

**Thornton Wilder's Play *Our Town*: The Dramatic Techniques as a  
Reflection of the Embodiment of Emotions\***  
**Thornton Wilder'in *Our Town* Adlı Oyunu: Duyguların Somutlaşmasını  
Yansıtan Dramatik Teknikler**

Assistant Prof. B. Ayça Ülker Erkan  
Celal Bayar University, Faculty of Science and Letters  
English Language and Literature Dept.  
e-mail: [ayca.erk@bayar.edu.tr](mailto:ayca.erk@bayar.edu.tr)

**Özet:**

Bu makale, Thornton Wilder'in *Our Town* adlı oyununda kullanılan dramatik teknikleri ve tekniklerin duyguları nasıl şekillendirdiğini tartışır. Grotowski ve Strindberg'in tekniklerinden etkilenen Wilder, kendi rüya-oyun tekniğini şekillendirir ve geliştirir. Grotowski'nin sahne dekorasyonundan yoksun olan "yoksun tiyatro" tekniğini uygulayan Wilder, tiyatro karakterlerinin abartılmış mimik ve jestlerine dikkat çeker. Böyle bir durum karakterlerin iç çatışmalarını ve duygularını zamandan bağımsız olarak ortaya çıkarır. Bu tekniğin amacı insan hayatı ve duygularının evrensel olduğunu göstermektir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** rüya oyunu, duygular, jestlerle anlatım, pandomim

**Abstract:**

This essay discusses the dramatic techniques and how these techniques form the embodiment of human emotions in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*. Wilder influenced by the techniques of Grotowski and Strindberg, shapes and develops his own dream-play technique. By applying Grotowski's "poor theatre" technique, in which the stage lacks decoration, Wilder draws attention to the exaggerated gesticulation and miming of the characters. This illustrates the inner conflicts and emotions of the characters regardless of time. The purpose of this technique is to demonstrate human life and emotions that are most universal.

**Key Words:** dream play, emotions, gesticulation, miming

Do we ever realize how we live and what taste we get out of life? The answer lies in the purpose of this essay, since Wilder draws attention to make the audience aware of the importance of every trivial event. Wilder successfully demonstrates the unawareness of the value of small moments of life especially in the last act of *Our Town* through death, which is the central theme of the play. One should keep in mind that Wilder's plays are greatly meant to engage life and his favorite subject is time. He celebrates life and contrasts it with death in almost all of his plays. The timelessness,

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which is manipulated with the dream-play technique, contributes much in our understanding of the universality of human conditions.

Thornton Wilder Niven, born in 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin was a remarkable dramatist especially in 1930s. He earned his reputation in drama as the creator of two unconventional plays: *Our Town* produced in 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1942. In *Our Town*, the universe is reflected in a New England small town and *The Skin of Our Teeth* covers the history of the world and humanity in fanciful adventures of a family who lives in New Jersey. Wilder brought new touches to American theater by using the dream-play technique of August Strindberg, which conveyed audience to use their imagination. By removing the concept of time, the action appears as if it took place in a dream. It is important to note that the embodiment of emotions is especially revealed by the use of this technique that is our primary concern. Perhaps, one should draw attention to the background of this technique and mention its effects on Wilder before he fully developed it. It is significant to note that Wilder was technically influenced by Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, the non-realistic theatres of China (in which characters use a stick representing a horse), the Italian dramatist Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* who used the "play in play" technique. Wilder was also influenced by the Polish director Grotowski who envisaged a "poor theatre" that was stripped of inessentials depending on the brain and the body of the actor. Wilder's making no use of richly decorated stage, the exception in the use of chairs, can also be observed in Grotowski's poor technique.

Wilder was also influenced by German expressionist dramatists, when expressionism first emerged in Germany. Still, it can not be said that Wilder was completely an expressionist playwright. German drama of the 1910s gave expressionism birth with the forerunners like Büchner and Strindberg in its early stages. In fact, expressionist drama was a dramatization of the subconscious which seems to be a kind of scripted dream. Likewise, Grotowski saw the actor's body as an expressive instrument. In this sense, body becomes the organ of the soul that is to express the inner feelings while acting. It is important to note that the expressionist actors use exaggerated gesticulations and their faces transform into masks to express emotions in a physical term. As it is the case with the characters in *Our Town*, always performing in mime and embodying the emotions in an exaggerated gesticulation.

