

Teaching Guide to **THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH** by Thornton Wilder

Note to Teachers

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1928 and Pulitzer Prizes in drama for *Our Town* (1939) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1943), the only writer to have won the award in both fiction and drama. Financially secure from his royalties, aged 45 and with poor vision that guaranteed he would never be drafted, in 1942, six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor and shortly before the premiere of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder nevertheless actively sought and received a commission in the Army as a captain. Perhaps because he was fluent in German, Italian, French, and Spanish, he was assigned to the Army Air Corps (the Air Force was not yet a separate service) where he worked in Intelligence and War Plans. After service in Algeria and Italy, he finished the war as a lieutenant colonel. Wilder's conviction that he needed to defend the United States shaped both his decision to join the military and his play.

When *The Skin of Our Teeth* premiered at the Plymouth Theater in New York on November 18, 1942, Americans had spent more than a decade with the fear that American democracy was doomed to failure. The Great Depression of the 1930s seemed to indicate to intellectuals and industrial workers that capitalism was fated to implode from its internal contradictions. World War II began on September 1, 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. The United States entered the war after the Japanese navy destroyed most of the Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. On opening night of the play, Germany controlled most of Europe confronted only by British and Russian airmen and soldiers who were hanging on grimly against what seemed unbeatable German forces. America had been driven from the Philippines by Japanese troops, which controlled much of Asia. To many in the audience, a long, totalitarian dark age must have seemed a distinct possibility.

On a less serious level, theatergoers in New York knew the production itself had been plagued by epic internal battles, largely because of the flamboyant temperament of the star cast as Sabina, the tempestuous Tallulah Bankhead, whom the inexperienced producer and director, Michael Meyerberg and Elia Kazan respectively, had difficulty controlling (Kazan would go on to become one of the great theater and film directors of the 20th century). And even though the play was a success, running for 359 performances, Wilder's own reputation was seriously damaged by Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson's entirely unjust accusation that the Wilder had plagiarized James Joyce's difficult novel *Finnegans Wake*. Campbell and Robinson's article was

believed by some because Wilder declined to defend himself, very few reporters then or now were likely to read the enormously complicated *Wake*, and the play does borrow some of its ideas from Joyce. Although the distinguished critic Edmund Wilson refuted the charge by pointing out that playwrights have always borrowed from previous writers, and differences of tone and characterization between the two works are great, for a long time the unfair aspersion lingered in memory—Robinson repeated it in 1957 in connection with another Wilder success, *The Matchmaker*, which eventually was turned into the musical *Hello Dolly*.

Yet despite the contentiousness of the play's historical context, political, theatrical, and literary, *The Skin of Our Teeth* is a tragi-comedy where the comedy is so broad it borders on farce. Wilder himself claimed that he got the idea for it when a rubber chicken flew off the stage and landed in his lap at a production of *Hellzapoppin*, the hit 1938 vaudeville review written by Ole Olsen and Chick Johnson. The farcical element makes it possible for an audience to contemplate the most painful and difficult ideas by placing them in an absurd frame. Henry/Cain has killed his brother, but in a world of singing telegraph boys, where a maid is asked if she has milked the mammoth, fratricide is distanced enough so that the audience can respond with curiosity to the idea the Cain and Abel is the story of two ordinary suburban boys who had a fight with tragic results. Horror becomes sufficiently endurable that the audience can accept it and move on, just as humanity has had to accept certain horrors and move on.

Structurally the play rejects the convention of the fourth wall common on the American stage. In realistic plays and melodramas, the audience sees a slice of life where characters speak in relatively ordinary language on a realistic set. In Wilder's view, this was "soothing"; the audience was not involved with the play's action and was transformed into mere spectators, not the actively engaged community the times demanded. New (or rather, "recovered") dramatic forms were necessary to represent the painful new experiences of the twentieth century while at the same time affirming the fundamental continuity of human experience and the consequent hope that since we had survived before we would again.

The Skin of Our Teeth presents alternately seriously and comically that mankind has always been on the edge of catastrophe, and, worse, probably always will be, because of natural disasters and the human race's inability to learn from its past mistakes. Thus human history is not linear, a steady advance of progress, but cyclical, with development, catastrophe, and the necessity to rebuild. But the great books, representing the best of what humanity has thought, provide the foundation for the newest attempt to build a just and happy community. The ideas of the philosophers and prophets are the enduring part of culture and supply the knowledge and hope that enables people to go on and try again.

Near the end of Act III of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Mr. Antrobus says, "Oh, I've never forgotten for long at a time that living is struggle. I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor edge of danger and must be

fought for—whether it's a field, or a home, or a country." Just as the theater staff—the leading man's dresser, the star's maid, the head usher, the wardrobe mistress—in the theatrical tradition must take up unaccustomed roles because the show must go on, the audience is called on to take on heroic roles and "save the human race." Of course in World War II many men and women, including Wilder, left their homes and ordinary lives to do exactly that.

Questions for Class Discussion

1. The Antrobus live in contemporary New Jersey, which is threatened by an ice age. Adam and Eve (who are also the Antrobus) 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 (the class) 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 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? Is 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?

