul Froese tellingly describes motherhood in this way:

Motherhood, the higher purpose of Woman....., is something temporal and circumstantial—her children will eventually grow into adults. But motherhood evokes a deeper meaning; it describes not simply the actions of giving birth and raising children. Motherhood is imbued with higher purpose because it evokes a moral sensibility—the feeling that it is good to nurture, care, protect, and provide. Consequently, “mothers” can feel good about their lives, motivating them to suffer through the sleepless nights, rude retorts, maddening tedium, and deep anxieties that come with mothering.<sup>17</sup>

In the view of the fact that the personal feeling of happiness and self-satisfaction is related to the status of education, women in the play are after educating their children. They believe that ignorance is the fountainhead of unhappiness and endless suffering, a matter that implies the impossibility of knowing the meaning of life.<sup>18</sup>

The women’s role lies in their engagement “in motherhood roles of getting their children fed and off to school, they relax, share the chore of stringing beans, and discuss Mrs. Gibbs’ desire to sell her grandmother’s highboy and use the money for a trip to Paris.”<sup>19</sup> Mrs Webb represents the voice of Wilder who stresses that happiness is accessible through different ways at the top of which lies education. She seems upset by her children, George and Rebecca. Mrs Webb strongly rebukes George because he does not abide by her instructions :

**MRS WEBB:** Children! Now I won’t have it. Breakfast is just as good as any other meal and I won’t have you gobbling like wolves. It’ll stunt your growth, - that’s the fact. Put away your book, Wally.

**WALLY:** Aw, Ma! By ten o’clock I got to know all about Canada.

**MRS WEBB:** You know the rule’s well as I do - no books at table. As for me, I’d rather have my children healthy than bright.

**EMILY:** I’m both, Mama: you know I am. I’m the brightest girl in school for my age. I have a wonderful memory.

**MRS WEBB:** Eat your breakfast.

**WALLY:** I’m bright, too, when I’m looking at my stamp collection.(I.17)

**MRS GIBBS:** It’s a fact! Dr Gibbs is never so happy as when he’s at Antietam or Gettysburg. The times I’ve walked over those hills, Myrtle, stopping at every bush and pacing it all out, like we were going to buy it.(I.22).

As Mrs Webb holds it, education is instrumental in achieving personal happiness. She is much concerned about George’s health. She tells him to observe himself upon eating and drinking. Further, Mrs Webb feels happier when her boy hopes to be a would-be farmer, “I want to be a farmer on Uncle Luke’s farm.”

This is so because setting an aim for the future ushers in the success of Mrs Webb’s upbringing of her children.

Three years have elapsed since the events of act I, and we are now in July 1904, and this is “the time most of our young people jump up and get married”( II.50). In act II, the Stage Manager presents the nexus of love and marriage to affirm how people drive a sense of happiness from their marital relationship. This act displays another cycle of life development. “Nature’s been pushing and contriving in other ways, too: a number of young people fell in love and got

married”( II.49). To initiate his own argument about the significance of life, the Stage Manager quotes a medieval saying by one of the poets: “It’s like what one of those Middle West poets said: You’ve got to love life to have life, and you’ve got to have life to love life .... It’s what they call a vicious circle” (II. 51).

George Gibbs and Emily Webb are going to get married very soon and their families are making the final arrangements for the wedding. Mr Gibbs and Mrs Gibbs feel worried about George whom they think unable to bear the heavy responsibility of marriage. The old Gibbs appear to have been enjoying a jubilant matrimonial life as they affirm later. Earlier in their new life, they were afraid that their relationship would be very problematic. Mr. Gibbs reminds his wife of his then excessive fears, “I was afraid we’d run out and eat our meals in silence, that’s a fact. Well, you and I been conversing for twenty years now without any noticeable barren spells” (II.57). They hopefully try to instil in the minds of their progeny the understanding of life as the mediator of happiness.

Quite significantly, George and Emily share the great feeling that love creates a meaningful and happy life. Hermann Stresau states that “they are all aware of what love is or can be: “... the bridge between the land of the living and the land of the dead... the only survival, the only meaning.”<sup>20</sup> George and Emily clearly speak for Wilder’s belief in the power of love as the cause of a much merrier life:

GEORGE: Mr. Webb, I want to ... I want to try. Emily, I’m going to do my best. I love you, Emily. I need you.

