

Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH



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Thornton Wilder (1897-1975)

Premiere: Plymouth Theatre,
New York, 1942 (Pulitzer prize)
Arena Stage, Washington DC, 1992

Jill Savege Scharff

Thornton Niven Wilder, Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright and author, explores the problems of human existence from the enigma of fate to the ordinariness of everyday life. Without soothing our anxiety, as theater of his day tended to do, Wilder challenges us to see life as an adventure fraught with danger emanating from internal and external sources, and yet one in which not even our own internal enemies can destroy us. His seriocomic assessment of the human condition in his play *The Skin of Our Teeth* (Wilder 1957) is a

hilarious, yet deadly serious, ruthless investigation of our struggle against the evil within us as we aim for moral and intellectual improvement. With one lens pointed at the particulars of the Antrobus family household and the other lens broadly focused on universal historical continuity, Wilder's highly theatrical piece cleverly engineers a simultaneous vision of the here-and-now of the human condition and the there-and-then of its development through prehistoric and biblical times to the present times of prosperity, war, and racial tension.

Themes of destructiveness and survivorship in *The Skin of Our Teeth* can be related to Wilder's experience in his family of origin, his knowledge of psychoanalysis, and his writing (1957) that includes *Our Town* (1957), *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), and *Theophilus North* (1973). The destructiveness can be considered in terms of the classical psychoanalytic concept of the death instinct (Freud, 1920) and projective identification (Klein 1946), an unconscious mechanism invoked to deal with the force of the death instinct. Understanding the hidden power of unconscious communication, especially projective identification, in shaping family and individual development can illuminate Wilder's disquieting perception of the male-female relationship in which woman is split into childish exhibitionistic, aggressively sexual, devotedly maternal, simplistically black or white aspects, and man is seen as intelligently arrogant, entitled, and barely in control of violent and sexual impulses. Wilder's own family of origin

experienced many actual splits when his parents lived apart, sometimes on separate continents, and when the siblings were sent to schools in different locations. Wilder's survival of many separations and his experience of his parents' committed, but strained, couple relationship, may have influenced his choices to live as a single man, enjoy closeness to family, and contemplate life and death.

Born in Madison, Wisconsin, where his father was editor of the local paper, Thornton Wilder later lived in China and Europe as well as in the United States, at home, and in boarding school, variously separated from one or both parents and from his sisters and older brother. His first major separation occurred at birth when his twin was still-born. He was the survivor of the twin-ship, even though his twin brother was the well-formed infant and Thornton was a sickly, underweight baby who had to be coddled. It must have seemed as though the wrong twin died. According to Thornton Wilder's biographer, Gilbert A. Harrison, the family story was that delicate Thornton was carried around on a pillow for the first year of his life (Harrison, 1983). It is easy to imagine the anxious care and concern that his bereft parents showered on the surviving twin. After being a frail and jumpy child, Thornton eventually did become robust enough for adult success as a long distance runner. He had enough vitality to withstand the effects of heavy smoking and social drinking, but he remained psychologically preoccupied with death and survivorship. Although firmly in favor of marriage and the

family, he himself did not marry, his most significant relationships in adulthood remaining with his four siblings. He was particularly close to his sister, Isabel, who was his business manager, and, conversely, remarkably spurned in later years by his sister Charlotte, a gifted writer who suffered mental illness and was institutionalized. Charlotte's breakdown would be alluded to in Wilder's novel, *The Eighth Day* (Wilder 1967; Blank 1996).

The Death Theme

The German scholar, Horst Oppel, emphasized the recurring death theme, converse with the dead, and descent into the underworld (qtd. and trans. A. Wilder, 1980). *Our Town* uses the dramatic effect of having Emily return from the dead, while *The Skin of Our Teeth* exposes the family to the philosophy of the dead poets and thinkers. But Wilder is not drawn to death as a solution to conflict. He uses death to explore life and survivorship.