Topics for Research and Writing Projects

1. Wilder was accused of plagiarism by Campbell and Robinson. Read this essay and the response by Edmund Wilson. What is plagiarism in an artistic context (consider "sampling" in rap)? How does it differ from plagiarism on, for instance, a student paper? Look up legal definitions of plagiarism, and uncover a few cases of plagiarism charges in the arts industry today. Look up the term "intertextuality" in a handbook of critical theory. When is it legitimate for a creative writer to borrow ideas and motifs from another work?
2. The Antrobuses' maid is named "Lily Sabina": look up "Lilith," who begins as a character in Jewish commentary about Genesis and becomes a significant figure in Gnostic readings of the Bible. Also find out who the Sabine women were in Roman history. What does Sabina represent in the play? Is she a positive or negative figure (or both)? What roles do women play in civilization in Wilder's play?
3. Read *Rain* (by Somerset Maugham) or *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (by Rudolph Besier). Look up "melodrama," "realism," and "expressionism" in theater history. Why does Wilder reject the kind of plays that Sabina used to star in? What are the limitations of plays that stress verisimilitude? What advantages does Wilder gain by not trying to create an illusion of reality on stage? What does he lose by this method of play writing?

4. Race relations play a significant although subtle role in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. African-American playwrights such as Langston Hughes and companies such as the American Negro Theater had given minorities a voice on the American stage. The Harlem Renaissance had produced many important writers. Research plays about race in the theater in the 1930s and 1940s. How does knowing this background enrich our understanding of the play? Is Wilder's attitude toward racial concerns dated?
5. Tallulah Bankhead was a great beauty, a wit, and a star in both London and New York. Her father was the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the United States. She was also legendary for her personal life. Read Bankhead's autobiography and a biography of her. How does Wilder shape his play for his star? How does your understanding of the play change by knowing something about a central cast member? Ultimately, is it relevant to the meaning of the play to know who played the roles originally?
6. Henry presents himself as a revolutionary, interested in sweeping away the existing order and starting over again to build a better world. Many American intellectuals believed that the Great Depression and the world wars demonstrated the need for just such a revolution in America. Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* is a good example of a play written as a radical call to arms. Compare and contrast Odets' and Wilder's plays. You should also do research on the Group Theater (who staged *Waiting for Lefty*) and of which Elia Kazan, the original director of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, was a member. What does Wilder have in common with Odets and the Group? Why does he nevertheless believe in preserving the foundational documents of a civilization that inevitably ends up back on the edge of destruction?
7. In 1931 Wilder published *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act*. Three of the plays, "The Long Christmas Dinner," "Pullman Car Hiawatha," and "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden," were perhaps the most theatrically experimental written to that time by an American. "Pullman Car Hiawatha" in particular shows that the ideas for *The Skin of Our Teeth* had been in Wilder's mind for a long time. Explain how Wilder's ideas about theater develop and change between 1931 and 1942.
8. *The Skin of Our Teeth* is sometimes described as a "tragi-comedy"; look up tragi-comedy and decide to what extent *The Skin of Our Teeth* is one. What plays might it be compared to? What is the effect of mingling comedy and tragedy in the same play?
9. Bertold Brecht was one of the great innovators of the twentieth-century stage because of his "epic theater"; many critics have seen a similarity between Brecht and Wilder's works, and this despite the fact that their political views are very different from each other. Read Brecht's *Mother Courage* (also a war play) and

discuss how Brecht and Wilder use non-realistic staging. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Biography:

- Gilbert A. Harrison, *The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder* (New York: Fromm International Publishing Company, 1986).
- [Niven, Penelope, Thornton Wilder \(New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012\).](#)

Interviews:

- Jackson R. Breyer, ed., *Conversations with Thornton Wilder* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1992).

Letters and Journals:

- *The Journals of Thornton Wilder 1939-1961*, selected and edited by Donald Gallup (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).
- Edward M. Burns and Ulla E. Dydo with William Rice, eds., *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).
- Edward Burns with Josh A. Gaylord, eds., *A Tour of the Darkling Plain: The "Finnegans Wake" Letters of Thornton Wilder and Adaline Glasheen* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001).

On the Plagiarism Controversy:

- Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, "The Skin of Whose Teeth?" (*Saturday Review*, December 19, 1942, pp. 3-4).
- Edmund Wilson, "The Antrobuses and the Earwickers" (*Nation*, January 30, 1943, pp. 167-8).

Theater History:

- Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 3 vols. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998-2000).

- Thomas P Adler, *American Drama, 1940-1960: A Critical History* (New York: Twayne, 1994).
- William W. Demastes, ed., *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, xxxx).

Tallulah Bankhead:

- Tallulah Bankhead, *Tallulah: My Autobiography* (New York: Harper, 1952).
- Denis Brian, *Tallulah, Darling: a Biography of Tallulah Bankhead* (New York: Macmillan, 1980).

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- Claudette Walsh, *Thornton Wilder: A Reference Guide 1926-1990* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1993).

Other Works by Thornton Wilder:

- Donald Gallup and A. Tappan Wilder, eds., *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder*, 2 vols. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997-1998).
- *American Characteristics and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).