# The Skin of Our Teeth Study Guide

## The Skin of Our Teeth by Thornton Wilder

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Introduction

Thornton Wilder completed his sixth, and perhaps most ambitious, play, *The Skin of Our Teeth,* on January 1, 1942. After trial runs in New Haven, Connecticut, and Baltimore, Maryland, the play opened on Broadway at the Plymouth Theater on November 18, 1942. The production—directed by Elia Kazan and starring Tallulah Bankhead (Sabina), Frederic March (Mr. Antrobus), and Florence Eldridge (Mrs. Antrobus)—received positive reviews and ran for 355 performances. Audiences and critics applauded Wilder's unconventional drama about the history of humankind. Most reviewers agreed that the playwright had produced a work that would revitalize American theater; as Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *New York Times, "The Skin of Our Teeth* stands head and shoulders above the monotonous plane of our moribund theater—an original, gay-hearted play that is now and again profoundly moving, as a genuine comedy should be."

Disrupting traditional notions of linear time, Wilder's play tells the story of the twentieth-century American Antrobus family in three acts which recount such epochal events as the onset of the Ice Age, the start of Great Flood, and the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Ending exactly as it began, the play illustrates the cyclical nature of existence, celebrating humanity's resilience, inventiveness, and will to survive. Although the play offers an age-old message, it does so in an untraditional form, rejecting the conventions of naturalistic drama. Not only do the characters appear to be both middleclass Americans and allegorical figures, but they also repeatedly drop out of character and speak directly to the audience, breaking theatrical illusion and reminding viewers that they are watching a play. Combining modern theatrical experiments and timeless human themes, Wilder produced a work that would both challenge and entertain generations of Americans. Along with *Our Town* (1938), *The Skin of Our Teeth* is considered Wilder's theatrical masterpiece and an invaluable cornerstone of modern American drama.

# Author Biography

Thornton Niven Wilder was born on April 17,1897, in Madison, Wisconsin, the survivor of twin sons born to Isabella Thornton and Amos Parker Wilder. At the time of Wilder's birth, his father, a newspaperman with a Ph.D. in political science, was working as editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal.* A strict and religious man, Wilder's father exerted a forceful influence over his second child. The young Thornton often felt the pull between his mother's encouragement and his father's disapproval.

In 1906, the Wilder family moved to Hong Kong, where Amos assumed the diplomatic position of consul general. There, the nine-year-old Thornton went to a German school for six months before returning to the United States with his mother. In the following years, Thornton attended schools in California and China, eventually graduating from Berkeley High School in 1915. He then spent two years at Oberlin College in Ohio, transferred to Yale University, graduated from there in 1920, and spent the next academic year at the American Academy in Rome.

Back in America in 1921, Wilder settled into a job teaching French at the LawrenceviUe School in New Jersey. On leave from LawrenceviUe in 1925, Wilder entered the master's program in French at Princeton University. In that year, he revised his fictionalized account of his time in Italy which became his first novel, *The Cabala,* a work that earned favorable reviews when it appeared in 1926. That same year, critics greeted a production of Wilder's first play, an allegorical drama called *The Trumpet Shall Sound,* much less enthusiastically. But the next year, his second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* would win the Pulitzer Prize for the best fiction work of 1927, allowing Wilder to resign his teaching position.

Wilder's career as a novelist and playwright would flourish in the succeeding decades. Two collections of one-act plays and two more novels were followed by a play destined to become an American classic, *Our Town* (1938), a drama about small-town life that would bring Wilder his second Pulitzer Prize. His thirteen later plays include: *The Merchant ofYonkers* (1938), a comedy he revised into *The Matchmaker* (1954) and which became the source for the popular musical *Hello, Dolly!* (1963); *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), which earned Wilder his third Pulitzer Prize; *Our Century* (1947), a short burlesque; and *TheAlcestiad* (1955), a drama based on Greek playwright Euripides's *Alcestis.*

In his later, years, Wilder continued to be honored. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1963) and the National Medal for Literature (1965). His sixth novel, *The Eighth Day* (1967), earned a National Book Award. Two years after the publication of his final work, *Theophilis North* (1973), Wilder died on December 7, 1975, in Hamden, Connecticut, secure in his reputation as an innovative dramatist and important American literary figure.

# Plot Summary

## Act I

At the opening of *The Skin of Our Teeth,* images from a slide projector appear on the closed stage curtain. An Announcer narrates these pictures of "News Events of the World," telling the audience about events in both the theater (items left in the lost and found) and the world (a glacier is moving South over Vermont; Mr. George Antrobus has invented the wheel).

When the curtain rises, it reveals the living room of the Antrobus house in suburban Excelsior, New Jersey. Sabina, the sexy maid, gives an opening speech which parodies the clunky expositions that often begin traditional realistic plays: it is six o'clock and Mr. Antrobus is not yet home; it is so cold "dogs are sticking to the sidewalks"; and "the whole world is at sixes and sevens." But before the end of this speech, the actress playing Sabina drops her character and speaks in her own voice as Miss Somerset, complaining that she does not understand the play in which she is performing. After the stage manager sticks his head out to reprimand her, she picks up where she left off and is joined on stage by Mrs. Antrobus. The women discuss the weather, the fact Sabina has let the lire go out, Mrs. Antrobus's devotion to her ungrateful children, and Sabina's past affair with Mr. Antrobus. Their conversation is then interrupted by a baby dinosaur sticking his head in the window to say it is cold, followed by the entrance of a telegraph boy who delivers a message from Mr. Antrobus saying he win be late and instructing them to keep the children warm by burning "everything but the Shakespeare."

Before the telegraph boy departs, he helps Mrs. Antrobus re-light the fire. The dinosaur and a mammoth—who behave like family pets—have come into the house, and Mrs. Antrobus soon calls her children in as well. Yelling out the door, she orders her son, Henry, to put down a stone that he has picked up (and is contemplating throwing at something or someone). She yells at her daughter, Gladys, to put down her skirt (which she has raised to entice men). The ensuing conversation reveals that Henry—who, as Sabina told the audience earlier, killed his brother in an "unfortunate accident"—was once called Cain. Soon, Mr. Antrobus returns home bearing his newly-invented wheel and offering humorous comments about his day. Before long he has to turn the animals outside in order to make room for the human refugees he has encountered on the way home—these wanderers include the poet Homer, the lawgiver Moses, a doctor, and a professor. In order to save these representatives of higher civilization—and themselves—the Antrobuses need to stoke the fire. Sabina, who, as Miss Somerset, had previously reassured the audience that in actuality "the world's not coming to an end," now turns to the audience and tells them to help fuel the fire: "Pass up your chairs everybody. Save the human race."

# Act II

Act II again opens with slide projections on the curtain: "Time tables for trains leaving Pennsylvania Station for Atlantic City. Advertisements of Atlantic City hotels, drugstores, churches, rug merchants; fortune tellers, Bingo parlors." These are followed by the announcer's voice again narrating the "News Events of the World." The news this time is that the hundred thousandth annual convention of the "Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans" is taking place in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and Mr. Antrobus has been elected president of the order.

The action begins with Mr. Antrobus giving a speech with the assistance of his wife, who whispers cues to him. He tells his listeners that "the watchword for the future" is "Enjoy Yourselves." His wife, however, who steps up to speak next as president of the "Women's Auxiliary Bed and Board Society," offers an alternate motto: "Save the Family." Throughout the act we see the conveners following Mr. Antrobus's advice to seek enjoyment, while the president himself is tempted to sacrifice duty to pleasure and pursue an affair with Sabina, who now appears as Miss Lily Sabina Fairweather, Miss Atlantic City, 1942. During the seduction scene, Miss Somerset again drops her character, refusing to speak her lines because she believes they will offend a friend of hers in the audience. She does not "think the theater is a place where people's feelings ought to be hurt."

Meanwhile, a fortune teller on the boardwalk offers advice to Sabina, and speaks words of warning to both the audience and the heedless conveneers. Mrs. Antrobus reprimands Gladys, who shows up in a sexually provocative outfit complete with red stockings, and Henry, who threatens a chair-pusher with his slingshot. As events on stage get more chaotic, a storm signal warns of a coming hurricane. At the end of the act, Mr. Antrobus is forced to abandon his plan to leave his wife for Sabina and instead must shepherd his family and two of every kind of animal onto a waiting ark.

# Act III

At the outset of Act III the curtain raises on a dark stage. The Antrobuses' Excelsior home is visible but the walls "lean helter-skelter.' The sound of a bugle is heard from off-stage and Sabina enters "dressed as a Napoleonic camp follower." Ensuing dialogue makes it clear that a seven-year war has just come to an end.

Moments after Sabina enters, the stage manager interrupts the action to announce that several actors have fallen sick with food poisoning. He Ihen asks the actor playing Mr. Antrobus to explain what is wrong. So Mr. Antrobus drops his character and tells the audience that the sick actors will be replaced by "a number of splendid volunteers," including his own dresser and Miss Somerset's maid. He then asks those in the audience to "just talk quietly among yourselves" while the stage manager quickly takes the volunteers through their parts. After this "rehearsal" is through, the action resumes with Mrs. Antrobus and Gladys, who holds a baby in her arms, emerging from a trapdoor in the floor.

Not long after Mrs. Antrobus, Gladys, and Sabina are reunited, Henry and Mr. Antrobus return from battle. Mr. Antrobus has come to recognize that Henry is "the enemy." Henry remains as angry as ever and swears to kill his father, but during their right. Miss Somerset again drops character and warns them not to play the scene, "You know what happened last night. Stop the play. Last night you almost strangled him." The actor playing Henry also steps out of character and confesses "something comes over [him]" when he plays the scene and the "emptiness of being hated" in his own life makes him want "to strike and fight and kill."

When the actors resume their parts, Sabina escorts Henry off stage while Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus begin a conversation in the living room which the women have put back in order. Mr. Antrobus explains he has momentarily lost "the desire to begin again, to start building"; but his wife, hearing the cries of her grandchild, tells him matter-of-factly that he will "have to get it back again." Sabina re-enters in her outfit from Act I, ready to barter some beef-cubes in order to go to the movies. She knows she should have turned the cubes over to "the Center downtown" but in her opinion "after anybody's gone through what we've gone through, they have a right to grab what they can find" and she's just "an ordinary girl" who "every now and then" needs to "go to the movies."

Sabina's comments remind Mr. Antrobus of one of the three things that motivated him to keep going, "the voice of the people in their confusion and their need." This, along with the thought of his family and his books, reinvigorates him. He picks up a book and, as he looks into it, the "volunteers" from the earlier rehearsal come forward to recite passages from Spinoza, Plato, Aristotle, and the Bible. At the conclusion of these recitations, the stage goes momentarily black, then the lights come up on the exact scene of the play's opening with Sabina speaking the same opening lines before pausing to tell the audience, "This is where you came in We have to go on for ages and ages yet You go home. The end of the play isn't written yet. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus! Their heads are full of plans and they're as confident as the first day they began—and they told me to tell you good night."

# Act 1, Part 1

## Act 1, Part 1 Summary

This stylistically and interpretively challenging play doesn't so much tell a story as explore the experience of being human. By placing theatrical and narrative innovation alongside more traditional explorations of the human condition, the play makes the (possibly ironic) thematic point that life's challenges and questions can all be resolved by sticking together as a family, be it the biological family or the universal family of humankind.

The play begins with an announcement over the theatre loudspeaker announcing how, immediately upon seeing the sunrise, a society proclaiming the end of the world postpones the arrival of that event for another twenty-four hours. The announcement also reveals that it's the middle of August, and that a wall of ice is moving into America. Finally, the announcement informs the audience that a wedding ring has been found, inscribed "From Eva to Adam" and names a verse from the Book of Genesis in the Bible. A slide show then begins, showing pictures of Mr. Antrobus, introduced as the inventor of the wheel, of his home in suburban New Jersey, and of Mrs. Antrobus, introduced as the inventor of the apron. Their children, Henry and Gladys, are also introduced, as is their maid, Sabina.

Sabina appears, dressed in a maid's uniform. As she dusts the Antrobus home, she speaks a long, comic monologue about the Antrobus family, referring to each member in turn and describing the fine qualities they each possess, which, according to her, exist alongside certain negative qualities. As she's commenting on Henry, she implies that he hits his older brother with a rock and is investigated by the police. She talks about how "Each new child that's born to the Antrobuses seems to them ... sufficient reason for the whole universe's being set in motion; and each new child that dies seems to them to have been spared a whole world of sorrow." Also as she talks, portions of the set either become unstable or disappear completely.