Wilder's commitment to these subjects may have been derived from the impact of the loss of his twin, Theophilus, at birth (Glenn, 1986). His older brother writes of Thornton as follows: "As himself a twin who lost a brother at birth, he was predisposed to fascination with this relationship. Indeed, one could hazard that he was haunted all his life by this missing alter ego. Thus, he plays with the afterlife of this twin in the dual persona suggested by the title of his last novel, *Theophilus North*, 'North' representing an anagram for

Thornton. In this way, he was able to tease both himself and the reader as to the borderlands between autobiography and fable" (A. Wilder 1980, p. 10).

Jules Glenn, a psychoanalyst interested in applied psychoanalysis, noted Wilder's preoccupation with twinning and described how the author's twinship affected his choice of material (Glenn 1986, p. 627). As evidence, Glenn mentions many plays and novels, but focuses especially on the novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In that novel, Wilder explores the lives of the victims of a collapse of a bridge. Among them is Esteban who, grieving for his dead twin' Manuel, had undertaken a long journey in the course of which he crossed the bridge on the fateful day. The date Wilder originally assigned to the collapse of the bridge was the birthdate of himself and his twin before Wilder changed it (Harrison, 1983 p.105). So, in the story, the twins are reunited in death on a date associated with the birth of the author and his twin. In this story, as in much of his writing, Wilder uses death to examine life.

In this late-life, semi-autobiographical novel, *Theophilus North*, a study of love and virtue set in the Newport, Rhode Island, of the nineteen twenties, the protagonist Theophilus North, a bustling, do-gooding, adventurous, quixotic character rescues people from a series of nine settings. The nine ambitions, nine cities, and nine gables mentioned in the novel may refer to the nine months of a pregnancy (Glenn 1986, p. 635). Together with the theme of rescue, the recurring motif of nine may refer to Wilder's wish to

rescue both himself and his twin from the unhappy result of the nine months of pregnancy. And Glenn reminds us that *Our Town*, a play about family and community relationships begins with the joyful announcement of the birth of twins (p. 634).

There are no twins or twinned families in *The Skin of Our Teeth* but there is a pair of families; the present-day family in New Jersey and the stone-age family, its historical twin. The family name, Antrobus, has been chosen to refer to the family of man ostensibly for its affinity to Anthropos, but it has a hint of being almost an anagram for Thornton, as is North. Added to this, we have information that the father-son struggle in the play is a painful echo of Wilder's love-hate relationship with his admired, ebullient father who was, however, somewhat critical and even tyrannical as perceived by his son. Now we have the autobiographical element to add to the fictional element of the Antrobus family, through which *The Skin of Our Teeth* addresses the issues facing the human family.

What light does Freud's theory of the death instinct throw on this play? Previously believing humans' wish to live by the pleasure principle and reluctantly accede to the demands of reality because their intelligence allows them to see that survival depends upon becoming civilized, Freud later became convinced that some of the time we are motivated not by pleasure, but by the need to repeat painful situations, and then we get caught in a

repetitive cycle of self-defeat and self-destruction, seen in symptoms, in recurrent fantasies, and in dreams after trauma (Freud 1920, pp. 21-22). He looked for an instinct to explain this "repetition compulsion" and proposed the death instinct, an instinctual disposition that either led the organism surely, but silently, back to oblivion or that was diverted outwards as an impulse of aggressiveness or destructiveness (p. 44). The death instinct could only be detected in the form of repetitive symptoms, fantasies and dreams, especially sadomasochistic fantasies in which the more visible erotic elements with which the destructive elements are paired act as symptomatic manifestations of the death instinct. Freud suggested that the life instinct driving the organism to survive and enjoy pleasure, sexuality and procreation is opposed by the death instinct which led to aggression and destruction (Freud 1933, p. 106).

Whether he was aware of the concept of the death instinct or not, Wilder himself was a victim of repetitive compulsion. Wilder, who suffered many separations as a child, continually recreated repeated separations from his loved ones due to work and travel. In simple terms, he was running away from the pain of closeness, and doing what his family always did. In technical terms, his pattern of flight can be viewed as arising from the death instinct, with which he was infused by association to his dead twin and by being cared for by grieving parents. We may also view his repetition of separation as a personal attempt at mastery of a painful situation, a clinging to what is

known, even if it was not satisfactory, in preference to depending on the possibility of an ephemeral security that was unknown or unproven. His repetition of separation occurred as an identification with a family style of repeatedly responding to loss, disappointment, and conflict, by flight.

