

The Skin of Our Teeth

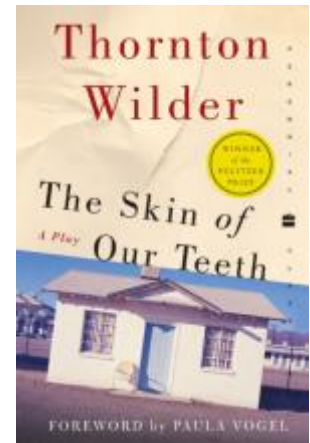
Harper Perennial

By Thornton Wilder

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Introduction

A timeless statement about human foibles . . . and human endurance, this beautiful new edition features Wilder's unpublished production notes, diary entries, and other illuminating documentary material, all of which is included in a new Afterword by Tappan Wilder.



Time magazine called *The Skin of Our Teeth* "a sort of *Hellzapoppin'* with brains," as it broke from established theatrical conventions and walked off with the 1943 Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama. Combining farce, burlesque, and satire (among other styles), Thornton Wilder departs from his studied use of nostalgia and sentiment in *Our Town* to have an Eternal Family narrowly escape one disaster after another, from ancient times to the present. Meet George and Maggie Antrobus (married only 5,000 years); their two children, Gladys and Henry (perfect in every way!); and their maid, Sabina (the ageless vamp) as they overcome ice, flood, and war—by the skin of their teeth.

Questions for Discussion

1. The Antrobuses live in contemporary New Jersey, which is threatened by an ice age. Adam and Eve (who are also the Antrobuses) have lost a ring in the theater the previous night. What does that indicate about time in the play? What does Wilder think about human nature? Have people changed over the ages?
2. Excelsior is the motto of the State of New York and the title of a poem by the 19th-century American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow about a youth who climbs a mountain to heaven. Why does Wilder choose this name for a "typical" American city?
3. Sabina says that if you want to know about Mrs. Antrobus, just "go and look at a tigress, and look hard." What does she mean by this? Are human beings indistinguishable from animals? Is the similarity between humans and animals important? Where does the difference between animals and people lie?
4. There is no equivalent of Gladys in the book of Genesis. What is her function in the play? What does she represent?

5. Sabina breaks character to complain about the play. In doing so she reveals that she is a leading lady who has accepted a role that she regards as beneath her and that she does not understand the play. As audience members, do you sympathize with her? Why would the playwright include a character complaining about his own play?
6. Wilder stresses from the beginning of the play that the audience is watching a play by having the flats that represents wall lean and then fly away. Why does Wilder insist that the audience not be allowed to forget that they are in a theater and that the play is an artificial construct, not a "slice of life"?
7. Sabina says, "Now that you audience are listening to this, too, I understand it a little better." Why does the presence of the audience change the play for Sabina? How does the audience help to create the meaning of the play?
8. Mr. Antrobus has recently invented the wheel and discovered that ten tens equal a hundred—"Consequences far-reaching"—and the telegraph boy remarks, "a few more discoveries like that and we'll be worth freezing." What does this mean? What is the point of advances in technology or mathematics in the face of a disaster?
9. When Henry suggests you could put a chair on the wheel, Mr. Antrobus reacts oddly and says "Ye-e-s, any booby can fool with it now, but I thought of it first." Why does he act this way? Is he jealous of his son? Is he jealous of future people who will build on his inventions? If so, why invent anything?
10. When the refugees enter, Homer speaks in Greek and Moses in Hebrew. As it happens, the former recites the opening lines of the Iliad and the latter the openings lines of Genesis, but most members of the audience will not recognize that. Why not have them speak in English translations of the original? Can poetry or any other kind of literature be useful if we do not understand it?
11. The Antrobuses repeatedly save Henry/Cain, no matter what he does. Why? Wouldn't it be better if they let him die?
12. Mr. Antrobus' watchword for the future is "Enjoy Yourselves"; Mrs. Antrobus' watchword is "Save the Family." Are these compatible? Is marriage, as Mrs. Antrobus says, an advance? Why did men fight it? Why is Mrs. Antrobus for it, while Sabina is obviously indifferent to it? Mrs. Antrobus says marriage is a promise but then does not say what the promise is. What do you think she means?

13. The disaster of the first act is natural. What's different about the disasters of the second and third act? Why does Wilder change the disasters? What would be different about the play if he had chosen different disasters (the plague, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes)?
14. The fortune teller says she can easily tell you the future but only a charlatan tries to tell you the past. Why is the past unrecoverable? Is history false? What is the gypsy's role in the play? What themes does she introduce or comment on?
15. A bingo game is audible at various times in the second act. Sometimes the announcement of numbers occurs simultaneously with dialogue. What does the bingo game represent? Is it a metaphor for the human condition? Why bingo rather than, for instance, poker?
16. When the volunteers perform the philosophers in Act III, they do not wear costumes, while the rest of the cast is costumed as if they had just survived a war. How does this contrast advance the theme of the play?
17. Henry, it turns out, rose to lead the enemy in the war and above all he wants to kill his father. Is he "evil"? Mentally disturbed? Does the conflict between Henry and his father represent some universal, psychological conflict between fathers and sons? If so, why does that conflict exist?
18. Henry also believes that the books his father treasures are the cause of the misery in the world and that if you could sweep away the existing civilization you could start over and build a better one. What does the play as a whole suggest about Henry's view?
19. Mrs. Antrobus tells her husband that "the only thought we [Mrs. Antrobus and Gladys] clung to was that you were going to bring something good out of this suffering." How can good come out of suffering? What "good" could they expect to come out of a war? What promise has Mr. Antrobus made by fighting the war?
20. The play ends with Sabina reciting some of the lines from the beginning of the play and wishing the audience good night. Have the Antrobuses accomplished anything, or are they right back where they began? Is "progress" an illusion and the world entirely cyclical? Can the play be optimistic if the Antrobuses haven't changed from their experiences?

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

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