At the conclusion of her speech, she reminds herself to not think too much about sad things, recalling that a few years ago everyone got through the Depression "by the skin of our teeth!" At that moment she stops, apparently waiting for another character to make an entrance. Unsure of what to do, she starts again from the beginning of her monologue. A voice from offstage urges her to make something up, so the play can continue. She has difficulty thinking of what to say, then suddenly steps out of character and tells the audience she hates the play and can't understand why the author wants to write about all the troubles the human race has suffered. She adds that the author hasn't made up his mind where and how he wants to set it, and that she only took the part of Sabina because she hasn't worked in a long time.

Mrs. Antrobus comes in, telling Sabina she's let the fire go out. "Sabina" becomes Sabina again and gives Mrs. Antrobus two weeks notice that she's quitting. Mrs.

Antrobus asks whether Sabina has milked the mammoth. In an aside, "Sabina" comments again that she hates the play, and then returns to her character and tells Mrs. Antrobus that yes, she has milked the mammoth. When Mrs. Antrobus tells her to go and borrow some fire, Sabina begs to be allowed to stay, melodramatically telling Mrs. Antrobus it's too dangerous to go outside. When Mrs. Antrobus is unsympathetic, Sabina speaks negatively about her family. Mrs. Antrobus, in turn, tells Sabina how humiliated she's been in her own home since Mr. Antrobus brought Sabina home after kidnapping her. As they argue, a dinosaur sticks its head in through a window and complains about the cold. Mrs. Antrobus tells it go around the back of the house where it belongs. The dinosaur disappears and Mrs. Antrobus goes out.

A Telegraph Boy appears, but before he can come in, Sabina, with the help of Mrs. Antrobus, who rushes in answering Sabina's calls for help, blockades the door - apparently, the Antrobus family doesn't allow strangers in the house. The Dinosaur and a Mammoth slip past the barricade, come into the house and get comfortable. Meanwhile, the Telegraph Boy tells Sabina and Mrs. Antrobus he's got a message from Mr. Antrobus. Mrs. Antrobus lets him in and asks whether he's got something to light the fire. He says he does, and, as he settles down to start a fire, Sabina reminds Mrs. Antrobus that she's quitting in two weeks and goes out.

The Telegraph Boy and Mrs. Antrobus discuss the weather and the message from Mr. Antrobus, which says he's going to be late for dinner because he's busy developing the multiplication table. He also sings a song celebrating the Antrobus' anniversary. Sabina comes in to listen, and the Dinosaur and Mammoth howl along. Mrs. Antrobus describes the singing telegram as silly; Sabina retracts her resignation because she loves the unpredictability of life in the Antrobus household, and the Telegraph Boy (who, according to stage directions, is only twelve) tells Mrs. Antrobus he has two sons and wants her advice on how to protect them from the cold. Sabina says they're all going to die, but Mrs. Antrobus tells him to just keep as warm as he can and don't let his children see his worry. The Telegraph Boy thanks her, gives Mrs. Antrobus the last part of the message--that her husband has just invented the wheel, and leaves. Sabina says goodbye to him, and goes out in another direction.

## Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

The unpredictable narrative style of this play is easily its most noteworthy characteristic. Anyone watching or reading it can't help being struck by the variety of ways in which the author challenges, breaks down, and at times re-invents the way theatre is generally written and performed. It must be remembered that this play is first produced in the 1940's, a time when theatre in general and American theatre in particular, is usually conservative and traditional. Narrative elements in this play such as the simultaneous existence of different time frames, the era of the dinosaurs with the so-called present day, and actors breaking character and speaking to the audience are, at the time, new, disconcerting, and jarring.

It's possible that contemporary audiences, while more accustomed to experiments in story-telling technique, might themselves be disconcerted by the seeming narrative anarchy of the piece. All the unpredictability, however, does have a thematic point - to suggest that life itself is unpredictable. This is half of the play's thematic core. The other half can be inferred from one of the play's few consistent elements, Mrs. Antrobus' steadfast determination to protect and sustain her family. When everything is going haywire, Mrs. Antrobus remains completely focused on holding her family together. Together these two elements combine to portray the play's central theme - survival in a crazy world depends on faith in human relationships, and on living according to that faith.

Another noteworthy characteristic of the play is its basis in Biblical narrative. This is referred to in the opening announcement, in which the wedding ring seems clearly to belong to Eve of "Adam and Eve." This reference to Eve combines with Sabina's comment about Henry Antrobus hitting someone with a rock--as Adam and Eve's son, Cain does--and with the revelation in the following section that Henry is Cain, to suggest that Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus are Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve, according to the book of Genesis in the Bible, are the first humans and the originators of sin. Sin orginates when Eve breaks God's law and encourages Adam to do likewise, thereby causing God to banish them and ultimately all humanity from Paradise.

The play as a whole goes on to suggest that the Antrobuses, are not only the first humans but archetypes of humanity, individuals whose traits represent universal characteristics. Several such characteristics are glimpsed throughout the play. The most important characteristic is defined by the similar endings of each act - the Antrobus family is forced to start life over again in the same way as Adam and Eve when they are forced out of Paradise. In short, each act of the play reiterates a second key aspect of its thematic exploration of the nature of humanity. In addition to the importance of human relationships in inspiring survival, humans have an endless capacity to start over, with courage and faith that someday it will all have meaning.

The wall of ice is one of several symbols of destruction which recurs throughout the play, triggering the similarly recurring motif of humanity having to repeatedly start over. Given that the Antrobuses are archetypes of humanity, it's reasonable to infer that the wall of ice in this act, the flood in Act 2 and the war in Act 3 are also archetypes, representing forces against which humanity must struggle in order to triumph. The presence of such obstacles, it seems, is necessary for humanity to achieve greatness, a point made by Sabina in Act 3, when she comments on how she values the war because people are at their best. This point is foreshadowed here when the Antrobuses, against their instincts for self-preservation, behave charitably (at their best) by inviting refugees into their home. The point is made again in Act 2, when the Antrobuses become Noah and his family, welcoming animals into the ark to save them in the same way as the refugees are saved in this act.

# Act 1, Part 2

## Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Mrs. Antrobus calls for her children, shouting for Henry to put down the stone he's carrying because of what happened last time. Henry and Gladys come in, complaining about the cold. Mrs. Antrobus draws them close to offer warmth and comfort, tells them to be quiet and respectful when Mr. Antrobus comes home from his hard day at work, and then suddenly panics when she sees Henry's hair isn't covering his forehead. As she tries to scrub a mark off his forehead, Henry comments that two of his teachers called him by his old name: Cain. Mrs. Antrobus tells him to never say that name again, then turns her attention to Gladys, whom she urges to behave like a lady. She then notices that Gladys is wearing makeup, so loses her temper, and yells for Sabina to take Gladys into the kitchen and scrub her clean.

The sound of a man singing is heard. The family and the animals worry that it's a stranger, but it soon becomes clear that it's Mr. Antrobus, who shouts to be allowed in. When the doorway is cleared, he comes in, greets everyone with teasing cruelty, shows them the wheel, his new invention and smacks Henry to give him something to really remember this day. Mrs. Antrobus tells the children to go into the kitchen, saying she wants to talk to Mr. Antrobus alone.

When the children and Sabina have gone, Mrs. Antrobus asks her husband what he plans to do to save them from the cold. He repeatedly avoids the question, finally saying he doesn't know what to do, other than burn everything in the house. She's about to start doing just that when two refugees from the cold appear, asking to come in and warm themselves. Sabina rushes in to say there are more refugees at the back door. Mrs. Antrobus goes out to tell them to go away. Mr. Antrobus tells Sabina to make a giant pot of coffee and piles of sandwiches. Sabina suddenly drops her character again, and in an aside tells the audience that she's suddenly realized the play is about refugees. She starts to cry and the voices from offstage urge her to continue, but Sabina tells the audience not to take the play seriously.

Sabina goes out to make the sandwiches as Mrs. Antrobus comes in, saying the refugees at the back assert that Mr. Antrobus had told them to come by. Antrobus says it's true, adding there's a doctor in the group and reminding her that because so many of their children have died, it's good to have a doctor around. He adds that another is Judge Moses, the lawmaker. When Mrs. Antrobus says judges are of no use, Mr. Antrobus reminds her that if the ice melts and they survive, they'll need laws. He also says there are nine old women among the crowd, who are music teachers and artists. He convinces Mrs. Antrobus to let them all in, but Mrs. Antrobus insists the animals must go out. She takes them out as the refuges come in.

The refugees, include Judge Moses, Homer, a beggar with a guitar who is apparently a representation of the Ancient Greek poet of the same name, and the nine old women,

whom Mr. Antrobus introduces as the Nine Muses. As the Antrobuses go out to bring in the coffee and food, Homer sings a ballad in Ancient Greek, and Moses recites from the Bible in Ancient Hebrew. Sabina and the Antrobuses return and distribute sandwiches and coffee, with Sabina again saying she's going to quit. The refugees make small talk about the weather and about whether after all the work they've all done, this ice age means they've all worked for nothing. Mrs. Antrobus starts talking about her children, leading Moses to comment that Mrs. Antrobus once had two sons. Mrs. Antrobus distractedly recalls her other son, Abel. As the refugees comfort her, Sabina rushes in with the news that Henry has thrown a stone at a neighbor and probably killed him. Mrs. Antrobus runs out and quickly returns with Henry, who now has a bright red "C" on his forehead. She tries to defend Henry to his father; however, Mr. Antrobus angrily shouts for all the fires to be put out, saying it's no wonder the sun is dying and the earth is getting cold. Mrs. Antrobus tells the refugees to sing and Gladys to fetch Mr. Antrobus' slippers. She attempts to calm and comfort Mr. Antrobus, who is too upset to be calmed, talking distractedly about how they're all covered with blood as the result of Henry's actions.

Mrs. Antrobus tells Henry to cheer his father up by reciting the times tables. Henry does so and Gladys returns with the slippers, telling Mr. Antrobus how well she performed in school that day and begging him to look at her just once. Mr. Antrobus changes his mind, ordering that more wood put on the fire. He drills Henry in his times tables, and orders Mrs. Antrobus to teach Gladys the first verses of the Bible.

As Mrs. Antrobus quotes the Biblical story of the creation of the world and Henry quotes the multiplication tables, Sabina asks the audience to start passing up their chairs for the fire so the human race can be saved. Theatre ushers start passing up chairs, and Act 1 ends.

## Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

In this section, the positive aspects of being human, particularly the charity displayed towards the refugees by the Antrobuses, are vividly contrasted with the negative aspects, as personified by Mr. Antrobus' crudity and cruelty. The potential for human negativity is also personified by Henry/Cain, who is described later in the play as being an incarnation of pure evil. It eventually becomes clear as a result moments of cruelty and/or foolishness (such as Mr. Antrobus' seduction by Sabina in Act 2) that the play's view of humanity is by no means blinded to humanity's potential for monstrous behavior. But as is the case in this act, throughout the play such behavior is juxtaposed with actions similar to the charity displayed here. Through these repeated juxtapositions, the play makes the secondary thematic point that human relationships, specifically, charity and compassion, have the capacity to transcend the world's darkness and make life livable.

This point is reinforced by Sabina's breaking character and stating it to the audience. This functions on two levels - her breaking out of the artificial world of the play to comment on what is apparently reality parallels the way that charity breaks through evil

and selfishness. That being said, she doesn't get the point quite right - the play isn't about refugees, as she suggests, but about the treatment of refugees. The previously discussed idea that Adam and Eve, ie, the Antrobuses, were themselves refugees from paradise is important to remember here. Having been refugees themselves after they are cast out of Paradise, they're at least learning to have compassion for others. In other words, they've learned that positive human relationships are necessary to start over.

Another thematic point, albeit a relatively minor one in relation to the others in the play, can be found in the nature of the refugees in this act - the archetypal lawgiver (Moses), poet (Homer) and artists (the Muses, who in Greek mythology were the goddesses of several arts and sciences, including theatre and music). The point made by these references is that humanity is given its value by those who protect and illuminate the workings of the soul.

Mrs. Antrobus' anger at Gladys wearing makeup foreshadows a similar situation in Act 2, when Gladys appears wearing red stockings and Mrs. Antrobus again loses her temper. It is clear in both circumstances that Gladys represents humanity's capacity to be tempted into sin. Granted her so-called "sins" are relatively minor, but the fact remains that she's drawn into actions because other people do them - she wears makeup, she says, because other girls do it, and she puts on the stockings because she sees Sabina wearing similar ones. In short she's easily led, in the same way Eve in the Bible is led by the serpent. Is Sabina representative of the serpent? Perhaps - she certainly tempts Mr. Antrobus into sin in the next act of the play. Whether she is or she isn't, the point here is that giving in to desire, as opposed to consistently living with integrity, leads the Antrobus family (as representatives of all humanity) into trouble in Act 2.