EMILY: Well, if you love me, help me. All I want is someone to love me.

GEORGE: I will, Emily. Emily, I’ll try.

EMILY: And I mean for *ever*. Do you hear? For ever and ever.

(II. 82)

It is clear that the existence of love is the effective medium of getting pleasure and happiness. In marital life, the true feelings of reciprocal love can give couples a kind of transcendence and ontological security. Both George and Emily express their irresistible need for each other. George sees that love positively affects his personality, which causes him to feel restful and happy. He is very satisfied with the love affair with Emily although Emily sometimes finds faults with him, “I’m glad you spoke to me like you did. But you’ll see: I’m going to change so quick you bet I’m going to change” (II. 71).

For his part, Mr. Webb, George’s father-in-law, tells George of his experience of marriage and how he never took into consideration his father’s advice on personal happiness and other relevant issues. What Mr. Webb says is quoted here:

George, I was thinking the other night of some advice my father gave me when I got married. Charles, he said, Charles, start out early showing who’s boss, he said. Best thing to do is to give an order, even if it don’t make sense; just so she’ll learn to obey. And he said: if anything about your wife irritates you her conversation, or anything-just get up and leave the house.

That’ll make it clear to her, he said. And, oh, yes! he said never, *never* let your wife know how much money you have, never. (II. 62)

Not only did Mr. Webb undervalue his father’s view of how to treat his wife, but he also revolted against his father’s traditional codes of beliefs. Mr. Webb

remembered how he followed a trajectory which would lead him to the personal perspective of happiness.

In so doing, he has been very ecstatic, “SO I took the opposite of my father’s advice and I’ve been happy ever since. And let that be a lesson to you, George, never to ask advice on personal matters” (II. 62).

If one knows oneself very well, much happiness is subsequently expected. Terry Eagleton rightly argues that “Knowledge is an aid to happiness rather than its antagonist.”<sup>21</sup>

People in this symmetrical community feel more pleasant and resilient because of the anticipated happy wedding of Emily and George. The very idea of seeing couples enter the golden nest is highly appealing to them. The Stage Manager then asks George to take Emily’s hands to start the ceremonies of the wedding. Mrs. Soames, one of the womenfolk, is agitated by this wedding, saying that “Perfectly lovely wedding! Loveliest wedding I ever saw.../ I just like to see young people happy (II.83). Curiously enough, this act closes with Mrs. Soames’s declaration “Aren’t they a lovely couple? Oh, I’ve never been to such a nice wedding. I’m sure they’ll be happy. I always say: *happiness*, that’s the great thing! The important thing is to be happy” (II. 84). This speech gets to the roots of Wilder’s philosophy of life that life is very short and beautiful. People are invited to luxuriate in the happy moments and to avoid what is devastating to these moments.

The events of act III take place in a cemetery where the philosophy of life becomes more evident than before. There is a journey into the metaphysical presence of people configured in this act. This otherworldly configuration bears the meaning of life continuously lacked by people in their secular existence. Wilder seems that he did his job to remind the people of his age of the singularity of life experiences. As a national artist, he set himself the task of illuminating the minds of his people in a manner to affect radically the intellectual system. People can get a source of a never-lived happiness by understanding how to live their life.

Unimpeachably, death is a very heart- rending human experience, and it is impossibly inevitable. The Stage Manager builds on this common fact of life to explicate the inevitability of death. Wilder sees death as “something that completes the whole and is therefore artistically necessary.

This is the real beauty of death, and only when it is viewed in such manner can it give life any meaning....”<sup>22</sup> People in this town are cognizant of it, “People just wild with grief have brought their relatives up to this hill.

We all know how it is ... and then time ... and sunny days ... and rainy days. .. 'n snow ...

We’re all glad they’re in a beautiful place and we’re coming up here ourselves when our fit’s over” (III. 89).

