

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

GROUP 2

ENGLISH B EXTENDED ESSAY

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Research Question: 'What makes routine events and everyday life situations of a town so unique and well-known drama in Thornton Wilder's "*Our Town*"?'

## CONTENTS

Abstract.....	2
A)Introduction.....	3
B)Analysis.....	5
i. Stage Design.....	6
ii. The Role Of Stage Manager.....	8
iii. Analysis of Static and Dynamic Characters...	11
iv. Themes.....	12
v. Playwright’s style.....	14
C)Conclusion.....	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	16

## ABSTRACT

Thornton Wilder is known to be a master in American Literature. By receiving United State's most prestigious literature reward, Pulitzer Prize, he has become one of the most popular authors. His novels and theatre plays have inspired many others. His simple but efficient style has had an impact on readers and audiences.

In order to show a reaction to the 1920's luxurious "American Dream" concept, he has written "Our Town"; a town which consists simple and ordinary citizens. This simplicity is also reflected by a simple plot. According to this plot, no climax or an action is present. Moreover many people who watch the play initially feel boredom and question themselves why they ever spend all that money to watch an everyday life situation-even very similar to their own life. Yet, as the play goes on, this initial thought is diverted to an immense admiration for the playwright's talent to bring out the value in the simplest things in life.

However, at the end every single audience is affected so deeply that some of them can not stop their tears. What makes all the crowds go and watch on stage what they do everyday? This extended essay is an attempt to find out the features that make Thornton Wilder's seemingly simplistic play, "Our Town" this much popular. Besides, the playwright's technique ,which helps to convey the universal message is to be examined.

The first section of the extended essay is the Introduction where the play and the playwright are introduced in a simple frame. Part B is devoted to the indepth analysis of "Our Town" in four sub categories as "Stage Design", " The Role Of Stage Manager", "Analysis of Characters" and "Themes". The last section will try to answer the research question: 'What makes routine events and everyday life situations of a town so unique and well-known drama in Thornton Wilder's "*Our Town*"?'

(314 words)

## A) INTRODUCTION

The beginning of 1900's was like a metamorphosis for the American society. The society was pushed to get used to a completely different life style. The concept of "American Dream" anchored American people to materialism. Because of the "American Dream" concept, money and the materials, which could be afforded, played a great role at those times. Even the dreams of people changed. Dream of getting richer and estimable individuals was very popular. The secret potential and value of human life fell into disfavor. The only element that mattered, was money and the affairs that money could buy. This corruption led to ignorance, illiteracy and lack of innocence. Even the art was affected by the corruption in society. Art lost its admiration. As a result of the "rise of materialism", theatre was settled mostly on imaginative literature. Theatre lost its purpose, to show how very complicated life situations or stories-for example even "Romeo and Juliet"- could be performed on a very limited stage. The importance was shifted from the story to the design. The passion to affect the audience by the plot and message was ceased. Directors and playwrights were in an endeavor, in order to affect the audience by stage design and materialistic decors.

Thornton Wilder was one of the individuals who were anxious about the future of the society and art. In the Preface by Thornton Wilder, he claims that he lost his pleasure in going to the theatre. In addition, he says that he feels that something is going wrong within his time and he feels dissatisfaction. He also overwelms the new style of theatre, beginning from 1920's, with the words of being evasive and inconsequential.

Thornton Wilder, who is known to be a master in his profession of drama in American literature, tried to stop this fake and ambiguous style by writing "Our Town"; A production which responses to the hypocrisy of the current theatre plays; A play which differs from the inadequate style of drama; A play which illustrates the real life situations of real human

beings, not the exaggerated people who are drown in luxury; A town which symbolizes not the town of American Dream Concept or the millionaires but the town of normal people, **“Our Town”**.