The previously discussed idea that the end of each act represents both an ending and a beginning is reinforced at the end of this act by Mrs. Antrobus quoting the Biblical story of creation. In the same way as God created the world, she and her family, in the company of the surviving refugees, are about to create their new world. Overwhelmed by destruction, life is about to come to an end. The fact that the audience is asked by Sabina to help save the human race suggests that members of the audience are likewise responsible for sustaining the human race in the same way - or at least that the play is asking them to look at themselves in those terms.

"Abel," referred to by Mrs. Antrobus as her other son, is the name of the youngest son of Adam and Eve in the Bible, killed by Cain while in the throes of a jealous rage.

# Act 2, Part 1

## Act 2, Part 1 Summary

Similar to Act 1, this act begins with an announcement over the loudspeaker, describing the setting, Atlantic City, and how the international society of mammals, human division, has just elected a new president - Mr. Antrobus. He and Mrs. Antrobus appear as the announcement narrates his achievements, the most important of which is the classifying the animals, as well as those of his wife, the most notable of which has apparently been the invention of fried food. Mr. Antrobus gives a speech in which he celebrates the extinction of the dinosaur, the disappearance of the ice, the noble sacrifice of those who've died to get the human race where it is, and the beginning of a new day. He then debunks apparent accusations that in the moments before his birth he almost chose to be a bird or a fish instead of human, saying he's always been proudly human. Mrs. Antrobus then gives a speech in which she lists her discoveries - the tomato is edible, silkworms spin a thread that can be woven into cloth, and she personally does not believe that sleeping with a window open is healthy. In response to a question from a reporter, she admits that it is indeed her wedding anniversary, and that she and Mr. Antrobus have been married for five thousand years. She describes women's quest for marriage in terms that echo women's quest for the vote, and concludes by urging her fellow human beings to live by the slogan "Save the Family." An announcement comments on how Sabina wins a beauty contest judged by Mr. Antrobus, and that it had been hoped that she and other contestants would appear, but that the time has come instead to show the audience Convention City, and some of the people attending the convention of mammals, human division.

The setting changes to the boardwalk of Atlantic City, where there is a number of small shops. Among these is a bingo hall, from which emerges the sound of bingo numbers being called, and the stall of a Fortune Teller, who shouts out gloomy fortunes apparently at random. Sabina appears, asking the grumpy Fortune Teller whether Mr. Antrobus has come. When she says he hasn't, Sabina talks about her intention to take him away from his wife, take every man away from his wife, and turn the world upside down. The Fortune Teller tells her to stop being foolish and to go away. Sabina goes out, gathering a crowd of excited, flattering conventioneers around her as she goes.

The Fortune Teller then gives a long speech to the audience in which she heckles them about how they let their pasts slip away from them, how they're obsessed with their pasts, and how the immediate future holds the same thing for all of them - a deluge of flooding rain. She comments that before the rain comes, the audience will see shameful things, and that there will be some who believe that Mr. Antrobus should drown. She tells them they're wrong, adding that he will lead a handful to survive in the face of total destruction. She refers to how he'll save pairs of animals; it's clear that she's telling the story of Noah and the Ark, with Mr. Antrobus assuming the role of Noah. Conventioneers appear and jeer at her; she shouts at them, and they go away.

The Antrobus family appears, with Mrs. Antrobus telling Gladys how to behave and Henry having just fired a rock at someone with a slingshot. When confronted by his father, Henry complains that everyone is always pushing him around and that he's determined to make them all sorry. Mrs. Antrobus urges them all to calm down, but then loses her temper when she sees the man who spread the story about Mr. Antrobus wanting to be a fish (Act 2, Part 1). Mr. Antrobus in his turn calms Mrs. Antrobus down; the family argues about what they're going to do next, and Mr. Antrobus angrily says he's desperate for some relaxation. "A man," he says, can stand a family only just so long."

Sabina appears dressed in a seductive bathing suit. As Mrs. Antrobus asks her husband what he means by his last remark, he watches Sabina walk by and go out. Mrs. Antrobus recognizes her, but Mr. Antrobus tries to convince Mrs. Antrobus that the woman is not Sabina. Mrs. Antrobus finally says she doesn't want to talk about it any more, asking Mr. Antrobus what a particular sign along the boardwalk means. Mr. Antrobus tells her it's a storm signal warning of rain. Mrs. Antrobus starts to go out to get raincoats, but Gladys holds her back, saying she's happy being with her mother. Mrs. Antrobus says what would make Mrs. Antrobus happy is to see a whale. Henry says they're delegates at another division of the convention and offers to go find one, but Mrs. Antrobus says she's going to get those raincoats no matter what. She urges Mr. Antrobus to rest before he gives his broadcast and gives Henry and Gladys permission to go and play for ten minutes. As they go out, rowdy conventioneers appear and tease Mr. Antrobus about having become a family man. Mrs. Antrobus defiantly asks them what's wrong with having a family. They disappear without answering, and Mrs. Antrobus goes out.

## Act 2, Part 1 Analysis

The first and third parts of this section reinforce the previously discussed idea that the Antrobus family is intended to be viewed as archetypals of human beings. The speeches of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus represent positive human qualities such as courage, inquisitiveness, and inventiveness. Negative human qualities are represented by such things as Henry's capacity for violence, Mr. Antrobus' angry reaction to Henry and Mrs. Antrobus' anger at the passing. Mr. Antrobus' attention to Sabina, along with Gladys' appearance later in the act wearing stockings of the sexy sort worn by Sabina, represents humanity's capacity to be tempted.

In fact, throughout this act, Sabina is the embodiment of temptation, and the setting of this act in Atlantic City represents the way humanity is surrounded by temptation. Atlantic City is the east coast equivalent of Las Vegas, with gambling, exploitation, and titillation of the human being the main industries. As such, it's the perfect context for this act's allegorical retelling of the story of Noah's Ark.

An allegory is a style of narrative in which a contemporary experience represents symbolically a deeper, often Biblical, story. In this case, the story in question is that of Noah's Ark, in which God decides the world is too sinful to be allowed to continue so

resolves to destroy the earth so life can begin anew. As God prepares to inundate the world with rain, he instructs a righteous man, Noah, to build a giant boat in which he, his family, and representatives of every animal species on the planet will be preserved. There is no overt voice of God in *The Skin of our Teeth*; although it is possible to see the Fortune Teller, with her comments on humanity's obsession with the past and her warnings that humanity is in trouble, as a prophet of God.

Overall, the pattern of the story is the same - in a world of sin about to be destroyed by rain (indicated by the storm signal), a flawed, but righteous man, Mr. Antrobus, acts to preserve his family and indeed all life. Much of the action and dialogue of this act contains references to the Biblical story, which means that much of its narrative foreshadows the inevitable end - the deluge of rain, the destruction of humanity, and the necessity of starting over. Here is the second appearance of the play's repeated motif of destruction and beginning anew, first seen in Act 1 with the appearance of the ice and the quotation from Genesis. This theme is repeated in Act 3, with the end of the war and the restarting of the play.

The Fortune Teller's long and angry lecture to the audience is a manifestation of the play's thematic focus on humanity moving forward. Her very nature as a seer of the future embodies the point that moving ahead should be humanity's goal. Her angry comments about how humanity is always focused on the past are an overt criticism of what she, and the play, see as the human race's general perspective. Her comments about the ultimate goodness of Mr. Antrobus, in spite of his apparent nastiness, are particularly relevant. Given that Mr. Antrobus, as previously discussed, represents all of humanity, the Fortune Teller's sure faith in his virtues is essentially a statement of faith in all humanity. She can therefore be seen as a symbol of the play's thematic statement that civilization can, should, and will transcend destruction, sin and death.

# Act 2, Part 2

## Act 2, Part 2 Summary

As Mr. Antrobus sleeps, and Sabina and the Fortune Teller reappear, the latter urging Sabina to go ahead and seduce Mr. Antrobus. Sabina gets up her courage and starts talking to Mr. Antrobus about how she's a good girl who isn't the sort to usually enter beauty contests. Their conversation reveals that Sabina is using the last name Fairweather, and that she's intent upon urging Mr. Anrtobus to come with her to the beach and relax. She then turns to the audience, breaks out of her character, and says she isn't going to play the scene that follows but will summarize what happens. She explains that in the scene Mr. Antrobus decides to leave his wife. "Mr. Antrobus" and a Stage Hand, Fitzpatrick, insist that she play the scene properly. "Sabina" argues with them; Fitzpatrick threatens to report her to the Actors' Union, but "Sabina" continues to refuse, saying she has a friend in the audience in the same situation that Mrs. Antrobus will be in when Mr. Antrobus leaves her. She says she doesn't want to hurt her friend's feelings.

Fitzpatrick again insists that the scene be played; "Sabina" again refuses, so Fitzpatrick tells her to leave the stage. "Mr. Antrobus" speaks up and says it's all right to skip the scene. Fitzpatrick goes off; "Sabina" thanks Mr. Antrobus; they work out where to pick up the dialogue, and Sabina (back in character) talks about how most people don't have deep feelings, describing them as "people of straw." Sabina says that she and Mr. Antrobus are different because they feel deeply, and that except for pleasure and power, life is boring. She embraces Antrobus; he embraces her, and they go out.

Thunder rumbles distantly as Mrs. Antrobus appears. The storm signal indicates that the rain is closer. Gladys comes in wearing stockings the same color as Sabina's bathing suit. Mrs. Antrobus reacts angrily, but Gladys tells her Mr. Antrobus likes the color, and Mrs. Antrobus allows her to keep them on. She asks where Henry is, but Gladys seems reluctant to discuss it, leading Mrs. Antrobus to understand that he's gotten into trouble again. They hear Mr. Antrobus laughing with Sabina, and Gladys sits beside her mother, crying because Mrs. Antrobus doesn't like the stockings.

Broadcast officials appear, looking frantically for Mr. Antrobus. Mrs. Antrobus calmly tells them he's coming, and at that moment he and Sabina reappear. The broadcast officials help him get ready for the broadcast, but he has more important things on his mind - he tells Mrs. Antrobus he's leaving her. The sounds from the bingo hall become louder, the broadcast officials become more insistent, and Mrs. Antrobus says that after five thousand years of marriage, she believes she has the right to have some say in the future of her marriage. As the broadcast officials near hysteria, she tells her husband that she married him not for love but because he made her a promise, that the promises they both made compensates for both of their faults and makes the marriage. She illustrates what she believes can happen when such promises are broken by dramatically revealing Gladys' red stockings! Mr. Antrobus accuses Sabina of giving the

stockings to Gladys, then tells Gladys to go back to the hotel and take them off. Gladys says she has something to tell them about Henry, but Mrs. Antrobus forestalls her by throwing a bottle with a message into it (invisible to the audience) into the ocean. She says the message is a list of all the things a woman knows, talks about how women are nothing like anyone believes them to be, and says that if any man ever finds out the truth of what a woman is, "he'll learn why the whole universe was set in motion."

Mrs. Antrobus then tries to take Gladys back to the hotel, but Gladys breaks her mother's grip and tells Mr. Antrobus that Henry hit someone with a rock again, that the police are looking for Henry, and that she doesn't want to have anything to do with her father ever again. As she runs off Mr. Antrobus starts to go after her, but Sabina tells him not to worry, everything will be forgotten in a hundred years. She then turns his attention to his broadcast. The broadcast officials thank her for her help and lead Mr. Antrobus to the microphone.

Before Mr. Antrobus starts his speech, he comments in awe about how all the animals, including the whales Mrs. Antrobus wanted to see, are coming onto the beach two by two. Darkness falls, the other characters disappear, and Mr. Antrobus begins to speak. Immediately he's interrupted by the Fortune Teller, who tells him to take his family into the boat at the end of the pier into which all the animals are climbing. He says his family won't come; the Fortune Teller convinces him they will; Mr. Antrobus calls them, and Sabina urges him to stay with her. Mrs. Antrobus appears with Gladys, hands her over to her father, and then goes out to look for Henry. Sabina remains convinced that the storm isn't going to be as bad as everybody thinks, but then begins to panic as Mr. Antrobus begins to organize the animals as they climb into the ship.