Writing this play, Thornton Wilder tried to give his audience a glimmer of hope, which would assist man to overcome the difficulties that may block the way to happiness and serenity. Such a hope is encompassed in a kind of spirituality. M.C. Kuner in his book *Thornton Wilder: the Bright and the Dark* explains the importance of this spiritual tendency for Wilde both as man and artist:

In a sense, Wilder's confidence in the existence of the spiritual verities in humanity's custodial duties toward them sums him up both as man and artist: his faith is a kind of huge celestial umbrella that preserves him from the harshness of the elements and free him to focus earthly details of everyday as interest him.<sup>23</sup>

Kuner also adds that Wilder affirms that regaining one's faith is not a matter of joining a religious institution whatever, strongly believing that without the presence of faith in one's life it becomes impossible to live active and meaningful life.<sup>24</sup>

The meaning of happiness is fundamentally linked with the character of Emily who seems bewildered by some people who are quite incapable of capturing the value of life. She has a wishful thinking that she would return to life to live again the reposeful and happy moments exclusively. In a very affective way, she tells her mother, Mrs. Gibbs, about her much-coveted but never-fulfilling dream:

**EMILY:** But, Mother Gibbs, one can go back; one can go back there again ... into living. I feel it. I know it. Why just then for a moment I was thinking about ... about the farm ... and for a minute I *was* there, and my baby was on my lap as plain as ! day.

**MRS. GIBBS:** Yes, of course you can.

**EMILY:** I can go back there and live all those days over again ... why not?

**MRS. GIBBS:** All I can say is, Emily, don't.

**EMILY:** *She appeals gently to the stage manager.*

But it's true, isn't it? I can go and live ... back there ... again.

**STAGE MANAGER:** Yes, some have tried-but they soon come back here.

**MRS. GIBBS:** Don't do it, Emily.

**MRS. SOAMES:** Emily, don't. It's not what you think it'd be.

**EMILY:** But I won't live over a sad day. I'll choose a happy one-I'll choose the day I first knew that I loved George. Why should that be painful?  
(III. 100)

Mary Ellen Snodgrass maintains that Emily's chief function is seen in Act III. After dying and leaving behind a four-year-old son, she finds difficulty coming up with the spirits in the cemetery and she cannot initially accept her position. She is able to comment on the relative difference between the living and dead.<sup>25</sup> Of the living, she says: "They're sort of shut up in little boxes" (III.98). Quite ironically, Emily knows about the meaning of freedom more than the living, who are separated from other living beings. She represents the articulation of Wilder's philosophy concerning the meaning of life and living, realizing that the living people are so busy in their daily obligations to the extent that they do not comprehend what they are doing. The difficulties of the daily situations make them disregard the fleeting hours of their early life.<sup>26</sup>

Towards the end of the Act III, Emily, who has loved George very deeply, has enjoyed a kind of detachment and serenity which is not experienced by the living. Consequently she does not share George's grief as the living do, simply commenting that the living do not understand. Emily is set as an example

of how the ordinary man can live, marry, and die before understanding the meaning of life.<sup>27</sup> A.H. Quinn writing about *Our Town in Literature of the American People* says: "The real power of the play rose from its touching presentation of life's preciousness.

Its appeal is as simple as daylight and as strong."<sup>28</sup> Throughout the play, Wilder focuses on the thinkability of life as a beautiful journey if people can catch sight of its significance.

Emily's important question "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?" (III. 110) sums up Wilder's philosophical view of life. The Stage Manager replies in negative, saying that people cannot grasp the goodness of life while they are alive. The exception to this rule is the saints and poets whom he regards as the intelligentsia of the community. "Apparently, it is not until death that people comprehend that every moment of life is wonderful but that most people fail to relish the experience."<sup>29</sup> *Our Town* "asserts the value of human life, no matter how apparently trivial,... [and] insignificant. It does so, not by ignoring or belittling change and death, but reminding us that change is necessary to the recognition of beauty and that death in very fundamental way gives meaning to life."<sup>30</sup>

Overall, Thornton Wilder is a very positive dramatist who devoted his efforts to enliven the American individual through colouring his plays with the philosophy of life he believed in. His philosophy is lucidly encapsulated in the argument that human beings can live ever happily if they comprehend what life is. What Wilder really says in *Our Town* is that people, unfortunately, start to realize the beauty of life when their end becomes very imminent and they are about to leave the transient life. Had they been offered an opportunity to return to life, they would have enjoyed life and grasp its meaning.