Throughout this play, Thornton Wilder chooses a suitable structure for everyday life situations, such as the calling of mother to her children in the morning in both houses. By using special techniques, themes and symbols, he conveys his deliberate purpose in keeping the play so simple in regard to the glamorous but unreal world going on outside the theatre. Every special fact he uses in his play, is recognizable. Because according to his aim, the society has to be reminded that materialism and money are not important to be superior. What matters is the pure and unadulterated human life. Away from materialism, the structures that Thornton Wilder follows, are like a reaction and antiphon.

In this simple play Thornton Wilder does not create a dramatic incitement as he does not have a regular plot like the other drama plays of other playwrights. There is neither a regular structure, nor a moving, interesting story. In this play, Thornton Wilder refuses to use the steps that lead to the creation of an effective plot. He does not try to take the attention of the audience by making a complication or any dashing and expanded action. He does not have a climax or a crisis or an episode when the excitement arouses. As a result, the play does not consist of a resolution which shows one of the main themes, universality that will be studied later on in the essay. Only the daily events of a town are narrated by an omniscient point of view in a time period, where the lives of people are simple, regular and quite boring for some of the audiences. Moreover, the furniture of stage design is not remarkable. The only remarkable fact about the stage is, its simplicity. In addition, there aren't any extra-ordinary lexical choice, like some other poets or playwrights have. Language used does not have complicated stylistic devices, daily use of language is preferred.

## B) ANALYSIS

“Our Town” by Thornton Wilder, has different structures from the very beginning. As he rejects the usage of the fundamental structures of drama and the tradition that was formed toward the end of the 1920’s. According to Wilder “*theatre plays was not fulfilling their complete potentialities*”<sup>1</sup>. Popularity of imaginative literature was increasing, however at the same time theatre plays were becoming inconsequential and were losing their ability to awaken the society. In his opinion audiences have to be “recollected” for some facts in real life. However exaggerated style of imaginative literature was not allowing to remind the society in any consequences. So in order to accomplish such duty, Wilder creates a town, “Our Town”, to show that actually everything in life is simple. Neither the events and characters nor the furnishing is unique. Everything is universal and humanity does not need anything special to be satisfied, merry and to be “recollected”.

The following structures are analyzed due to understand the effect of “Our Town” by Thornton Wilder on the audiences who have watched the play.

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<sup>1</sup> “PREFACE BY THORNTON WILDER”

## B-i ) STAGE DESIGN

The stage is designed according to the simplicity of the play. “*The author provides no conventional scenery or stage properties to give it normal theatrical shape and seeming*”.(Wilder, viii) The play starts with Act 1 on an empty stage where no curtain or scenery is present. Stage Manager places two tables and several chairs on the stage.(Wilder, page 1) Along the act only two more ladders are pushed on the stage to symbolize the houses of two families, Gibbs and Webbs . By using only two kinds of materials on the stage, Wilder tries to emphasize that nothing more is needed to show the basic daily lives of a common society. Without any fancy and luxury, life can still continue.

Act Two starts without a significant change on the stage. Although it said that three years have gone by nothing has changed , only the ladders are withdrawn ,the chairs and tables stand still. Even for different sceneries same properties are used by Thornton Wilder in Act Two. For example, (Wilder, 62) a board and high stools are placed on the stage to represent the drugstore of Mr. Morgan. On the other hand same tool –board- is used by Mrs. Gibbs as an ironing board.

It is obvious to see that Wilder tries to illustrate the trivial effect of materials in human life. Materials are just transient elements. They do not have any considerable role as they have in 1920’s. A drugstore does not have to be luxurious, because a drugstore is a place where people – especially kids- can communicate. This example gives point to the message of Thornton Wilder. The importance of the drugstore is, it’s the place where the love affair has begun between Emily and George. So beyond the materials and properties, the relationship especially love is the most important fact of human life.

Different from other acts Act Three has an incitement. The characters are busy with the marriage ceremony rush. However even the beautifying , elaborate marriage ceremony is illustrated with the same simple furnishing.

The tables are withdrawn and a platform is placed for the Minister of the church.

Lastly, when the play is about to end, the platform is withdrawn and a couple of chairs are used to symbolize the graves of elders.