Gladys helps Mr. Antrobus keep order; Sabina begs to be taken with him; conventioneers appear and mock him for being afraid, and Mrs. Antrobus appears, calling for Henry by his real name, Cain. Henry runs onto the boat and is embraced by his mother as they, Mr. Antrobus and Gladys climb the ramp into the ship. Sabina begs to be allowed onto the ship. Mrs. Antrobus hastily allows her on as the conventioneers reappear, taunting the Fortune Teller. The Antrobus family and Sabina disappear, the noise from the bingo hall gets again louder, the Fortune Teller taunts the conventioneers whom she says are about to die, and then she looks out at the water at the Antrobuses and their ship. She shouts to them "Think it over! A new world to make!" On that note, the act ends.

## Act 2, Part 2 Analysis

The first thing to note about this complex sequence of scenes is the way the parallels to the story of Noah's Ark manifest. There are few parallels in the first part of the scene, which deals primarily with Sabina's attempted seduction of Mr. Antrobus. Later in the act, however, the parallels become very clearly drawn. These include the heckling conventioneers, whose actions represent those people who ridiculed Noah for building the boat, and the broadcast Mr. Antrobus is to make, which represents Noah's attempts to spread word of the impending flood among the people.

Other parallels include the way the animals climb into "the ark" two by two, and the way Noah/Mr. Antrobus rescues his family. It's interesting to note that Sabina is allowed to get on board as well. This suggests that she, in spite of her apparent character flaws and weakness, is as much a member of the "family of humanity" as the Antrobuses. Herein again is the suggestion that humanity, while flawed, is worth preserving. This, however, raises questions about the nature of the character of the Fortune Teller. Why isn't she allowed on "the ark" as well? Perhaps she represents the voice of God, an idea discussed in the analysis of Act 2, Part 1. If the Fortune Teller is the voice of God, she doesn't get on the boat because she doesn't need to. As God's representative her spirit lives on, partly to remind the conventioneers of their folly in not living better lives and partly to remind Mr. Antrobus that he has a duty to make the new world better. Here, again, is the repetition of the motif the Antrobus as humanity starting over after calamity.

The second question about the Fortune Teller is this - if she is the voice of God and the embodiment of faith in humanity, why does she urge Sabina to tempt Mr. Antrobus? One possible answer lies in the traditional belief that God wants human beings to be tempted, so they can choose not to give in to temptation, and therefore glorify both God and God's commandments. If this is true,then it is true not only in terms of Mr. Antrobus, but in terms of Sabina as well - she wants Sabina to realize the foolishness of her ways. Sabina is, after all, as flawed and as safety-worthy in the eyes of God (and the play) as the Antrobuses. This in turn offers a possible explanation for Sabina's breaking character and refusing to play out the full seduction scene. In doing so "Sabina" clearly chooses compassion over pain in terms of her friend in the same way that the Antrobus' demonstrate compassion to the refugees in Act 1.

If there is hope for Sabina, the play (and the Fortune Teller) are saying, there is hope for all humanity. The point is reiterated even further in Act 3 in the scene when Henry and Mr. Antrobus (inspired by Sabina) break character and choose to connect on a humanist level rather than confront on an angry, so-called evil level.

Gladys' stockings can be seen here in the same light as her makeup in Act 1 - as manifestations of the human capacity to be tempted. The fact that she is saved restates the play's thematic point that humanity, even though it's flawed, is worthy of a second chance. The point is restated yet again when Henry, too, is allowed to be saved.

Other telling points in this scene include the constant calling of bingo numbers, which gives the sense that all life, and not just life in Atlantic City, is a gamble, and Mrs. Antrobus' comment on the nature of womanhood. Mrs. Antrobus' comment must be considered a somewhat radical statement given that the play is written at a time when there are still States in America where women do not have the vote. Finally, an irony that comes and goes so quickly that it's possible to miss it is the fact that Sabina is given the last name Fairweather, ironic since the weather in this act is anything but fair.

# Act 3, Part 1

## Act 3, Part 1 Summary

As the act begins, the set consists of the ruins (crooked walls, overturned furniture) of the Antrobus home from Act 1. There is the glow of fire in the background. Sabina appears in rags, calling for Mrs. Antrobus and Gladys. Fitzpatrick, the stage hand from Act 2, appears, followed by all the members of the company. He explains that several actors have been taken ill with food poisoning. He announces that members of the company's production team, including a couple of costume assistants, will be taking over the roles of the ill performers. He describes the roles they are to play - the hours of the night as portrayed by philosophers. In other words, the substitute actors play the philosophers playing the time. Fitzpatrick briefly coaches the replacements. Their lines refer to the futility of everyday life and to the power of the mind springing from divine energy. Satisfied that the substitutes are ready, Fitzpatrick leads them off and tells Sabina to continue. Sabina starts the act over again, calling for Gladys and Mrs. Antrobus. She wanders offstage, still calling.

Mrs. Antrobus and Gladys appear, coming up through a trapdoor in the floor of the stage. It's revealed that Gladys has had a baby. As Mrs. Antrobus looks around, commenting on how different it is to see women walking freely down the middle of the street, Sabina runs back on, telling them the war's over. She's happy and surprised to see Gladys' baby, reveals that she's seen Mr. Antrobus on his way home, and urges Mrs. Antrobus to get changed and cleaned up. Mrs. Antrobus asks who won the war. Sabina doesn't tell her, but urges her to hurry. After Gladys and Mrs. Antrobus go back through the trap door, Sabina shouts to them that Mr. Antrobus is still inventing things, is determined to end laziness and idiocy, and wants to be reunited with his books. Books are handed up to her as she chatters about what the world will be like now that it's back at peace, how she enjoyed the war because everybody was at their best, and how Mr. Antrobus is still angry at Henry.

Henry, dressed in a tattered uniform and covered with dirt, appears and listens as Sabina describes him as the enemy. Henry confronts her; Sabina tells Henry that his father is determined to kill Sabina, but she's not afraid of him; Henry begins kicking the books all over the stage. She tells Henry to think of what his mother and sister will think; Henry tells her they never cared about him; Sabina says they love him, and he shouts that he doesn't want to be loved. Sabina tells Henry that he does want to be loved, and that she can hear it in his every word. Mrs. Antrobus and Gladys appear, dressed in their costumes from Act 1. They greet Henry happily, offering him food, saying his bedroom's still the same as it was, and telling him he's back home where he belongs. In the middle of his arguments against his having any of home, Henry falls asleep, leading Sabina to comment sarcastically on how he's "the terror of the world." Mrs. Antrobus tells Sabina to get the room tidied for Mr. Antrobus. Sabina pulls a rope that has magically appeared and the walls of the set start to right themselves. Meanwhile, Mrs. Antrobus and Gladys put the furniture where it belongs. As they do so, Sabina

comments on how they're always starting over, and wonders aloud about why they bother, given that someday life on earth will all end anyway. Mrs. Antrobus speaks spiritedly to her about how too many people have fought and died to give up, and about how there can be no doubt this world has work to do and that work will be done. She sends Sabina out to the kitchen and Sabina goes out, grumbling. Mrs. Antrobus congratulates herself on her speech, but then notices she's almost woken Henry, who's talking in his sleep about how his life has always been obstructed. Mrs. Antrobus calms him, and Gladys goes out to hold her baby to the sky and show him there's no reason to be afraid any more. After she goes, Mrs. Antrobus takes one last look at Henry, who's thrashing restlessly in his sleep, and goes out to the kitchen.

## Act 3, Part 1 Analysis

The essential purpose of the beginning of the act, the rehearsing of non-actors into the roles of the philosophers, is to suggest that philosophical truths can be found in the minds, hearts and belief systems of ordinary people living everyday lives. However, the play is not suggesting that the works of philosophers are to be ignored - on the contrary, the attention paid by both the narrative and Mr. Antrobus to such works suggests that books and learning are a profound and necessary source if important truths. The training of the non-actors simply suggests that books are not the only source.

Meanwhile, the lines that the substitute actors learn foreshadow their reappearance at the end of the play. At that point, the actors represent stages in the human thought process, which eventually lead to the determination to start over - hopelessness, thoughtfulness, and forward thinking. It's interesting to note how, at the beginning of the act when the Antrobus situation seems most hopeless, it's only the first two actors that are rehearsed.

Additionally, it's interesting to note that the war is never named - it's not a world war, the Civil War, the War of Independence, the Crimean War or any particular war at all. The devastation of this war is the devastation of war in general. Damage to humanity is still damage no matter what cause is being fought over, hope in the face of such conflict is still hope, and the capacity for both rage and transcendence as embodied in the characters of Henry and Mr. Antrobus, particularly in their conflict in the following section, is still the same. War, like the ice in Act 1 and the flood in Act 2, represents destruction in general, with the war here representative of humanity's capacity to destroy itself.

If the war represents destruction, Sabina's re-construction of the set and her debate with Mrs. Antrobus over the futility/necessity of starting over represents humanity's capacity for starting over, and the play's focus on that aspect of human existence. The following section, highlighted by the confrontation between Henry and Mr. Antrobus, suggests that reconstruction doesn't take place only in terms of the physical environment. It can, and must, take place in terms of human relationships and connection as well.

# Act 3, Part 2

## Act 3, Part 2 Summary

As Henry continues to mutter and thrash, Mr. Antrobus appears, wearing a long overcoat. He listens as Henry shouts angrily about tearing everything down and starting again. As he continues, Mr. Antrobus takes out a gun. Henry wakes himself up and confronts his father. Stage directions describe him as "a representation of strong unreconciled evil" as he challenges Mr. Antrobus to shoot him. He says he's got no family, doesn't want any, wants no-one telling him what to do, and that he's completely alone in the world. Mr. Antrobus tells him war is a pleasure compared to the prospect of trying to build a new life with Henry in the middle of it.

Henry promises to go away where he can be free. Mr. Antrobus' manner suddenly changes as he asks Henry to stay and try again. Henry refuses, indicating he has no desire to live the kind of polite, quiet life he thinks Mr. Antrobus wants him to live. Mr. Antrobus vows to continue fighting Henry, saying they both want freedom but that until Henry thinks of it as something everyone has a right to, Mr. Antrobus will fight to destroy Henry. After arguing over why Henry comes back at all, Mr. Antrobus says Henry has to behave himself when his mother returns.

As Mrs. Antrobus and Sabina come back in, Henry angrily insists that no-one can tell him what to do and vows again to be free, if he has to kill everybody to do it. He reaches out to strangle Mr. Antrobus ... but then Sabina breaks character and tells them to stop the scene, reminding the two actors that the previous night, "Henry" almost strangled "Mr. Antrobus" for real. This leads "Henry" to apologize, and to explain that he had an awful, deprived childhood that felt to him like he was being deprived of life. He says that living that way resulted in him feeling empty inside, and that that emptiness came to be filled with the desire to kill. As Sabina insists that "Henry's" story isn't true, "Mr. Antrobus" says that there's emptiness in him as well - working so hard has caused him to cease to live. Sabina takes "Henry" out. As he goes he apologizes to "Mr. Antrobus," saying that when the play is performed the next night, the scene will proceed as normal.

## Act 3, Part 2 Analysis

This scene contains the play's thematic, emotional and narrative climax, the highest point of emotion and confrontation as the human capacity for forgiveness, compassion and transcendence, embodied by Mr. Antrobus, confronts the equally-human capacity for anger, bitterness and destruction, embodied by Henry. What's particularly important to note here is that true reconciliation occurs only when "Antrobus" and "Henry" are allowed to speak - the true nature of the people on stage acting out humanity's key struggle. By employing the device of having characters break character, the play is suggesting that the struggle between good and evil is as much an illusion, an altered state of reality, as the play is. In other words, the capacity for transcendent human

relations, for compassion and forgiveness, lies at the essential core of the human experience. This, the play is saying, is truly how humanity reinvents itself and survives in the face of both external evil (the war) and spiritual evil (hatred). This is true freedom.

# Act 3, Part 3

## Act 3, Part 3 Summary

Mrs. Antrobus and Mr. Antrobus, now back in character, discuss Mr. Antrobus' war wound, the street party celebrating the end of the war, and how Mr. Antrobus has lost the desire to go on in life. He speaks at length about how, while he was in combat, he used to imagine possibilities for making the world better, but adds that since the war has ended he's lost his desire to make those possibilities a reality. Mrs. Antrobus tells him that while she and Gladys were in hiding, they console themselves with the belief that he will find a way to make things better. She urges him to find the desire to rebuild the world, saying they can suffer whatever's necessary.

Sabina returns and asks permission to go out and join the celebration. She also asks to go to the movies, explaining that the people running the show aren't taking only money but are accepting any kind of payment. She adds that she's got a handful of dried soup cubes that she plans to use. Mrs. Antrobus tells her the cubes should be given to charity. Sabina angrily tells her and Mr. Antrobus that everybody has a right to grab what they can find, adding that if Mr. Antrobus had realized that "dog eat dog was the rule in the beginning and always will be" he'd have had a better life. She breaks down into tears, realizes that she has to do the right thing, and hands Mrs. Antrobus the soup cubes. Sabina then apologizes to Mr. Antrobus for what she said, but adds that every once in a while she's just got to get out and escape. Mrs. Antrobus allows her to keep one cube so she can go to the movies.