The bare stage of Wilder sharpens the audience's perception of action such as delivery of milk in the early morning, the feeding of chickens. For instance, in Act III, large and black umbrellas with mourners in black indicate a funeral. The dead sit on chairs representing the graveyard. Thus, the funeral scene is in our minds and imagination, because the Stage Manager verbally arranges the scenery on the bare stage. The dead sit quietly and express their sorrow: "The dead do not turn their heads or their eyes to right or left, but they sit in a quiet without stiffness. When they speak their tone is matter-of-fact, without sentimentality, and above all, without lugubriousness" (Act 3, 74). Hodgson emphasizes that, ". . . for the dreamers release an imaginative rather than practical energy" (Hodgson, 1992, p. 143). This permits the play to deploy time freely, especially to show the past at work in the present. Wilder, in this sense, played with time freely to capture universality by the dream-play technique.

Dream play technique used in *Our Town*, has been interpreted as a play written as though it were a set of dreams authored by the unconscious story telling mind.

Richard Gilman states that in dream plays, “time moves backward and forward, characters change into their older and younger selves” (Gilman, 1972, p.109). This effect exists in Wilder’s *Our Town* where time moves backward in the very beginning of the play while the Stage Manager describes characters by foretelling their fortunes and the time of their death. For instance, the main characters Emily and George grow up and get married (the time moves forward) and when Emily dies she returns to her twelfth birthday (time moves backwards). In this perspective, Wilder used the dream play technique in order to spread out time freely. Townly describes the dualistic nature of *Our Town* as, “the fusion of past and present, natural and supernatural” (Townly, p.151). In fact, Wilder presents a unified whole-human life summed up in three acts, all of which flow along in a perfectly normal pattern. Along with the technique(s), the theme of the play remains popular because of its humanistic ideas. The play’s values are those of the ideal American small town: democratic, egalitarian, middle-class and neighbourly. Moreover, the value of the ordinary lives is told in such a sophisticated style that it celebrates the holiness of the ordinary.

*Our Town* has its setting in a small New England village, Grover’s Corners, in 1901. The plot of the play is an ordinary one. A boy, George, meets a girl, Emily, they fall in love and finally they get married. Emily dies in childbirth and goes to the cemetery of the town where she meets with the other dead people of the town. Although Wilder’s presentation looks simple, it is artful. The first Act is called “Daily Life”, the second Act is called “Love and Marriage”, and the third Act is entitled as “Death”. The ordinary life begins in the first Act: two main families in the play, the Webbs and the Gibbs, are introduced to the audience. The lives and the conversations in each house are so similar that while Mrs. Gibbs is telling her children to get ready for the school, the children in the Webbs’ house are answering their mother, which appears as a reply to Mrs. Gibbs’ lines. Act two takes place three years later. We witness Emily and George’s ordinary fears, pleasure of tears and comforting parents on the day of their wedding. The third Act deals with separation and death. It is 1913, twelve chairs are placed in three rows on which the dead are seated and the mourners stand next to them that represent a scene of graves in the cemetery. The dead are talking and they do not like it when the “living” come to visit. When Emily joins them, she asks if she can choose and relive a day again. Then, she goes back to her twelfth birthday and realizes the beauty of an unordinary day. She emphasizes that human beings never realize life while they live it and the Stage Manager bids good-night and the play finishes at that point.

The Stage Manager plays an important role in the play, because he is like the unconscious mind who is telling a dream. In the very beginning of the play, we are reminded that what we are watching is a play and this is parallel with the idea that he is the persona who is dreaming. The audience becomes aware of the fact that there is a play in the play. This type of theatre is called as “metatheatre”<sup>1</sup>. As Berkowitz states, “. . . it is he who reminds us at all times that what we are watching is a play, an invented

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<sup>1</sup> It is called metadrama which means drama about drama or “any moment of self-consciousness by which a play draws attention to its own fictional status as a theatrical pretence” (Abrams, 1971, p.132). The term refers to the play itself and a similar effect may be achieved in asides. Significantly, it is “the use of a play-within-play” as in *Hamlet* and in Pirandello *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

reality distinct from the one we inhabit, and that he can move back and forth between the two at will.” (Berkowitz, 1992, p.63) As the audience is aware of what is being dramatized is the representation of real life, a dreamer is aware of the fact that he is dreaming. The play begins with the Stage Manager who announces the title, author and the names of the principal actors of the play from a bare stage. It is a bare stage, because it represents an atmosphere of a dream, one can place anything s/he likes to according to her/his imagination.