Besides the simplicity of furniture on stage, actors carry imaginary materials for their roles. For example, on page 5 while Doctor Gibbs is walking on the stage, *“he stops, sets down his –imaginary- black bag, takes off his hat, and ...”*.(Wilder, 5) Also Si Crowell- newspaper deliveryman- *“hurls imaginary newspapers into doorways”* (Wilder, 49). Furthermore milk deliveryman – Howie Newsome- delivers imaginary milk bottles.

By ignoring figurative designs Thornton Wilder tries to take the attention of the audiences to the insignificant place of physical materials. Life does not depend on materialistic properties. The estimable part is the relationship between the human beings. For example if it were a play from the “roaring 1920’s” the black bag of Doctor Gibbs would be a very expensive brand. The designer or the author would try to take the attention to the high-priced, eye-catching bag. Yet Thornton Wilder does not have a desire to take the attention to the bag. His desire is to take the attention to the actions of Doctor Gibbs and the relationship between his wife.

Moreover, if it were a play from those irritating times from 1920’s, the wedding ceremony would be the most elegant scene of the play. Shiny jewels of the invitees would have the attention of the audience in spite of the love between bride and groom.

## B-ii ) THE ROLE OF STAGE MANAGER

All along the play Stage Manager plays a great role. He is neither a character nor an actor but a narrator. Different from usual theatre plays an omniscient narrator is used, like a novel. In usual plays the sequence of events progress without any interruption, however in “Our Town” the Stage Manager narrates the events by omniscient point of view. He does not have a significant role or he does not change the sequence of events. Firstly he introduces himself at the very beginning of the play, he introduces the director, author and the actors. *“This play is called Our Town. It was written by Thornton Wilder; produced and directed by A.... In it you will see Miss C...; Miss D...; Miss E... ; Mr. F... ; Mr. G... ; Mr. H...; and many others”*

(Wilder, 1) At this part of the play, his role is similar to a presenter or an announcer.

Secondly, décor’s emplacement into/from the stage is provided by the Stage Manager. The following quotations show that Stage Manager acts like one of the staff or a steward working in the theatre hall. *“ Presently the Stage Manager, hat on and pipe in mouth, enters and begins placing a table and several chairs down stage left, and a table and chairs down stage right.”* (Wilder, 1)

*“He-Stage Manager- places a board across the backs of two chairs, parallel to the footlights, and places two high stools behind it.”* (Wilder, 61/62) .

In addition control of the play and the transition along the acts is supported by him. All of the acts start with the explanations of the Stage Manager. In Act 1, he welcomes the audience and give brief information about the “Town”. He shows the place of church, town hall and several locations.

The act also finishes with his words ;

*“That’s the end of the First Act, friends. You can go and smoke now, those that smoke.”*

(Wilder ,45)

Moreover Act 2 starts with his expressions again. He explains how three years have gone by.

In addition he explains his philosophy about the relation between human life and nature.

*“ Three years have gone by. Yes, the sun’s come up over a thousand times. Some babies that weren’t even born before have begun talking regular sentences already;... All that can happen in a thousand days. Nature’s been pushing and contriving in other ways too; a number of people fell in love and got married.”* (Wilder, 47)

He emphasizes on how nature pushes humanity to get used to the speed of time. He also gives a great point to love affairs which happened or can happen in those three years.

According to the play, love and marriage concepts are one of the most essential facts about human life. The importance of love and marriage is conveyed by the Stage Manager with those lines ; *“Almost everybody in the world gets married,-you know what I mean? In our town there aren’t hardly any exceptions. Most everybody in the world climbs into their graves married. The first act was called the Daily Life. This act is called Love and Marriage.”*

(Wilder, 48) Furthermore Act 2 is finished by Stage Manager. After he finishes his role as Minister in the church, he turns to the audience and makes the closing of the Act. *“That’s all the second act. Ten minutes intermission folks.”*(Wilder, 88) Lastly Act 3 starts with his opinions about the wars and veterans of United States of America and his opinions about death. He also ends up the play by drawing a curtain across the stage and wishing a good night to the audience.