As Sabina goes out, Mr. Antrobus reveals, through laughter, that his spirit has been renewed, and tells Mrs. Antrobus that he recalls three aspects to life that created harmony and hope when he was at his lowest - the needs of the world, and the thought of his family. Recollection of the third thing is interrupted by his sudden asking for his books, but the juxtaposition suggests that the third thing is intellectual and spiritual guidance. He comments on how studying his books the last time he started over helped him rebuild the world, adding that he knows that every good thing in the world stands on the edge of destruction but that all he asks for is a chance. He talks about how humanity has come a long way, how it's still learning, and how the steps of humanity's journey are marked by books. He tells how he used to pass the time in combat by imagining each hour represented a philosopher.

At that moment, the previously rehearsed substitute performers appear, reciting the lines they quoted at the beginning of the act. As Henry appears and listens, a previously unseen substitute appears last, quoting the first words in the Bible: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth ..." continuing the the quote and concluding with "and the Lord said let there be light, and there was light." Lights suddenly disappear from the stage. A bell tolls briefly. Just as suddenly, lights go back up. Sabina is in the same place and starts speaking the same words as at the beginning of the play. After a few lines she breaks character, telling the audience that the actors have to do the play

over and over and over again, that the audience should go home, that Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus are confident and full of plans ... and told Sabina to bid the audience goodnight.

## Act 3, Part 3 Analysis

The scene with the soup cubes is yet another manifestation of the play's thematically relevant focus on compassion. In the way the Antrobus family is compassionate to the refugees in Act 1, and all living things in Act 2, Sabina is nudged into compassion for the destitute here. Also in this scene can be seen a warning against greed and being self-serving. Sabina is clearly torn between the extremes of greed and compassion and generosity; Sabina choosing compassion dramatizes the play's key thematic point. Interestingly, the play allows her to keep one soup cube. The suggestion here is that there's a distinction between taking care of oneself and being self-centered, between self-pity and sustaining self worth. This distinction is at the core of the action of the rest of this section, as Mrs. Antrobus struggles to shake Mr. Antrobus out of his self pity and renew his sense of self-respect and courage. Their dialogue can be seen as an attempt made by the play as a whole to waken humanity in general, or at least the audience, to the same hope and faith in the future

At the end of the act and the play, the motif of endings/beginnings appears for the last time. At the beginning of this act, two of the three verses are heard, and can be interpreted as the first two stages in the process of humanity choosing to reinvent itself and fully live. At that point, however, the third verse (in which the beginning officially begins) isn't heard. It is, however, heard in this last act - one of the first verses of the Bible, the description of God's creation of the world. Its inclusion here suggests that the family of humanity, as represented by the Antrobus family, is at a simultaneous ending and beginning - the ending of a life without faith (in God or in humanity), and the beginning of a life aware of that faith.

There is, however, one last point to be made, and it comes in the theatrically engaging re-starting of the play. Sabina starting her first monologue again represents the idea that the journey towards a deeper understanding of humanity is one that humanity needs to make again and again. This idea is reinforced by "Sabina's" suggestion that the actors have to do the play again and again - life on stage, life in the world, and human relationships all have to be relived and reinvented. As the action of the play has indicated, specifically in the confrontations between Henry and Mr. Antrobus, getting humanity to the point where its ready to start the reinvention process is always a close call ... but, the play is saying, somehow humanity gets there, if only by *The Skin of our Teeth.*

# Characters

## George Antrobus

Mr. Antrobus is the father of not only a typical suburban American family but also the entire human race. The play's central character, he possesses the virtues and flaws of both the biblical Adam and the American Everyman. The inventor of the wheel and the alphabet, he "comes of very old stock and has made his way up from next to nothing." In Act I, he is the hardworking and innovative businessman who loves his family and values his books and must preserve them all from the approaching Ice Age. In Act II, he is the President of the Order of Mammals who is tempted to leave his wife for a beauty contest winner, but with the onslaught of catastrophic rains, he returns to his family and loads them—along with his potential mistress and two of every kind of animal—onto a ship that will withstand the coming flood. And finally in Act in, he returns to his family after a seven-year war, ready to unearth his books and rebuild civilization.

## Gladys Antrobus

The daughter of Mr. and Mrs Antrobus, Gladys is constantly admonished to act like a lady, put down her dress, and not wear makeup or red stockings. Her mother reminds her that she should try to be as perfect as Mr. Antrobus thinks she is, and she does attempt to please her father by reciting lessons. But in Act in she appears with an apparently illegitimate baby which seems to be the result of her Irrepressible sexuality.

## Henry Antrobus

The son of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, Henry is introduced as "a real, clean-cut American boy" who killed his brother in "an unfortunate accident." Later dialogue reveals that the dead brother was named Abel and Henry—who has a red mark on his forehead—used to be called Cain. These references clearly remind the audience of the biblical story of the two brothers. Henry demonstrates his violent nature throughout the play. In Act I Sabina reports he has "killed the boy that lives next door"; in Act II he threatens people with his slingshot; in Act III he expresses his desire to kill his father. Although Mrs. Antrobus always loves her son despite his evil character, Mr. Antrobus acknowledges in Act III that Henry is "the enemy" who starts wars and disrupts peace.

## Maggie Antrobus

Mrs. Antrobus is both the ideal suburban wife and the archetypal earth mother. She uncomplainingly endures nature's disasters, her husband's infidelities, and her children's disobedience, always facing each new crisis with energy and determination to survive. President of the Excelsior Mothers' club, "an excellent needlewoman" who "invented the apron," she "lives only for her children." Entirely defined by her domestic

role, her motto is to "Save the Family," and in each Act of the play she manages to do just that.

## Fred Bailey

The Captain of the Ushers, Fred is one of the backstage workers called forward in Act III to take the place of actors who have fallen sick with food poisoning.

## Broadcast Official

In Act II, this man is trying, in the midst of chaotic activity, to get Mr. Antrobus to the microphone to give a broadcast to the conventions of the world.

## Cain

*See* Henry Antrobus

## Chair Pushers

Wilder's stage directions for Act II, using the sort of stereotypical racial designations typical of the years preceding the Civil Rights movement, note that "three roller chairs, pushed by melancholy Negroes, file by empty. Throughout the act they traverse the stage in both directions."

## Conveners

Six conveners—attendees of the Annual Convention of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals—appear throughout Act II, walking on the Boardwalk. Determined to enjoy themselves, they do not heed the Fortune Teller's warnings about the coming rain. Engaged in drinking, gambling, and other sorts of revelry, they taunt Mr. Antrobus about being domesticated and tied to his family.

## Dinosaur

The baby Dinosaur Dolly appears on the Antrobus's front lawn in Act I, is allowed in out of the cold, and behaves like a family pet. At the end of the Act when more room is needed for human refugees inside the house, Mr. Antrobus sends it and the Mammoth outside again, presumably to face extinction in the face of the oncoming ice age.

## Doctor

The Doctor is the first refugee who comes into the Antrobus home in Act I.

## Dolly

*See* Dinosaur

## Esmerelda

*See* Fortune Teller

## Miss Lily-Sabina Fairweaiher

*See* Sabina

## Mr. Fitzpatrick

The stage manager who comes out front at several points to deal with problems, such as Miss Somerset's refusal to act certain scenes or the illness of other actors which necessitates their being replaced by volunteers.

## Fortune Teller

The Atlantic City Fortune Teller who appears in Act II offers advice and words of wisdom to Sabina and other characters. The Fortune Teller also speaks directly to the audience, saying that it is easier to tell the future than to understand the past and that the Antrobuses are a reflection of those watching the play. Her comments point to the themes and concepts Wilder seeks to highlight.

## Frederick

*See* Mammoth

## Mammoth

The Mammoth comes into the Antrobus home in Act I along with the Dinosaur. Both animals act like pets until Mr. Antrobus sends them outside at the end of the Act.

## Judge Moses

The third refugee who enters the house in Act I, Judge Moses is an elderly Jewish man wearing a skull cap. The Judge's recitation in Hebrew, along with Mr. Antrobus's comment that this is the man "who makes all the laws," suggests that this is the biblical

Moses who led the Jews out of Egypt and received the Ten Commandments from God in the Old Testament.

## Muses

The three sisters—Miss E. Muse, Miss T. Muse, and Miss M. Muse—enter the Antrobus home in Act I along with the other refugees. Then-name and relationship suggests they are the sister goddesses from Greek mythology who inspired song and poetry.

## Hester

The wardrobe mistress, Hester, is another backstage worker called forward in Act HI to replace one of the actors who have fallen sick with food poisoning.

## Homer

The second refugee, "a blind beggar with a guitar," who comes into the house in Act I. Homer is "an old man" and "particular friend" of Mr. Antrobus. His name and Mr. Antrobus's comment that it was this man who "really started off the A.B.C.'s," suggest to the audience that this is the poet Homer who authored the Greek epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.*

## Ivy

Miss Somerset's maid Ivy is one of the backstage workers called forward in Act III to take the place of actors who have fallen sick with food poisoning.

## Lily Sabina

*See* Sabina

## Sabina

The character of Sabina is described in the stage directions for Act I as "straw blonde" and "over-rouged"; she carries a feather-duster and plays the stock role from farce of the smart-mouthed maid. Her mercurial emotions, pessimism, and desire to have fun distinguish her from the unflinching, resilient, and pragmatic Antrobuses The sexy Sabina—whose name variations are meant to remind the audience of the biblical stories of the Sabine women and Lihth (in biblical legend, Lilith was Adam's first wife who was supplanted by Eve)—is the opposite of the maternal Mrs. Antrobus. A house servant and Mr. Antrobus's former mistress in Act I, Sabina appears in Act II as the winner of an Atlantic City beauty contest who is determined to lure Mr. Antrobus away from his wife.

She reappears in Act in as a returning camp follower whose numerous liaisons have left her wishing "never... to kiss another human being" again.

Not far into the first act, the actress playing Sabina, Miss Somerset, steps out of her role and addresses the audience in her own voice, revealing that she hates the play but has taken the part out of financial necessity. Miss Somerset will drop out of character several more times during the course of the play to express similar dissatisfactions. Her side comments, both as Sabina and Miss Somerset, provide much of the play's humor.

## Miss Somerset

*See* Sabina

## Mr. Tremayne

A dresser for the actor playing Mr. Antrobus, Mr Tremayne is one of the backstage workers called forward in Act HI to take the place of actors who have fallen sick with food poisoning.

## Ushers

These two ushers rush down the theater aisles with chairs when Sabina calls out to the audience at the end of Act I, asking everyone to pass up their chairs for the fire to "save the human race."

# Themes

## Absurdity

Much of the humor in *The Skin of Our Teeth* derives from Wilder's use of bizarre juxtapositions which place the characters in absurd situations and highlight the ludicrous aspects of seemingly ordinary events. Combining elements of twentieth-century suburban America with events from the historical and mythological past creates an odd world where a middle-class family can have a dinosaur and mammoth for pets, the Antrobuses can celebrate their 5,000th wedding anniversary, and the children can recite poems even though their father has only just invented the alphabet.

## American Exceptionalism

By presenting his allegorical parents of the human race as a conventional American middle-class couple, Wilder reinforces Americans' belief in the exceptional nature of their country and its citizens. Mr. Antrobus's virtues of inventiveness, resilience, and diligence are those of the ideal American entrepreneur, and the family's continued ability to start from nothing and achieve greatness is the essence of the American dream. The play suggests the best human characteristics are also the best American qualities.

## Illusion vs. Reality

While traditional realistic plays try to create a "real" world on the stage, encouraging viewers to forget that they are watching actors play roles in a fictional drama, Wilder constantly interrupts this sort of theatrical illusion to remind the audience that they are watching a drama. When actors step out of their roles and speak directly to the audience, they highlight the fact that this is a performance taking place on a stage, a fictional world that can be altered and adapted by the ordinary people who are putting it together. Wilder repeatedly reminds the audience of the realities of sets, actors, and scripts, disrupting the conventions of naturalistic theater.

## Cycle of History

*The Skin of Our Teeth* emphasizes the repetitive nature of human history. The Antrobuses have faced disasters in the past, overcome more disasters during the course of the drama, and are ready to engage in further struggles at the performance's end. Wilder emphasizes the circular quality of the characters' lives, each act finds them starting over again. The play concludes with the exact same words and situation with which it began—another reminder that the cycle of history (and human existence) is on-going.

