



Theophilus North

By Thornton Wilder
ISBN: 9780060088927

Introduction

Theophilus North, published in 1973, was the last major work of Thornton Wilder (a number of one-act plays have been published posthumously). He said himself, "Not bad at seventy-five, wot?" The book is not autobiographical, although the character of Theophilus shares many similarities with Wilder. To write it he returned to episodes from his young manhood for material, serving in the Coast Guard in Newport, Rhode Island, graduating from Yale University, teaching at the prestigious Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. *Theophilus North* comes to Newport with all of these experiences and proceeds to set to rights the lives of the people of Newport. But the book is shaped by a lifetime of learning and writing, and the point of view of the young North is always balanced against the wisdom of the narrator who looks back affectionately on the brash confidence of his alter ego.

Theophilus North is a *kunsterroman*, a novel about the development of an artist. North helps those he can at least as much for the new experiences as for any moral reason. Then he writes "characters" of the people he has met, and the details of the escapade in his journal. Thus he develops the tools of a writer: acute perceptions, a capacious memory, and the ability to work hard at his writing. At the end of the novel the car mechanic who has read the work that North has left carelessly in his old jalopy points him in the direction of his ultimate career, one for which he has been prepared by his adventurous summer.

Some critics have claimed that Wilder's works are sentimental. Wilder, of course, rejected this notion. In his journal on February 3, 1940, Wilder wrote, "A sentimentalist (and the pessimist is here included as identical) is one whose desire that things be happy (or sad) exceeds his desire (and suppressed knowledge) that things be truthful; he demands that he be lied to." *Theophilus North* is fiction, but it is true to Wilder's vision of America; a place where people can recreate themselves in numbers of lives. In such a country, life is tragic only if you allow it to be.

Discussion Questions

1. "Theophilus" means "lover of God," but North doesn't seem to be a very religious man and prefers to be called "Ted." Why does Wilder name the character Theophilus? What are the character's religious beliefs?
2. North thinks he is a servant. Henry tells him he is not. What is the difference between their definitions? What does that say about the social structure of Newport?
3. Bill tells North that Newport is an aging city. Why? Who no longer goes there? How does this affect the lives of the people who still go there? What differences are there between the lives of young men and women of family in the 1920s?
4. Mr. Bell is an arrogant and obnoxious snob. Why does North help him anyway? Who is it that North actually helps in the Diana Bell episode?
5. How does North break up Hilary and Diana? How does he know what will be effective?
6. North is a Yale Man. While he does not tend to place too much importance on this fact, others in the novel do. Why does his graduating from Yale matter? What is it supposed to say about him?
7. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said to Ernest Hemingway, "The rich are different from us," and Hemingway responded, "Yes, they have more money." What side of this debate does Wilder come down on in this novel?
8. Flora Deland, we are told, thinks of Newport as "her Paradise Lost." How, and in what sense, did she become expelled from the city? Which city? How does she get back in? Is she an admirable or contemptible character?
9. One of Theophilus' ambitions is to be a saint, yet he lies effortlessly, convincingly, and frequently. Does this disqualify him for sainthood? What does North mean by a saint? Which characters in the novel seem good candidates for sainthood?
10. What is the attitude of the Chief of police towards the rich people of Newport? How does he attempt to deal with their problems? Are there different laws for the cities of Newport?
11. How did World War I affect Rip? Why is he unable to take control of his life? Why is it important that Rip was an airman? Why is he compared to Samson? Is Wilder being sexist in this section of the novel?
12. North calls Eloise a Shakespearean heroine. What does he mean by that? Why does she plan to join a convent? Are we supposed to sympathize with her desire?
13. Both North and Myra are "badgers." Why is this significant? Is it merely a convenient way of saying they are both from Wisconsin? If so, what does Wisconsin represent in contrast to Newport? Do they think of the animal as having human characteristics and apply them to themselves? If so, what are the characteristics they think of a badger as having?
14. Mino is an "autodidact": that means he is self-taught. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being an autodidact? As the children of immigrants and an entrepreneur, Mino is also a symbol of American opportunity. Why does Wilder choose as an example of the self-made man, a second generation immigrant with no feet?

15. While all of the cities of Newport have walls between them, the military seem more isolated than any other group. Why is it so difficult for the military to participate in normal life? Is Theophilus right to help Alice?

16. Does North have magical powers? Can he heal people? Or kill them? Are animals genuinely attracted to him? Why does Wilder make the entire question ambiguous?

17. Why does Wilder recount North's first meeting with Edweena almost at the end of the novel, when, in fact, he had met her years before the beginning of the novel? In fact, Wilder frequently recounts tales out of order in the novel. What is the purpose of this? What is the organizing principle of the plot? i.e., why are the episodes recounted in the order they appear in the novel, rather than chronologically?

18. Bobo and Persis are guests at the Servant's Ball. What does this say about American society? Is this a victory for democracy or just an aberration? Is Newport the better for this event? Or, to put it another way, North helps many individuals in this novel. Does he make society better? Is it possible to make society better?

About the Author

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was an accomplished novelist and playwright whose works explore the connection between the commonplace and the cosmic dimensions of human experience. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928 for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the second of his seven novels, and received the Pulitzer Prize in drama for *Our Town* in 1938, and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1943. Wilder's hit play *The Matchmaker* was adapted as the musical *Hello, Dolly!* His work is widely read and produced around the world to this day, and his screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) remains a classic psycho-thriller. Wilder's many honors include the Gold Medal for Fiction of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

By Christopher J. Wheatley

Bibliography

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