In the early 1960s, Wilder dropped out for nearly two years to live in obscurity in the southwest. Perhaps this was the equivalent of the city boy spending the summer on a farm as he had had done as a teenager on his father's orders, a vehicle for getting in touch with ordinary people in a non-intellectual way. It must have also served to provide psychological space for reflection and self-renewal, after which he wrote his most complex novel, *The Eighth Day*. After the age of 65, Wilder wrote comparatively little, perhaps because the issues of survivorship were invaded by anxieties about the approach of death.

In later life, Thornton commented on another kind of separation, his flight from seriousness, as follows: "What I must put behind me is the continual passing from one 'false situation' to another" (qtd. in Harrison 1983, p. 267). He said to himself, "I must gaze at, the boundless misery of the human condition, collective and individual" (qtd. Harrison 1983, p. 270). He does just that in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, but with enough comic diversion to make the confrontation palatable. Although some critics thought that Wilder's writing smacked of middle America and disguised religiosity, others thought

that it transcended the trivia of everyday while celebrating the latent dignity within the ordinariness of the humdrum. Wilder is concerned not with his characters' actuality, but with their promise (A. Wilder 1980 p. 71).

At the time of writing about the death instinct, Freud was deeply affected by the loss of his own nephew and by the massive destruction of World War I. At the time of writing *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder was in a state of strong emotion about the atrocities of World War II. Both the scientist and the artist were trying to draw our attention to the forces of destruction at large in the repetitive cycle of aggression and defeat in human society. Freud used a biological model, whereas Wilder used a relational one.

Projective Identification

It fell to Melanie Klein to grasp the significance of Freud's observations concerning the death instinct. She thought that the infantile self was desperately afraid that the uncontrollable hatred and devouring love arising from the death instinct would destroy the object of its affections, the good mother and her body. The infant, so her theory goes, attempts to deflect the death instinct, as Freud suggested, by an unconscious mental mechanism called *projective identification* (Klein 1946 p. 8) so as to defend against anxiety and to communicate experience within the context of an unconscious reciprocated relationship. Using projective identification, the infant projects

out the aggressive, threatening part of itself that is under the influence of the death instinct and identifies it as arising from its mother's body, to maintain the security of its self. Unfortunately danger returns when the baby identifies the mother as being like the primitive, aggressive part that is lodged in her especially when the mother identifies with the baby's perception of her and responds aggressively. Now instead of a mother experienced as loving and good, the baby thinks that the mother must be bad and hateful. The baby attempts to control this persecutory situation by taking in this bad image of the mother and storing it inside itself as a bad object.

Fortunately, according to Klein's theory, the life instinct is there to combat the death instinct. Under the force of the life instinct, good aspects of the self are projected into the mother to preserve them from destruction by the forces within the baby, and then she is experienced as good and loving, and the baby takes in the good object. So inside the self, the baby has good and bad objects that are in conflict, which leaves the baby anxious that the good object may be destroyed. The balance between the amounts of good and bad projected into and returned from the mother to the child eventually lead to appreciation of her as a whole person who is sometimes found to be good and sometimes felt to be bad. With maturation in cognitive abilities, the infant develops an integrated good and bad object inside the self and then a realistic sense of the self as a whole with the good and bad impulses that can be managed inside the self and within the context of the primary relationships.

Projective identification is a form of unconscious communication in adult life. With it comes a pattern of intrapsychic conflict and interpersonal behavior that is reiterated in relation to the parents and all future significant relationships. For instance, projective identification occurs between members of a family at all stages of the life-cycle. Aspects of the parents' relationship that have not been adapted to and modified tend to get projected out of the marriage, either to get rid of unwanted, bad parts, or to save and protect good parts of the marital relationship. These unacceptable parts of the spouse's joint marital personality are projected into one or another of the children where they show up as behaviors in that child that lead to the same level of anxiety that they generate in the parents; and the child gets treated with the same attitude that the couple holds toward these unmanageable parts of their relationship. So the child, for better or worse, becomes the repository for all the unacknowledged marital themes and is treated accordingly, being denigrated for the unacceptable bad aspects, or overly cherished for the good aspects. Some sturdy children can defend themselves against this process and refuse the projective identification, but others react more to their parents' than to their own agenda. The distribution of the projective identifications among the children encourages sibling rivalry.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the competitiveness and meanness of a conflicted brother-sister relationship appears as an incidental part of the action. The repetitiously quarreling children enact a battle for control and