## Family

Wilder's play both parodies and idealizes the image of the nuclear family. George and Maggie Antrobus are extreme examples of the masculine provider and the feminine caregiver. His enthusiasm for his inventions and books and her single-minded devotion to her children might be viewed as humorously exaggerated. Yet, their adherence to their stereotypical gender roles seems to contribute to the survival of the human race in each act, suggesting that the perpetuation of civilization depends upon the perpetuation of a traditional family structure in some form.

## Good and Evil

The character of Henry, formerly known as Cain, emphasizes the constant presence of evil in the world. The angry and violent Henry is part of the human family—and appears in every act—suggesting that evil can never be left behind. Henry's fight with his father towards the end of the play illustrates the on-going struggle between good and evil. Wilder interrupts this fight, however, leaving it unresolved (as real world clashes between such forces often end). The play suggests that as humanity enters each new era, it always brings both its good and evil impulses along.

## Human Condition

Wilder's characters exemplify basic human qualities and encounter basic human experiences. They illustrate the unchanging facts of the human condition. Representing in turn intelligence, maternal love, violence, lust, selfishness, and determination, the Antrobuses and Sabina endure work, betrayal, natural disaster, and war. In his depiction of them and their strangely timeless world, Wilder underscores the best and worst aspects of the human condition: humanity possesses the will and ability to survive and yet must repeatedly confront (and overcome) its own destructive tendencies.

# Style

## Allegory

An allegory is a narrative in which the characters and events can be read both literally and figuratively. In the case of *The Skin of Our Teeth,* the Antrobuses can be read as ordinary people (a middle-class American couple) and as allegorical figures (Adam and Eve, the progenitors of humankind). The action of the play can be viewed literally, as the experiences of a particular family, and allegorically, as the story of human history. Wilder, with both character names (such as Henry a.k.a. Cam and Sabina) and explicit comments, emphasizes the allegorical nature of his play.

## Anti-Illusion Theater

Anti-Illusion theater was pioneered by German playwright BertoltBrecht *(The Threepenny Opera),* who believed an audience should remain conscious of the physical realities of performance and not give into the illusion that events depicted on stage are real. Like Brecht and Italian dramatist Lmgi Pirandello *(Six Characters in Search of an Author),* Wilder uses various techniques to break the theatrical illusion. Both by presenting actors who drop out of character, comment on their lines, and speak directly to the audience and by bringing "backstage" figures in front of the curtain, he calls attention to the efforts that go into producing a theatrical work, prompting viewers to think about how and why a story is told in a certain way. In so doing, Wilder engages in meta-theater, creating a play that comments on the process of creating a play. (Meta is a prefix placed before any creative work that is self-referential; metafiction is perhaps the best-known of this form, with the writings of John Barth exemplifying the genre.)

## Characterization

Wilder does not try to present complex multi-faceted characters in *The Skin of Our Teeth* but instead presents each person on stage as a generalized type. Every character is easily identified with an archetypal role—the mother/nurturer (Mrs. Antrobus), the temptress (Sabina), the provider (Mr. Antrobus)—and exhibits the personality traits traditionally associated with this role. These simple and flat characterizations, along with the technique of having actors interrupt the action and comment about the nature of the play, keeps the audience from identifying with the characters and destroys the illusion that the Antrobuses are "real" people. It is interesting to note, however, that even though the "actors" playing the roles in *The Skin of Our Teeth* do break character and address the audience—presenting themselves as real people—they themselves are characters created for the purpose of anti-illusion theatre. While Miss Somerset may seem a more tangible person than Sabina, she is in fact just another character created by Wilder. The playwright's purpose, however, is not to provide the actors with a forum to address the

play process but to make the audience aware of the theatrical process they are viewing and provide a contrast to the broad character types.

## Farce

Wilder's play employs many elements of farce— a comedic theatrical form characterized by broadly drawn characters, improbable situations, and physical humor. Sabina's character of the seductive, inefficient, wise-cracking maid is a stock figure in farce. Similarly, incongruous images such as a pet dinosaur curled up in front of the family fireplace, reflect staging characteristic of farce. Other farcical elements include Henry's violent tendencies (he is constantly warned against committing violent acts) and Gladys's nymphomania (in the first act her mother yells at her to lower her skirt, an action she presumably undertakes to attract men to have sex with her).

## Juxtaposition

Throughout the play Wilder juxtaposes the modern and the ancient, the momentous and the insignificant, the serious and the silly. These ludicrously opposed images and ideas both produce humor and emphasize the simultaneous greatness and absurdity of humankind. A good example of this is found in Mr. Antrobus's qualities as an inventor and an educated man. The newsreel at the play's opening informs the audience that George Antrobus has just invented the wheel and the alphabet despite the obvious fact that the society in which he lives has already lived with archetypal inventions such as these for many years.

Wilder plays with audiences' notion of linear time by setting his play in past historical epochs and in 1940s New Jersey simultaneously. The three acts take place during the Ice Age, the Great Flood, and the Napoleonic Wars respectively, yet the characters dress and act like twentieth-century Americans. The play's notion of time is further complicated by the Antrobus's apparent agelessness (they have been married 5,000 years) as well as the repetitive cycle of events (at the end the play starts over where it began). This use of tame emphasizes the play's message about humanity's ability to endure through the ages, while also contributing to Wilder's goal of reminding the audience of the non-reality of the staged events.

# Historical Context

Wilder began writing *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1940 at a time of great political and cultural change. As the 1930s drew to a close, Americans found themselves in an increasingly urban and secular world where market forces took precedence over moral ideals and psychology took the place of religion. The ideas of Sigmund Freud, a German psychologist who argued that the unconscious mind significantly impacted human behavior, greatly influenced the art of the era. Experimental movements in visual art, such as surrealism, reflected artists' attempts to move beyond traditional aesthetic standards they felt did not do justice to the imaginative resources of the human unconscious. Many writers and musicians engaged in similar experiments during the following decades, altering conventional forms so as to better express human consciousness and experience.

Although open to cultural influences from abroad, America had followed a policy of political isolationism throughout the 1930s. In Europe, Adolf Hitler's army attacked Poland in September of 1939, beginning World War n. The United States stayed out of the war even as the Germans continued their offensive, invading Norway, Denmark, and France in the spring and summer of 1940. As the situation worsened, President Franklin Roosevelt did encourage Congress to pass, in March of 1941, the American Lend-Lease Act which gave money and supplies to the Allied nations (England, France, and Russia) fighting against the Germans. But America did not officially enter the war until the Japanese air attack on the U.S. naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7,1941. This event, followed by Germany's declaration of war against the United States days later on December 11, made further isolationism impossible.

When Wilder finished his play in January of 1942, the United States hadjoined the Allied forces and was engaged in a global war. Battles raged in Africa, Europe, and the Pacific with only four countries remaining neutral (Spain, Portugal, and Switzerland). In early 1942 things still looked bleak for the Allies, but three decisive battles that year would alter the course of the conflict. In February, the six-month-long battle for control of Stalingrad, Russia, finally ended with the Russian forces outlasting the demoralized German invaders. In June, the battle of Midway Island would leave the Japanese fleet permanently crippled. And in November, the British victory at the battle of El Alamein would turn the tide in Africa. Meanwhile, American forces were gradually gaining command of the Atlantic.

At home, Americans were closely following these military events and doing what they could to aid the war effort. Stateside industrial plants began to shift from producing commercial goods to producing war supplies; rubber and gasoline were rationed and families were encouraged to grow their own food in "Victory Gardens." Audiences who went to see the first production of *The Skin of Our Teeth,* although hardly suffering the hardship and starvation that afflicted the populations of Europe, still would have related to the images of war-induced sacrifice and destruction depicted in Wilder'splay.

# Critical Overview

Since its premiere, *The Skin of Our Teeth* has maintained a solid critical reputation, earning consistent critical acclaim and winning over new generations of Americans with its frequent revivals.

The original Broadway production, which opened on November 18,1942, prompted reviewers like the New York *Daily Telegraph's* George Freedley to comment both that "Wilder certainly has the most vivid imagination in the theater today," and that the play is "a perfect piece of theater." Although a few critics complained that the work lacked substance and that Wilder's anti-illusion staging devices were awkward, such voices were distinctly in the minority.

The play did generate some controversy when two authors, Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, published an article in the *Saturday Review of Literature* claiming that Wilder had plagiarized James Joyce's novel *Finnegan 's Wake* (1939). Campbell and Robinson carefully pointed out the similarities in plot, theme, and presentation between the two works. Wilder, who freely admitted Joyce's influence on his play, did not directly answer the charges but merely encouraged critics to read both texts and judge for themselves. A small flurry of articles on the issue followed, some poked fun at Campbell and Robinson while most acknowledged that Wilder's use of Joyce's novel was no different than many other dramatists' creative use of their sources. Although this controversy may have prevented the New York drama critics from naming it the year's best play, *The Skin of Our Teeth* still won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1942 and ran for 355 perfonnances.

In 1945, a London production starring Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier was also a success. Though the Soviet Union banned performances of Wilder's plays, other European countries responded favorably to *The Skin of Our Teeth;* performances in Amsterdam and Bavaria, as well as a 1946 London revival, were well-attended and positively reviewed. German theatergoers particularly loved the play, which offered hope for revitalization to a broken people. In years to come, the play would become even more highly regarded—and receive more critical attention—in German-speaking countries than in the United States.

By the 1950s, the play's reputation was solidly established. In 1952, Sheldon Cheney, in his survey of the history of theater *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting, and Stagecraft,* would pronounce *The Skin of Our Teeth* "the most notable event of the forties." Two years later Frank M. Whiting's *An Introduction to the Theater* would tell readers that "any survey of American play writing must recognize the importance of Thornton Wilder." By 1956, several academic articles about *The Skin of Our Teeth* were published, and the work was discussed in three books on drama. Scholars continued to praise Wilder's theatrical technique and began to associate his work with Brechtian epic-theater. Critics also noted Wilder's influence on European absurdist drama.

In 1961, Rex Burbank published the first book entirely devoted to Wilder's work. Though this text would be followed by several other full-length studies in succeeding decades, and Wilder would continue to hold the status of a respected literary figure, his writings would not receive as much academic attention as some of the dramatists of the next generation like Arthur Miller *(The Crucible)* and Tennessee Williams *(Cat on a Hot Tin Roof).* Some critics attribute this relative neglect to the fact that Wilder's essential optimism and classical ideals were at odds with the late-twentieth century preference for the pessimistic worldview of modernist works influenced by romantic aesthetics.

Despite scholars' reserved responses, in the last half of the century live performances of *The Skin of Our Teeth* have continued to be popular A 1955 revival at the National Theater in Washington, D.C.— starring Helen Hayes, Mary Martin, and George Abbot— earned critical raves. And although a national touring production of the play was less successful, the play again pleased critics when it was included as part of the American "Salute to France" in Paris. In 1961 the play once more went abroad as part of the Theatre Guild American Repertory Company's world tour and was embraced by audiences in countries as diverse as Chile, Greece, Trinidad, and Sweden. Americans again received the play favorably in a 1975 Kennedy Center production that was part of the national Bicentennial celebration, and more recently, a 1983 PBS "American Playhouse " production earned good reviews.

Throughout the 1990s, the play has remained a perennial favorite of high school, college, and community theater In 1997, the centennial of Wilder's birth prompted numerous revivals of his plays, as well as the creation of an internet web page devoted to his life and writings. Today, *The Skin of Our Teeth* is not only performed frequently but also appears regularly in literature anthologies and on college course syllabi. It holds a place, alongside Wilder's *Our Town,* as one of the best examples of mid-twentieth-century American drama.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

# Critical Essay #1

*Kreger is a Ph.D. candidate and instructor at the University of California, Davis. In this essay, she examines how Wilder joins innovative theatrical techniques, classic themes, and American optimism to create the mythic world of* The Skin of Our Teeth.

*The Skin of Our Teeth* is a play full of paradoxes When audiences first viewed Thornton Wilder's comedy in 1942, they were confronted by events which seemed to take place both in the distant past and the immediate present, characters who were both age-old allegorical figures and contemporary actors, and dialogue that was both irreverent and philosophical. Wilder's theatrical techniques were undeniably innovative for his time; he broke with the conventions of naturalistic theater that had guided previous generations of American playwrights. But perhaps the central irony of the play is that it uses these progressive techniques to present an extremely traditional message. In *The Skin of Our Teeth,* Wilder pairs modern form with classical content, disrupting viewers' assumptions about the nature of theater, while also reinforcing then: beliefs about the nature of humanity.