The Godlike position gives him the right to interrupt the speeches of other actors and to inform the audience about some facts about the “Town” . Because he is the one who knows

everything about the town, he knows the past, present and future. He knows how characters feel. His ability to shift the play from a scene to another, and his authority leads to an enormous effect on the audience. He is probably the most effective character in the play due to his plainness. Stage Manager doesn't need any implied messages. Wilder uses Stage Manager in order to convey his opinions clearly and directly. For example, the following lines can be given in order to illustrate the interruption of the Stage Manager and his opinions about war;

*“ Thank you. Thank you! That'll do. We'll have to interrupt again here.... Joe was a very bright fellow. He graduated with honors and got a scholarship to Boston Tech.- M.I.T., that is. But the War broke out and Joe died in France. All that education for nothing.”* (Wilder, 30)

In addition The Stage Manager tries to re-collect the audience by referring to their childhood and to the times of their first love. *“ Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Now I have to interrupt again here. You see we want to know how all this began, this wedding, this plan to spend a life time together. You know how it is: you're twenty-one or twenty-two and you make some decisions; then whissh! You're seventy... I want you to try and remember what it was like when you were young, when you were fifteen or sixteen. For some reasons it is very hard to do: those days when even the little things in life could be almost too exciting to bear.”* (Wilder, 61)

Using a soliloquy provides a link between the audience and the stage. By the help of the Stage Manager, Thornton Wilder bonds the audience to the play. As a result of such simple story, the attention of the audience may decrease as the play continues. By using a non-typical soliloquy, Wilder tries to prevent ruptures within the audience. Moreover, the Stage Manager serves as means of prop in order to express the message in a effective way.

### B-iii ) ANALYSIS OF DYNAMIC AND STATIC CHARACTERS

All along the play some characters like Howie Newsome, Si Crowell and the parents of Emily and George are static, do not show any progress. On the other hand, Emily goes through a change and improves her character during the play.

Emily Webb is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Webb and the wife of George Gibbs. Different from many other static characters, Emily has a dynamic character. Her recognition, that human life is more valuable than she thought while she was alive, play a key role in the play. Before her death, she is one of the typical village girls. She is not aware of the importance of human life. She is simple as everyone else. Yet, her death leads her to understand the real meaning and secret of life. Her realization is the main message of the play. According to Wilder the meaning of life lies under the simple things. Wilder makes Emily understand his ideology by letting her go back to her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. She witnesses the blindness of human beings. According to her, humans are not capable of being grateful for the life donated to them. The following lines are claimed by Emily when she returns from her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday to the graveyard:

*“ Oh, earth , you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you.” and then she asks : “ Do any human beings ever realize life where they live it? –every, every minute?” she admits : “That’s all human beings are!- Just blind people”.*(Wilder, 115)

On the other hand, some static characters are present in the play. Those characters exist in order to show the theme of universality. Those static characters symbolize all of the humankind. Although every single individual has his own personality, actually everyone is similar. Whom have avoided this similarity, are the ones that understands the importance of life while living it. Thornton Wilder , for example, have used Joe Crowell-newspaper deliver-

According to the plot Joe Crowell is very bright. He even gets a scholarship from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However nature does not let him develop himself. He dies in a war in France. His position is filled by Si Crowell. Like a cycle, the individuals, who can't see the value of life, is replaced with new individuals. Nothing significant is left after their death. Nothing remarkable changes even all of the generation is dead. Because life continues with other human beings. In addition, Cartwright family is used to show the independence of human life from money and wealth. Cartwright family is the wealthiest family of the town. They own a blanket factory which "*brings them a fortune*". However at the very end no one remarks neither them nor their fortune. Away from human relations, they are not to be reminded; A family which is away from town and away from the beauties of earth.