favor that constantly confronts the parents with conflicts that have to be managed. Is this cyclic repetition due to the innate response to the death instinct? Is the son, Henry/Cain, simply born bad?

Following the theory of Ronald Fairbairn (1952) and others of the object relations school of psychoanalysis, contemporary psychoanalytic theory has moved away from viewing instinct as the sole source of human motivation. The infant is still seen as having biological needs, of course, but the primary motivation is thought to be the need to be in a relationship. The infant is still seen as being born with a unique constitution deriving from a gene pool, but with an equally unique family with whom to progress through the life cycle. After all, without a mother the baby cannot survive. The infant builds the structure of the self from satisfying and frustrating experiences with the mother and other family members. Now the question becomes more complicated: Is the cyclic repetition in the Antrobus family due to the death instinct, or is it due to the way the anxiety has been managed in the family and in the culture in which they live? Is Henry/Cain born bad, or does his evil stem from the way that he has taken in good and bad experience in his family? Is he behaving in ways determined by his parents' relationship and by his family heritage?

In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the brother-sister struggle is an interpersonal replay of the children's internal struggle against Oedipal desires to murder a

parent in order to possess the other. These children are clearly living in an incredibly hostile environment in which the protection of both parents is vital to their survival and in which the parents who need each other for survival have not worked through their envy of the other's part of the bargain. The unhappy parents are worried about the death of their union, their family, and their culture, and they locate threat in the form of their son.

To protect their frightened parents' union – which the parents do not secure against threat from the children or from the sexually appealing maid, Sabina – the children displace their rage and sexually proactive impulses on to each other and attack them there. In the Antrobus family, the parents identify the girl as all that is sweet and favored especially by her father. They see the boy as evil incarnate. So the daughter acts in ways to please the parents and the son resentfully rebels against their authority. The children conform to role expectations placed upon them by their parents through projective identification which is a result of the parents' inability to contain conflict within the marital relationship. The parents act and the children react. The children's behavior diverts attention from the central problem in the marriage, and at the same time that problem is displayed in the children's behavior.

The relationship between brother and sister and their responses to their parents' behavior and expectations gives form to the tension in the

parents' marital relationship arising from the parents' unresolved conflicts over authority, self-esteem, sexual worth, and entitlement to respect and gratitude. Because of the family's projective identification of the girl as seductive and the boy as aggressive, we see a powerful reflection of the destructiveness of the female-male relationship derived from the children's experience of their parents' marriage and their shared perceptions of male and female roles and responsibilities. In contrast to these negative aspects, the positive aspects of the brother-sister relationship are focused on in Wilder's *Our Town*, a play that features twinned families each of which has a brother-sister pair out of which a marriage is created when George marries Emily.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder portrays the man as a single entity: intellectual, brilliant, devoted to work, inventor of survival strategies, and leader of the family unit. He portrays the woman in two parts: (1) the maternal woman – Mrs. Antrobus – who is devoted to her children and deeply in touch with their needs for comfort, shelter and nurturance, yet unable to tolerate her daughter's exhibitions of sexuality or her son's aggressiveness; (2) the seductive, single, childless woman – Sabina – who has the erotic appeal that the mother lacks. We see in the girl echoes of both adult women, but in the boy we see mainly a rejected, unsatisfactory, unsublimated and uncivilized part of his father. Lily Sabina splits herself into the woman, the maid, and the actress when she steps out of character and tells the audience

that it is really difficult to play her part. She acts the seductress because she identifies with what she believes men want from her, the prototype for men being her father. Her problem in playing her role is one of difficulty in tolerating and escaping from a projective identification. It is hard for her to be the maid she is required to be for Mrs. Antrobus, while acting as the seductress that she imagines she must be for Mr. Antrobus, and still be the real person who is in a role as their maid. She identifies with what she perceives will please the other person, and fills that role temporarily, because she does not realize that her own enduring self could be pleasing just as she is without role-playing. At the same time, she avoids recognizing her inherent aggression and sexuality, because they seem only to be attitudes that occur in role. These identifications occur to protect against death to the self, if the self were really to admit its full potential for sexual and aggressive feeling.