Accustomed to plays which sought to create the illusion that events on stage were really happening, 1940s audiences were caught off guard by Wilder's disregard for such theatrical convention. They recognized, in the opening minutes of *The Skin of Our Teeth* when "Miss Somerset" stops speaking in the character of Sabina and starts complaining about her lines, that they were viewing a different kind of play. They were not used to actors breaking the proscenium barrier—the imaginary divide between the people on stage and the people in the audience— and asking the viewer to participate in events on stage by, for example, passing up their chairs at the end of Act I to fuel the fire that will "save the human race."

Wilder anticipated theatergoers' surprise, and knew, as he wrote in a journal entry for October 26, 1940, that "twenty years from now ... audiences will be accustomed to such liberties and the impact of the method will no longer be so great" (published in *The Journals of Thornton Wilder, 1939-1961).* But in 1942, he felt American drama needed some shaking up. Theater, he explained in his 1957 preface to *Three Plays,* had "become a minor art," "an in consequential diversion." In the plays of the 1920s and '30s, "the tragic had no heat; the comic had no bite; the social criticism failed to indict us with responsibility." So Wilder decided to try a new approach; he began writing plays "that tried to capture not verisimilitude but reality."

Wilder's desire to present a different kind of reality on stage resulted in plays, like *The Skin of Our Teeth,* which can be classified as anti-illusion theater. Originating with European playwrights like Bertolt Brecht *(The Threepenny Opera)* and Luigi Pirandello *(Six Characters in Search of an Author*), this type of drama emphasizes the artificiality of performance while highlighting the actuality of performers. As Brecht explained the theory, in an essay collected in John Willett's anthology *Brecht on Theatre,*"the audience must not be able to think that it has been transported to the scene of the story but must be invited to take part" in the events on stage.

Anti-illusion dramatists, Thomas Adler explained in an essay in *Claudel Studies,* "write plays about plays... taking as their subjects the nature of the theatre and the act of going to the theatre and demanding that then: audiences consciously think of themselves as an audience." (This self-referential technique is often referred to as meta-drama.) A play like Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of An Author* (1921), in Adler's view, requires "absolutely no make-believe... in viewing it: the theatre is the theatre, the audience is the audience, the stage is the stage, the characters are the characters, and so forth." Although "ordinarily, we call a play realistic when what we see on stage presents ... [a] convincing illusion that what we are seeing is a faithful representation of reality; and when we in the audience are separated from what is happening on stage by an imaginary fourth wall," Adler argued that this type of play is actually un-realistic because it asks audience to "make believe that [they] are *not* making believe." A play that breaks through the fourth wall actually emphasizes the true realities of performance: the fact of sitting in a theater watching a production put on by living people.

Wilder's use of anti-illusion techniques in *The Skin of Our Teeth* is both surprising and fun. Disrupting audience expectations might alienate or confuse theatergoers, but Wilder anticipates such resistance and cleverly uses the actors' asides to articulate and diffuse viewers' objections. Miss Somerset often speaks for the sort of theatergoer who does not want to tackle tough questions. She will express annoyance at the playwright's subject matter and then at other points exclaim: "Oh, I see what this part of the play means now!" Yet not entirely won over, she still refuses to ponder the big issues: "I'll say the lines, but I won't think about the play." Like the middle-class theatergoer who seeks escapist entertainment—the sort of person Wilder wanted to jolt out of their complacency—Miss Somerset thinks plays should be pleasant and predictable. She does not "think the theatre is a place where people's feelings ought to be hurt." Wilder is definitely poking fun at such timid responses to theater—but he is also giving the ordinary person a voice, a voice given some credence because it is associated with the most sympathetic and amusing figure in the play.

Wilder emphasized general traits in his characterizations, another technique of anti-illusion theater. The play's characters are not psychologically developed and individualized but rather are broadly defined as common types, the sort of one-dimensional allegorical figures often found in myth. Despite their suburban setting, the main characters are presented as archetypes (age-old models of basic human roles such as the Great Mother, the Hero, the Fallen Woman). Each person on stage, when speaking in character, represents as essential human quality—intellect (Mr. Antrobus), nurture (Mrs. Antrobus), sexuality (Sabina and Gladys), violence (Henry)—-and these qualities appear in every historical epoch.

Although such allegorical characterizations were a departure from the dramatic practices common in the era immediately preceding the composition of *The Skin of Our Teeth,* Wilder's approach to character was not new. He had, in fact, returned to very old ideas, reclaiming classical Greek dramatic forms. In his essay "Some Thoughts on Play writing" (published in *Playwrights on Playwriting),* Wilder gave an example of the theatrical philosophy behind the staging of a classical play such as Euripides's *Medea*

(c. 431 B.C.). In such plays, the actors wore large masks and spoke their lines loudly without significant inflection. "For the Greeks," Wilder argued, "there was no pretense that Medea was on the stage." They saw "the mask, the costume, the mode of declamation" as a "series of signs which the spectator interpreted and reassembled in his own mind." These ancient viewers were active participants in the theatrical experience, assembling in their own minds the ideas and images presented on stage. Wilder wanted his twentieth century audiences to be just as active.

By the time Wilder began writing for the stage, modern drama had moved away from the staging techniques of Euripides and Sophocles *(Antigone),* In post-Sophoclean drama, as German writer Frederic Nietzsche explained it in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals,'* 'the spectator ceases to be aware of the myth at all and comes to focus on the amazing lifelikeness of the characters and the artists power of imitation." But, as noted above, Wilder did not concern himself with this modern focus on "lifelikeness" and instead wished to regenerate awareness of the myth. He made his intent clear in an October 26, 1940, journal passage, complaining of the difficulties of his "attempt to do a play in which the protagonist is a twenty-thousand-year-old man and whose heroine is a twenty-thousand-year-old woman and eight thousand years a wife." His "challenge" was to "represent Man and Woman." And he believed that "by shattering the ossified conventions of the well-made play [the] characters [would] emerge ... as generalized beings." His "favorite principle" he wrote in another journal entry on October 29, 1940, was "that the characters on the stage tend to figure as generalizations, that the stage burns and longs to express a timeless individualized Symbol."

In addition to its symbolic characters, Wilder's play contains other elements of classical drama. Both the structure and content of the work emphasize the cycle of history often depicted in myth. Sabina's comment early in Act I emphasizes the cyclical nature of the Antrobuses' existence, as well as its ambivalence and uncertainty: "Each new child that's born to the Antrobuses seems to them to be sufficient reason for the whole universe's being set in motion; and each new child that dies seems to have been spared a whole world of sorrow, and what the end of it will be is still very much open to question." Throughout the rest of the play, characters will frequently refer to the repetition in their lives—"always beginning again! Over and over again. Always beginning again."—demonstrating how things circle around and return to the same place rather than progressing forward. Each Act finds the same characters having come through another disaster, essentially unchanged. The end of Act III finds Sabina exactly in the same place she was at the play's outset, speaking the same lines once more and only pausing briefly to tell the audience to go ahead and leave since the Antrobuses have to go on for ages and ages yet."

Wilder's mythic vision, however, is less fatalistic than that of the classical works from which he drew inspiration. He did not want to portray humanity's helplessness in the face of adversity but rather wished to convince the audience of humanity's fortitude and strength. He wondered, in a December, 1941, journal entry, "what does one offer the audience as explanation of man's endurance, aim, and consolation?" He hoped his play would show that the representative man finds "adequate direction and stimulation" in "the existence of his children," "the inventive activity of his mind," and "the ideas

contained in the great books of his predecessors." His image of the persevering ordinary man reflected the optimistic ideals of American democracy. Although the ancient Greeks—as Winifred Dusenbury commented in *Modern Drama*—created "no myth which symbolizes free men governing themselves." Two thousand years later, Americans have begun to write a "mythology of the Common Man." A figure such as Mr. Antrobus, the inventive businessman and loving father, is an ordinary hero worthy of a democratic mythology. This Everyman—despite his flaws, failures, and crises of confidence—is a leader. His ingenuity ensures that his family—the human family—will get through more wars and more walls of ice and floods and earthquakes, even if they only make it through by the skin of their teeth. The play's concluding message, much like the optimistic outlook of other democratic American narratives, is that not only will people always come through such crises but they will learn something and start to get better.

The Antrobuses, the Fortune Teller informs the audience in Act II, are: "Your hope. Your despair. Your selves." They represent the best and worst of humanity—and in Wilder's comic formulation perhaps offer a good deal more hope than despair. With his depiction of this typically suburban and yet archetypically mythic family, Wilder transformed the American theatrical landscape of the 1940s. He will certainly be remembered as an innovator in twentieth century drama, though he would have classified himself as a traditionalist, as he wrote in the preface to *Three Plays, '* 'I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of forgotten goods and I hope a remover of obtrusive bric-a-brac."

Source: EnkaM Kteger, *tot Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998

# Critical Essay #2

*In this review of The* Skin of Our Teeth, *which was originally published on November 19, 1942, Nichols offers a positive review of the original Broadway production of the play.*

A few seasons ago Thornton Wilder increased the stature of the theatre with *Our Town* and now that November again lies heavy over Broadway he has done it once more. For in *The Skin of Our Teeth,* which Michael Myerberg brought last evening to the Plymouth, he has written a comedy about man which is the best play the Forties have seen in many months, the best pure theatre.

Mr. Wilder is no pedantic philosopher, setting down the laws of the schoolmaster; when he is writing for the theatre he uses all of its arts. His story of man's constant struggle for survival, and his wonderment over why he so struggles, is presented with pathos and broad comedy, with gentle irony and sometimes a sly self-raillery. He does not believe the footlights should separate his players from his audience; his actors now and then step out of their characters to discuss the progress of the play, to comment on what it means or what it does not mean.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth* the scenery bounces up and down, the players carry on rehearsals, at one point there is a call to the audience to send along its chairs to keep the fire going against the advancing Ice Age. Everywhere in both the dialogue and the properties that surround it are a series of anachronisms, so beautifully blended as to make Excelsior, N. J., quite properly a hold-but against the Ice Age, and Atlantic City the point from which the ark took off against the flood.

The first act is Excelsior, and Mr. Antrobus— played by Fredric March—has had a considerable day in town: He has fixed up the alphabet by separating em from en, he has brought the multiplication table up to the hundreds, he has invented the wheel. But in August at Excelsior it is growing colder, so cold the "dogs are sticking to the sidewalk," and obviously the ice is coming down from Vermont. The neighbors come in —Homer, Moses, others—and Mr. Antrobus and his wife, after wondering if it's all worth while, begin cramming their children with knowledge, in the hope they will survive somehow and can build again on the other side.

The second act is Atlantic City, at the convention of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans, where Mr. Antrobus, pompous with power and tired of his wife, again almost falls to disaster. The third is at the end of the war—any war—when Mr. Antrobus is properly beaten, but finally decides to start off again. This time the things he sees as reasons are "the voice of the people in their confusion and need," his wife, children and home, knowledge. He goes on, having gotten by only by the skin of his teeth.

The cast Mr. Myerberg has assembled should always fill Mr. Wilder's plays. First, there is Tallulah Bankhead, in the role of Sabina, who is variously the Antrobus maid, the bathing beauty, the camp follower who has been off to the wars for seven years. Her

role is the eternal Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, who wanders off on her own affairs when all is quiet, who comes home and helps out when the going is rough. Miss Bankhead is magnificent— breezy, hard, practical by turns. She can strut and posture in broad comedy, she can be calmly serene. It is she who steps out of character to discuss the play, marvelous interludes all of them.

As Mr. Antrobus, Mr. March is at first the roaring, blustering inventor and amasser of knowledge, bringing home bis new wheel with a loud whoop; then the pontifical new president of the Mammals in convention assembled; finally the war-weary and discouraged soldier coming home from battle. Florence Eldridge is Mrs. Antrobus, the mother and home-builder, the steadying influence who, in the Atlantic City period, is out of place, too. Miss Eldridge can be either the steady housekeeper or a Helen Hokinson drawing. Each of the Marches has every reason to be proud of the other.

And there are others: Montgomery Clift, as Henry, the son, the Henry who used to be called Cain and has a scar on his forehead; and Frances Heflin, as Gladys, daughter of the Antrobuses. There also in Florence Reed as a cynical, surly, contemptuous fortune-teller, and Dickie Van Patten as a telegraph boy and E. G. Marshall as the stage manager, who grows more and more harassed as the evening goes on. Eha Kazan directed in the mood meant by Mr. Wilder, and Albert Johnson has provided the informal settings that tilt and slide as a perfect cover to the play.

As of last evening the theatre was looking up. Definitely.