#### B-iv ) THEMES

All along the play, the most obvious and important theme is universality. Universality is the main prop for conveying the playwright's message. Many other important structures, such as "Stage Design, Stage Manager and Characters" are narrated by the theme, "universality". The words "hundreds", "thousands" and "millions" are used often. For example, in the quotation below Stage Manager uses " thousands" frequently and states the sameness and universality of human life even after thousands of years. "*should put in the cornerstone for people to dig up a thousand years from now.... A thousand- two thousand years. ... same as here.... Thousand years from now.... People a thousand years from now*"(Wilder, 31) In addition Stage Manager claims the words "... *thousand times...thousand days... a number of young people...millions of gallons... almost everybody... most everybody*" (Wilder, 47-48) in order to illustrate the universality and sameness of every individual. In this play everyman has the same feelings as it is stated by Mr.Webb "*Well, every man that's ever lived has felt that way about it.*" (Wilder, 57) An impact is to be created on the audience by the cemetery scenery. In

such scenery, everyone is buried in the same cemetery. It does not matter whether they are poor or rich or drink a lot. Everyone deserves the same burial process. In addition “everyone” and “nobody” are used commonly. For example Stage Manager states that “*In our town we like to know the facts about everybody.*” (Wilder, 5)

In this universal manner some other themes are present such as “Love and Marriage” and “Beauties of Human life and Nature”.

Love is often mentioned in “Our Town” and it is illustrated many times. In Act 1, love between family members is narrated. For example Emily gives her father an abrupt kiss and her father says : “*Golly, I never got a kiss from such a great lady before.*” (Wilder, 24) Such sympathetic relations reflect the love between the families and children whereas love between a wife and a husband is narrated in Act 2. Lastly in Act 3, an individual’s love to her early life is mentioned. Emily’s death leads to a demonstration of her early life, and she reminds that her early life was lovely. She remembers that actually her early life was wonderful.

Lastly “Beauties of Human life and Nature” is given by descriptive images by Stage Manager and Characters. Subjective comments are given such as “*The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go.*” (Wilder, 2) Furthermore, importance of human life is mentioned by the claims of Emily after her death in Act three. “*Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you....Do any human beings ever realize life where they live it? –every, every minute...That’s all human beings are! – Just blind people.*” (Wilder, 116)

## B-v ) PLAYWRIGHT'S STYLE

In this simple play, playwright uses a colloquial, folksy style in which fancy words are omitted. The entire play is based on a dialect style. The reason why a prestigious playwright, Wilder, chooses such language is dependent on his deliberate message. In an ordinary town in which ordinary people live, an ordinary language should be used. It would be inappropriate, if the language was not from everyday speech. Wilder would be so effective in conveying his message if he used a complicated language style. In many sections folksy style is used in order to unite the audience with the stage and characters. Everyone in town talks like “u know, knew ’em all” as if they are really one of members of an ordinary town.

### C) CONCLUSION

All in all, it can be said that Thornton Wilder's different structures are very effective and his deliberate message is successfully conveyed to the audience. His universal message contradicts with the current social structure. 1920's fake world misled many people and still continues to mislead. However; by the help of such playwrights like Thornton Wilder, society could be reminded the importance of human life. Firstly, his universal stage design reflects the real houses of real human beings. By providing very limited furniture, audience is reminded that they don't need anything more than a table and a couple of chairs in order to live. In today's world people have great houses with great furniture but they don't even come together around the table to communicate. Secondly by the help of a soliloquy -The Stage Manager- playwright transfers his message directly without any euphemism. Involving the audience, expecting their participation by asking questions connects the audience directly to the play. The audience sympathized themselves with the characters and their lives, by the help of the main theme- universality. Furthermore, the audience is reminded the beauties of life which they are unaware of. To conclude, it is reminded that life is a gift, with all it has, gives and takes. Humanity should appreciate life the way it comes and should not spend their times dealing with trivial things.

This definitely is a simple but immense truth of any human beings. Most societies need to be reminded of this fact in the simplest manner which -according to the outcome of this extended essay -is achieved by Thornton Wilder.

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