Thornton Wilder well knows that "life is brief but very precious, that love can dispel pessimism no matter how dark and deep – rooted it may be, and certainly in *Our Town* that American family life has formed a pattern for the whole world to follow."<sup>31</sup> Given the fact that *Our Town* is set during the Great Depression, it has a rather contemporary universality to the effect that people are highly obliged to set themselves a purpose to achieve, however. Achieving such a purpose will certainly conduce to a state of happiness and sublimity.

It invites contemporary man to reconsider his everyday situations in a way as to create a self-concluded signification of happiness which can accompany him in the course of the journey of his life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Froese, *On Purpose: How We Create the Meaning of Life*, (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Thomas E Porter, *Myth and Modern American*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 221.

<sup>3</sup> Toby Cole, (ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting: the Meaning and Making of Modern Drama from Ibsen to Ionesco*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 106.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Stresau, *Thornton Wilder*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1971), 103.

<sup>5</sup> Thornton Wilder, *3 Plays*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), preface xii.



<sup>6</sup> Kristin Bennet, “ The Tragic Heroine: an Intertextual Study of Thornton Wilder’s Women in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, *The Long Christmas Dinner*, and *Our Town* ” in *Intertextuality in American Drama* edit by Drew Eisenauer and Brenda Murphy. (London: McFarland & Company , Inc., Publishers, 2013), 76.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Simon, *Thornton Wilder: His World*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979), 201.

<sup>8</sup> Simon, 136.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson R. Bryer, (ed.), *Conversations with Thornton Wilder*, (Jackson and London: U Press of Mississippi, 1992), 111.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Barnard Hewitt, “Thornton Wilder Says “Yes” , *The Tulane Drama Review* Vol.4. No. 2 (Dec, 1959), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1124866>. Accessed: 24/7/2013, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Barry Paris, ed., *Stella Adler on America’s Master Playwrights*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 88.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas E Porter, *Myth and Modern American Drama*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 214.

<sup>13</sup> All quotations are taken from Wilder Thornton, *3 Plays*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998). Further references will be to this edition.

<sup>14</sup> Porter, 205.

<sup>15</sup> R. J. Cardullo, *A Play Analysis: a Casebook on Modern Western Drama*, ( Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2015), 158.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Bennet, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Froese, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Stresau, 91.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Ellen Snodgrass Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, (New York: Hungry Minds, Inc., 1990), 36.

<sup>20</sup> Stresau, 101.

<sup>21</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: a Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 19.

<sup>22</sup> M.C. Kuner, *Thornton Wilder: the Bright and the Dark*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1972), 45.

<sup>23</sup> Kuner, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Kuner, 196.

<sup>25</sup> Snodgrass 36.

<sup>26</sup> Snodgrass, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Snodgrass, 36.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Barron McCasland, *The Philosophy of Thornton Wilder*,( New York: Carlton Press, Inc., 1976), 30-31.

<sup>29</sup> Snodgrass, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Hewitt, 116.

<sup>31</sup> McCasland, 31.

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السعادة ان تفهم معنى الحياة : فلسفة الحياة في مسرحية ثورنتون وايلدر بلدتنا

### الخلاصة

يعد ثورنتون وايلدر (1897-1975) احد اشهر كتاب المسرح الامريكيين في القرن العشرين، وتمتاز مسرحياته بالتحليل المعمق للواقع الامريكي في ذلك الوقت. ويمثل هذا البحث محاولة لالقاء الضوء على فلسفة ثورنتون وايلدر التي مفادها ان بامكان المرء ان يحيا حياة سعيدة ان فهم معناها جيدا. ويجسد وايلدر هذا التوجه الفلسفي في مسرحيته بلدتنا (1938) في اطار الاسرة خلال فترة الكساد العظيم في ثلاثينيات القرن الماضي. وتشدد المسرحية على حقيقة ان هناك طرق شتى لادراك السعادة، ومثل هذ الفلسفة تنبع من حقيقة ان وايلدر وجد ان المجتمع الامريكي يتفتت، معتقدا ان مهمة الكاتب الرئيسية تكمن في محاولة تشخيص المشاكل الاجتماعية، وبث روح التفاؤل والامل والصبر.