

ANALYSIS

The Skin of Our Teeth (1942)



Thornton Wilder

(1897-1975)

“His two important full-length plays—the Pulitzer Prize drama *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*—reflect the theme of all Wilder’s major writing—man in the universe. He belongs to the select few who have managed to restore the primacy of imagination to the drama in a completely modern idiom.... In 1942, Wilder startled playgoers with a uniquely stylized drama, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which telescoped human history in the story of a New Jersey suburban family. Although it did not succeed as well as *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth* made a deep impression. It was the profoundest commentary on the Second World War crisis of which the American theatre proved capable.”

John Gassner

A Treasury of the Theatre: From Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller
(Simon & Schuster 1935-57) 926

“The unconventional use of theatrical devices, such as asides and interruptions, increases the audience’s feeling of participation. George Antrobus, his wife, and his son and daughter represent humanity—the parents are Adam and Eve, and their son Henry is Cain—engaged in the struggle to survive. Their home in Excelsior, N.J., is threatened first by a creeping wall of ice, and later by a long war. Each time they barely escape annihilation, but George, inventor of the alphabet and the wheel, maintains the continuity of learning and culture. Lily Sabina, their maid, the eternal Lilith, nearly succeeds in winning George away from his wife on the Atlantic City boardwalk during a convention of which George is elected president. Constructive attitudes prevail after the war, in which Henry is the enemy. Having reassembled his family, George feels the ‘most important thing of all: The desire to begin again to start building,’ and seeks his books to guide him in his struggle.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“A surprising number of isolated plays, presented in the commercial theater and directed, often with conspicuous success, toward a general audience, were frankly unrealistic and nonrepresentational; among them were *Our Town*, *On Borrowed Time*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and *The Glass Menagerie*.... Among the symbolic plays which achieved conspicuous success during the forties, Thornton Wilder’s extravaganza *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) and Mary Chase’s engaging farce-comedy *Harvey* (1944) deserve special

mention; but of the new playwrights who emerged between the debut of Odets and the middle of the forties only one, William Saroyan, has written often enough as well as originally enough to establish even a tentative claim to inclusion in any permanent list of American dramatists.”

Joseph Wood Krutch
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1331-32

“*The Skin of Our Teeth* is a fantastic *tour de force* resembling nothing else in Wilder’s work. The hero is all humanity, personified in the figure of George Antrobus. He is Adam, Noah, in fact every great hero of humanity; he invents the wheel and the alphabet, lives through the Fall, the Flood, various wars, the Ice Age, and countless other catastrophes, and yet his life somehow struggles on. His wife Eva bears him two boys and a girl, but Cain, or Henry, the elder, murders his brother. A maid, Lily, serves as a sort of Lilith or personification of female sensuality.

The first act takes place in the Ice Age, although the family is living in comfortable circumstances in Excelsior, New Jersey. It is so cold they are burning pianos in Hartford; gradually the wall of ice creeps southward. Refugees crowd into the home, including Homer, Moses, and the Muses. The second act takes place immediately before the deluge. The scene is Atlantic City; the convention of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans, is taking place, and George is to address the gathering. His theme is ‘Enjoy Yourselves.’ The Flood begins as the act closes; the family scrambles into a boat. The third act returns to the suburban home. A war has just ended; Henry or Cain (personification of brute force) was the enemy. Lily, of course, was a camp-follower. The father, George, is now the creative and inventive spirit in humanity, and continues with his inventions of the wheel and the alphabet. The play ends as George, ever optimistic, prepares to fight for a better world with his weapons: books, ideas, and human creativity.

The style of *The Skin of Our Teeth* is light and satirical, and the profound meaning is only latent. The play is the most humorous of Wilder’s works; it might be viewed as a sort of parody of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 310-11

“This is an amusing combination of fantasy, morality, and satire, for which Wilder won his third Pulitzer prize (1943). The play is unconventional in form; characters frequently address the audience, either explaining incidents or expressing bewilderment at their meaning. Its theme is universal; man’s escape from disaster through the ages. The central character is George Antrobus, who invents the lever and the wheel and who is elected President of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals (Subdivision: Humans). He is almost lured away from his wife (who, during 5,000 years of marriage, managed to invent the apron) by Sabina, the Eternal Temptress. However, he returns home in time of despair and disaster. The play has been revived frequently since its original production in New York. Some critics have found striking similarities between the play and parts of *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939) by James Joyce.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)