The Stage Manager opens and closes each Act and calls the actors on the stage and thanks them when the scene is finished. He provides the audience with historical background and with the details of the setting on a bare stage. He comments on the action and provides answers to the questions posed by the characters that nobody in the play would be able to answer. As a matter of fact, he is always in control of what is taking place on stage and is never annoyed by the characters. For instance, time goes back in the second Act when Emily and George confess their love to each other just before the wedding scene. We are informed of their former relationship by the help of flashbacks controlled by the Stage Manager. All of a sudden, he informs that Dr Gibbs died in 1930 when Dr Gibbs appears at the stage on his way home. The Stage Manager compresses the past, present, and the future which makes time a free unity. Moreover, the play sounds like a dream, since the god-like figure, the Stage Manager, appears as the dreamer. He plays the role of one’s subconscious that freely dreams one’s unrepressed desires. According to Wilder, the realistic (objects in a room) captures verisimilitude but not reality itself. For this reason, Wilder removes realistic obstacle and thus releases characters and events from the particular to the abstract. As he wrote in the preface of his plays: “our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind, not in things, not in scenery” (Wilder, 1938, p.12). Wilder explicitly claims that everything related to emotions and feelings happen in mind and also in imagination.

There is an absence of scenery and few stage properties such as few chairs, a stepladder and similar simple physical devices on stage in order to capture the dream-like atmosphere. The empty stage does not mean an undesigned stage moreover one is not blindly stick to visibility: “No scenery. The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light” (Act I). The absence of scenery compels the audience to focus on the details of life, not on the details of the setting. The stage is set by the effective use of words in which we use our imaginations. For instance, the newsboy throws imaginary papers into imaginary doorways, children eat imaginary breakfasts. The tops of two ladders form upstairs room, and Emily walks down the aisle to the stage as a part of her wedding ceremony.

Like in our dreams, the impossible becomes possible and the dead person like Emily can go back to her twelfth birthday. She realizes the beauty of life after she dies in the last Act: “. . . I can’t go on. It goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another . . . I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back -- up the hill – to my grave . . .” (Act III). The recurrent main theme creates nostalgia with sentimentality when Emily bids farewell to everything she possessed and realized the value too late:

. . . Good-bye, Good-bye, world. Good-bye, Grover's Corners . . .  
Mama and Papa. Good-bye, to clocks ticking . . . and Mama's  
sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot  
baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful  
for anybody to realize you . . . (Act III)

"Clocks ticking" could be heard, "sunflowers" could be seen, "food and coffee" could be tasted and smelled, "ironed dresses" and "hot baths" could be felt by living. Like in a dream, the Stage Manager sends Emily to her twelfth birthday by the use of the dream play technique. Emily realizes the things she had never realized while she was living. This final scene heightens the embodiment of emotions by giving examples from the very simple daily life. The playwright draws the attention of the spectators/readers to the simple things in life that most of us ignore while living. Everyone can hear 'clock tickings' or eat 'food' and drinks 'coffee' anytime we like, or do the other things that Emily tells. By using the dramatic technique, the playwright successfully embodies the emotions or feelings of the characters and thus universalizes those emotions since it is an expression of humanity. It is ironic that none of us value the smallest things in life. Emily ironically acknowledges the living as: "they're sort of shut up in little boxes aren't they?" (Act III). As a matter of fact, it is the dead who are literally "shut up in little boxes". Emily keeps on asking the Stage Manager: "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? – every, every minute? His answer is most significant: "No. [Pause.] The saints and poets, maybe – they do some" (Act III). What Wilder emphasizes here is that human beings cannot stand to the idea of having a sense of destiny -- the awareness that there is a continuity in all our acts, the awareness that every present moment comes from a past and is directed to a future. We have this sense of destiny and this sense of awareness of the future only appears at moments usually in emotional crisis. Inevitably, the tragedy of life lies in our fragmentary and imperfect awareness of it.

Consequently, the absence of scenery, gesticulation, and miming reinforce the individuals in relation to time, because the action can happen in the past, present or in the future. By removing the concept of time, the action appears as if it took place in a dream. In other words, the timelessness, which is manipulated with the dream-play technique, contributes much to the understanding of the universality of human emotions. Thornton Wilder uses the dream-play technique of August Strindberg as a major theatrical technique, which conveys the audience to use their imagination and to express the embodiment of emotions. Besides, Wilder is technically influenced by Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, the non-realistic theatres of China, Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* who used the "play in play" technique, Grotowski's "poor theatre" having no decorated stage, only depending on the brain and the body of the actor. Wilder usually uses a universal present time; that is why his spectators focus not on the details of the setting, but on the details of life. Using the dream-play technique in which there exists no stable place and time, Wilder captures universality of human emotions.

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