Source: Lewis Nichols, review of *The Skin, of Our Teeth* (1942) in *On Stage: Selected Theater Reviews from the New York Times, 1920-1970,* edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, pp. 242-243.

# Critical Essay #3

*Terming Wilder's drama a "morality play" designed to make audiences think about the consequences of their lives, Fleming gives the work a favorable review. He singles out such high points as a "high degree of suspense" and the play's theme of the "invincibility of the human spirit"—factors which make* The Skin of Our Teeth *"astonishingly successful" theatre.*

It is by the skin of our teeth, the author very plausibly asserts, that the human race escapes the consequences of its own proclivities for self-destruction. He calls his morality play "a history of mankind in comic strip," and though the history is allusive and surrealist the strip is undeniably comic. Nothing, in fact, could be less ponderous than Mr. Thornton Wilder's approach to his weighty theme. It is nevertheless truly philosophical.

Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus represent *Homo Sapiens* down the ages. They have a son and a daughter, and in the son germinate the seeds of what the Russians call "deviationism"—the itch first to break away from and then to overthrow the established order. The pert and lovely Sabina is their servant, feckless yet oddly faithful, shallow but percipient. Jabberwockian is the only word with which to describe the pattern of their vicissitudes. Some slight idea of the dramatist's technique may be conveyed by recalling that Moses and Homer are among refugees fleeing from the Ice Age who seek asylum in the Antrobus's New Jersey home, which already shelters a dinosaur and a mammoth. Nor is chronology the only convention which Mr. Thornton Wilder, with an engaging insouciance, defies. At frequent intervals the actors, and in particular Sabina, step outside the play and make their own adverse comments on it, so that a harassed stage-manager has to intervene to restore order. In short, the tactics of the' Crazy Gang are employed in an attempt to solve the ultimate riddle of human destiny.

The result is astonishingly successful One merit of the author's capricious (to put it mildly) methods is that they engender a very high degree of suspense; with no possible means of telling what is going to happen next on or, for that matter, off the stage, the audience has no choice but to remain alert and curious. But the play has solider virtues than this. Its theme is the invincibility of the human spirit, and despite the atmosphere of harlequinade there is something moving and noble in the spectacle of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, though conscious of their own follies and failings, and aware that each renewal of hope after a hard-won victory will be cheated by fresh disasters, refusing to admit defeat. The author takes every conceivable kind of risk—save only that of being pompous. Never was a message put across with less solemnity: and seldom with greater success.

The play unquestionably owes much to its producer, Mr. Laurence Olivier, who has imposed a tremendous pace on its zany symbolism. It is also deeply in debt to his wife, Miss Vivien Leigh, whose enchantingly detached Sabina is a very fine piece of comic acting. Mr. George Devine's rugged and impressive Antrobus is well matched by Miss Esther Somers's quiet but powerful portrait of his wife. I also liked very much poor Mr.

Fitzpatrick, whoever he was; he does not appear on the programme, but he was frequently on the stage, composing with a dire embarrassment recurrent mutinies among the cast. *The Skin of our Teeth* is as topical as Mr. Molotov's liver, and is well worth going to see.

Source: Peter Fleming, review of *The Skin ofOurTeeth* in the *Spectator,* Volume 177, no 6169, September 20, 1946 , p 287

# Critical Essay #4

*Vaughn reviews the original Broadway production of "Wilder's play, finding the cast and production values to be of the highest quality. The critic feels, however, that the playwright's text does not achieve what his previous play,* Our Town, *did in terms of enchanting an audience.*

Thornton Wilder in his new play has preached a sermon in a style joining asides like those of Saint Bernard with jarring juxtapositions like those of T. S. Eliot. Life, he wants to say, is struggle to discover truth, to build material conditions in the image of truth and above all to subdue natural forces and human anger, lust and unreason. Within himself and without, everyman meets such forces—inexhaustible supplies of arrogant energy blindly seeking his moral and material destruction. Working day and night they make moral and physical development a process ever balanced on the "razor edge of danger." Wilder says through this play that the unhuman irrational principles give us *in man* everything from bingo to war: everything sordid, dull, vulgar, carnal and murderous. In nature these principles develop a slow, unending series of frightful catastrophes from ice packs to hurricanes. Thus it has always been and so it will be always. Nevertheless we live, and rightly, with hope and faith because God has announced that our general conditions shall be permanently improved by thought, orderliness and the achievement of moral integrity.

The story is told of George Antrobus, his wife and two children. Antrobus, a kind of Adam, is the inventive, practical, home-building man. In the end he lives by thought and spirit despite momentary falls from grace. He is tried by nature, by lust and by the rebellion of his own son, but he survives because within him is an undying determination to begin anew the construction of the perfect world.

To preach his sermon Wilder has the advantage of the superlative talent of Fredric March and Florence Eldridge as Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus. Tallulah Bankhead supplies the comic touch and carnal intimations—with modest success, I should say. Florence Reed as the Fortune Teller charged with ominous passages regarding the unknowability of the human past is superb.

Had the play been placed in less capable hands it might have been a grotesque failure. It lacks enchantment The device, freely employed, of bringing the audience into the play need not destroy continuity of audience feeling as Mr. Wilder in *Our Town* proved. But the same technique fails in the present play because it is too overt, too garish, too sensational in the literal sense. The reception of the audience was tepid.

Source: James N. Vaughn, review of *The Skin of Our Teeth* in *Commonweal,* VolumeXXXVn, no 7,December4,1942, pp. 175-76.

# Adaptations

In 1950, Decca Records put out the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) *Album of Stars: Great Moments of Great Plays* Volume I, which included sound recordings of selections from *The Skin of Our Teeth* performed by Frederic March, Florence Eldridge, and Alan Hewitt.

On September 11, 1955, NBC televised a production of *The Skin of Our Teeth* starring Helen Hayes, Mary Martin, and George Abbott.

Another production of *The Skin of Our Teeth,* starring Vivien Leigh, was televised live in London in March of 1959.

In 1968, as the twelfth episode of its *One to One* television series, WETA-TV in Washington, D.C., aired "Armchair Theater: *The Skin of Our Teeth*" produced by Cherrill Anson and directed by David Powell. This episode, available on video, includes excerpts of the play performed by Jack Burn, Mary Lou Groom, Judy Margolis, and Ruth Mintz, followed by discussion.

A video recording of the play, presented by the Kennedy Center and Xerox Corporation as part of the American Bicentennial Theater series in 1975, had a teleplay adapted by Douglas Scott and set design by Robert Kelsey.

A sound recording of the play was produced by the Sydney A.B.C. company in 1979 as part of its World Theater series

As part of the "American Playhouse" series, PBS produced a live version of the play under the direction of Jack O'Brien in January, 1983.

A production recorded on May 19, 1988 is available on video from Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, TN.

The *Readings for the Blind* series (Southfield, Michigan, 1994) includes a sound recording of *Three Plays by Thornton Wilder.*

# Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast *The Skin of Our Teeth* with James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939). Wilder acknowledged that Joyce's novel was an important influence and source for his play. What similarities in content and structure do you see between the two works? What significant thematic differences distinguish Wilder's world view from Joyce's?

Research the political and cultural climate of post-World War II Germany. What issues and ideas confronting the German people during this time would account for their positive response to Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth?*

Look up psychologist Carl Jung's definition of "archetype." What archetypal images and figures appear in *The Skin of Our Teeth?* How does recognizing them as such influence viewer interpretation of the play?

Compare and contrast *The Skin of Our Teeth* with a traditionally naturalistic play such as Hennk Ibsen's A *Doll's House* (1879) or Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). What staging techniques characterize each work? What theatrical conventions does Wilder's play break down?

Read a book or view a film that portrays a post-apocalyptic world, for example, a novel such as, Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1981) or Richard Matheson's short novel / *am Legend* (1954), or amovielike *The Road Warrior* (1982) or *The Day After* (1983). Then compare your chosen work's setting and characters to those of *The Skin of Our Teeth.* To what extent does this work share Wilder's cyclic vision and message about humanity's fortitude, adaptability, and duality? Do the two works present similar or contrasting views of the human condition?

# Compare and Contrast

**1942:** German leader Adolf Hitler begins the methodical annihilation of millions of European Jews in what he calls the "final solution" and history will term the Holocaust. In July, Paris police, under the command of occupying German forces, gather 30,000 Jews and send them to German concentration camps, where all but thirty will die.

**Today:** On September 30,1997, Roman Catholic bishops in France offer the Church's first public apology to the Jewish people for its silence during the French participation in the Holocaust. Earlier in the year, the French medical association and the French police offer similar public apologies; while in Switzerland, the government finally responds to years of protests, creating a fund to reimburse survivors and relatives of Holocaust victims whose bank accounts and assets were kept by Swiss financial institutions after World War **II.**

**1942:** German rocket engineer Wernher von Braun launches the first surface-to-surface guided missile.

**Today:** Highly sophisticated guided missiles, as seen in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, play an important role in late-twentieth-century warfare. The United States military arsenal includes computer-guided missiles such as the Tomahawk cruise missile.

**1942:** Congress establishes the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) and the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES), bringing women into the United States armed services in an official, but limited, capacity.

**Today:** Women are active in all branches of the American armed services. In the U.S. Army, for example, women make up 14% of the personnel. These 69,000 female soldiers, however, are still excluded from thousands of combat positions as well as the senior leadership roles attained through serving in combat jobs. Questions about women's equal participation in combat, as well as highly publicized reports of sexual misconduct and harassment on military bases during the late-1990s, continue to fuel debate about the role of women in the military.

**1942:** The government asks Americans to grow vegetables in "Victory Gardens" to help alleviate war-time food shortages. Forty percent of U.S. vegetables will be grown in such gardens in 1942, but this percentage decreases in succeeding years as public interest wanes.

**Today:** Agriculture in America is big business, and the United States possesses the world's largest food surplus. The United States exports double the amount of food it imports. While Americans still grow some of the food they eat, it is more of a leisure pursuit than an economic necessity.

**1942:** Oxford University scholar Gilbert Murray founds the organization Oxfam to fight world famine. Millions of Europeans in German-occupied countries such as Greece, Poland, and Yugoslavia suffer from starvation as the war cuts off food supplies.

**Today:** Oxfam International has grown into a confederation of ten Oxfam agencies that direct projects in more than one hundred countries. Oxfam America, founded in 1970, fights against global poverty, hunger, and social injustice in the United States as well as in countries such as North Korea, where over 100,000 people died of starvation in 1996.

# What Do I Read Next?

*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) is Wilder's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, a work made up of three connected stories detailing the experiences of several people killed by a collapsing bridge in eighteenth-century Peru.

*The Making of Americans* (1925) is a novel by Wilder's good friend Gertrude Stein. This narrative about several generations of Stein's family uses her trademark techniques of simple language and repetition. Her goal was to create a sensation of a constant present, to begin again and again because "repeating is the whole of living and by repeating comes understanding." Stein's techniques greatly influenced Wilder.

*Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941), is a drama by German playwright Bertolt Brecht. The narrative revolves around a seventeenth-century German canteen woman who is an allegorical figure representing the destructive forces of capitalism. The play exemplifies Brecht's ideas of epic-theater and the anti-illusion techniques which influenced Wilder.

*Our Town* (1938) is Wilder's most famous work and possibly America's most-produced play. It depicts the daily existence of people in a small New Hampshire town, employing some of the same non-realistic theatrical techniques seen in *The Skin of Our Teeth.*

*Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) is an experimental drama by Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello. This play challenged the tradition of naturalistic theater and greatly influenced Wilder's writing.

*Watch on the Rhine* (1941) is a realistic play by Lillian Hellman that provides an interesting contrast to Wilder's work. This drama, about a couple fighting against Nazi ideas in the United States, deals explicitly with the political issues of its time.

# Further Study

Bigsby, C. W. E A *Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama; Volume One, 1900-1940,* Cambridge University Press, 1982.

A good overview of American theater before World War IE, this discussion devotes a full chapter to Wilder.

Blank, Martin, Editor *Critical Essays on Thornton Wilder,* G.K. Hall, 1996.

This is a good recent collection of articles on Wilder's work

Harrison, Gilbert A. *The Enthusiast A Life of Thornton Wilder,* Ticknor and Fields, 1983.

This biography, which makes use of Wilder's papers at the Yale University Bemecke Library, includes many excerpts from unpublished journals and notebooks that illuminate Wilder's troubled personal life.

Walsh, Claudette. *Thornton Wilder A Reference Guide, 1926-1990,* G.K. Hall, 1993.

This comprehensive annotated bibliography of works by and about Wilder is an invaluable resource for anyone studying his writings

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BOOKRAGS

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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