Wilder chose the family bond rather than the marital relationship for himself, a choice that his mother and father had also made despite the fact of their long and fertile marriage. His parents, each a person of character, remained committed to their marriage, yet chose to live separately in different continents for much of Wilder's life. Each was devoted to the children. We can see in Wilder the qualities of his mother – her literary and artistic interests, her gregariousness and musical sensibility – and his father's austerity, morality and intellectual drive, his writing ability, ebullience and wit. According to Mrs. Wilder, Mr. Wilder was dictatorial, not tender with her.

He was unable to recover from the loss of an earlier love, and thought of himself as a widower at heart. Mrs. Wilder thought that she and he could have "rubbed along comfortably enough," but there was not enough understanding between them to contain the strain of their long separations (Harrison 1983, p. 14). Only when Wilder was a very young boy was his father at home. Perhaps that is when he absorbed enough of the whole family atmosphere to provide the basis for his writing about family life. He also absorbed the strain in the couple relationship as projected by his parents.

It seems that Wilder identified with each of his parents separately, but he was unable to take them in as a whole, loving *internal couple* (Scharff 1992, p. 139). How could he if they were not together for most of his childhood that he can remember? Wilder's unconscious psychological inheritance was that of a dead internal couple, based on a coalescence of images of his father as a widower at heart who lost the woman he loved, of himself as the surviving twin who lost his brother, and of his parents' dead marital union. Despite his immense creativity that allowed him to explore and illuminate this issue for his audience, Wilder was personally unable or uninterested in bringing the couple to life for himself in the married state that he celebrates in his plays. Although charming as a social companion, he had few, if any, sexual relationships, and the one report of a homosexual relationship remains unsubstantiated (Tappan Wilder, nephew, personal communication).

Like many intellectuals of his time, Wilder who had read Freud, decided to visit him. In a letter to Arnold Zweig, the German writer, Freud referred to receiving a visit from "Thornton Wilder, the author of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*" (Freud 1935). (Freud kept the novel in his waiting room along with Conrad Aiken's *Great Circle*). Then Freud sent a note to Wilder thanking him for greetings he had received from him on his eightieth birthday (Freud 1936). According to Harrison, Freud referred to his theory of infantile sexuality, the Oedipus complex, and Wilder's problems with women (p. 140), and after the meeting with Freud, Wilder was convinced and declared himself a Freudian (p. 139). Certainly, *The Skin of Our Teeth* recalls Freud's conclusion that "the evolution of civilization is the struggle of eros and death, is the struggle for life of the human species" (Freud 1927, p.122).

Despite his own sexual repression, Wilder found Freud's libido theory interesting, but he recognized its limitation more clearly than Freudians of the day. Wilder wrote, "One can talk all one wants about the libido element in parental and sibling love yes, but one falls into the danger of overlooking the sheer emotional devotion which is a qualitative difference, and must be continually recognized as such" (qtd. in Harrison 1983, p. 170). In this statement, Wilder does not dismiss the sexuality that Freud drew attention to in family life, but like a contemporary analyst who has read Fairburn, Wilder emphasizes the importance of the emotional attachment and commitment that characterize family relationships. He was teaching this at Harvard one

year before the publication of Fairburn's book, *Psychoanalytic Studies of Personality*. Not surprisingly, Wilder's plays, including *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, are replete with family relational themes.

The same may be said for all Wilder's plays and novels. They deal with human potential, human follies, life, death, and fate. Wilder's plays retain their universal appeal because they present a view of human experience across the generations, presented with a charitable mixture of severity and empathy. Laced with charm and humor, the plays are highly entertaining, yet profoundly moving.

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