

**OUR TOWN REVISITED:  
THE SMALL TOWN IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA**

**Hans Bak, University of Nijmegen**

**I**

Whether regarded as one of the great, if deceptively simple, classical plays of the American theater or as a shamelessly nostalgic and sentimental piece of middle-class theatrical folklore, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) remains the archetypal small-town play in American literature and as such the inevitable point of reference and departure for a discussion of the small town in contemporary American drama. Its continuing popularity—evidenced by regular performances in college and community theaters across the U.S. as much as abroad (*Unsere Kleine Stadt, Notre Petite Ville, Ons Stadje*)—may well be based on what I take to be an unresolved doubleness or ambiguity at the core of Wilder's artistic strategy and intent. In one of its dimensions *Our Town* offers us an unmistakably particularized portrait of family and community life in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, between 1901 and 1913. We are given its precise geographical location, learn about its history, demographics, religious and ethnic make-up, voting preferences and its (non)interest in culture. Above all we hear the authentic flavor of New England village small-talk as we are being presented with a series of scenes from small-town "daily life" which focus on the parallel and virtually interchangeable lives and destinies of two archetypal families, the Gibbsses and the Webbs. In a play more lyrical-allegorical than dramatic-realistic, what plot there is revolves about the young lives and loves of George and Emily, as we watch them enact the human pageantry of budding adolescent love, courtship, marriage and early death, in a series of exemplary tableaux selected and presented for us by a God-like, omniscient Stage Manager at one time played by Wilder himself. The play's principal intent, however, is not to offer an authentic and intensely localized image of small-town life, but rather to subsume such a portrait in the larger metaphysical perspective of the endless continuum of human experience. The unexamined lives of "little" people are placed against the backdrop of the timeless and universal, as Wilder—by voice of his Stage Manager—probes into the question of the lasting value and meaning of ordinary lives imprisoned in the trivial routines of everyday life. In *Our Town* ordinary small-town life, in all its transience and

evanescence, becomes a ritual enactment of cosmic, permanent events. Here, also, emerges the play's curious doubleness, as Wilder points up the pathetic narrowness of "little" lives with irony and affection, even as he posits a fundamental significance for such lives by playing them out against the transcending backdrop of "the Mind of God."<sup>1</sup> Grover's Corners thus becomes a microcosm of humanity, its hopes and anxieties those of all human beings at all times in all places.

In offering us a celebration of the special value of the ordinary Wilder has resorted to a double strategy: his play shamelessly bets on the nostalgia and sentimentality of audience identification ("We all know how it is," the Stage Manager observes recurrently), even as it ends by exposing the "tragic waste"<sup>2</sup> involved in the lack of awareness marking such lives. On the one hand, the play explicitly invites us to identify with a small-town world of middle-class bourgeois values located in a pre-World War I past, a nostalgic memory of a world that was pastoral, benign, orderly, and safe, in which one did not have to lock one's front door against burglars never seen, in which the constable making his evening round reassuringly kept watch over the good and virtuous—a cosmos of fixed certainties in which even the most ordinary life has its place and significance, in which all is enveloped reassuringly in the "Mind of God." In the world of *Our Town* what little glimpses we catch of possible frictions, anxieties or disturbances—the lack of concern for social justice voiced by the Belligerent Man, the unhappy life (later suicide) of a drunken church organist, the "cruelty" of sending women, like Mrs. Webb, into marriage "blind as a bat" (69)—are downplayed and ironed out into a soothing universalism.

On the other hand, Wilder seems to want to subvert the reassurance of such universalism by offering us a vision of the tragic failure of human consciousness. This doubleness is illuminated most clearly by the ambiguous role played by the Stage Manager who (much like the narrator in Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* [1912]) is both the embodiment of the small-town spirit and in possession of a higher, transcendent perspective. Intimately acquainted with the folkways and the foibles of his town, he can invite us to identify nostalgically with its enactment of the eternal human pageantry. At the same time, since he is able to move back and forth freely and fluidly in time, he can offer us past, present and future, a perspective of timelessness which points up the tragic deficiencies of human life. Thus, we learn about the times

---

<sup>1</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 49. All subsequent references to *Our Town* or to Wilder's "Preface" will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Rex Burbank, *Thornton Wilder* (New York: Twayne, 1961), p. 94.

and circumstances of the deaths of Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs before we first see them in the play: as a result, the nostalgic screen through which we see them act out their little lives is further affected by our conscious and foregrounded knowledge of their ultimate deaths. Similarly, the Stage Manager, this time acting as the minister conducting the wedding ritual, can both affirm love and marriage as the perennial cosmic principle—the "pushing and contriving" of "nature" (50)—and ponder, apparently without a trace of cynicism or irony: "I've married over two hundred couples in my day. Do I believe in it? I don't know. ... Once in a thousand times it's interesting" (73).

The tragic element in Wilder's vision, while latently present throughout the play, emerges in full force in its last scene, which centers upon Emily's premature death-in-childbirth. The earlier summons to nostalgic identification ("We all know how it is") now is extended to include the reality of death. Wilder offers us a vision of death as the weaning away and burning out of the earthly and specific (merely the transient and evanescent), and the ultimate illumination of the "something way down deep that is eternal about every human being." The dead, growing indifferent to earthly concerns like love and material possession, are "waitin' for the eternal part in them to come out clear" (76), a vision that is offered as sustaining rather than disturbing. What Wilder *did* intend to be a disturbing and tragic moment is the final insight granted Emily as she is allowed by the Stage Manager (who this time acts his proper role as God-like manipulator of human destiny) to relive her twelfth birthday. Disregarding his warning that "you not only live it; but you watch yourself living it" (83), she finds it unbearable to live through small-town life from the perspective of immortality, as she is brought to the full awareness (Wilder's central truth) of the tragic waste and blindness of human life: our failure to appreciate the priceless value and significance of life—even and especially such small and ordinary lives as those lived in Grover's Corners—*as we are living it*. Wilder's celebration of the wonder and value of the ordinary is thus offset by his tragic understanding that mostly in our mortal state we human beings are too "blind" (89), "troubled" (82), and "in the dark" (82) to really *see* the value of life. "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you," Emily cries out, and then, turning to the stage manager, asks: "Do human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?" No, is the answer, "the saints and poets, maybe—they do some" (89). It is, of course, part of the effect of Wilder's double strategy to place the audience among those exceptionally gifted to perceive.

The doubleness of *Our Town* is underscored by Wilder's choice of an anti-realistic dramatic form and staging technique, which found its source (so he tells us in a 1958 preface to his plays) in the "dissatis-

faction" he came to feel in the late 1920s with a theater which was "evasive," which "did not wish to draw upon its deeper potentialities," which "aimed to be *soothing*. The tragic had no heat; the comic had no bite; the social criticism failed to indict us with responsibility."<sup>3</sup> Such a theater, Wilder argued, was essentially the product of "the rise of the middle classes" since the nineteenth century:

They distrusted the passions and tried to deny them. Their questions about the nature of life seemed to be sufficiently answered by the demonstration of financial status and by conformity to some clearly established rules of decorum. These were precarious positions; abysses yawned on either side. The air was thick with questions that must not be asked. These audiences fashioned a theater which could not disturb them. They thronged to melodrama ... and to sentimental drama ... and to comedies in which the characters were so represented that they always resembled someone else and not oneself. (9)

By contrast, Wilder envisioned a theater that could elicit a response of "belief," based on a "form of knowledge which Plato called 'recollection'" (7). The theater, Wilder advanced, was best suited to awaken this recollection through its double ability to portray both individual and general experience: "It is through the theater's power to raise the exhibited individual action into the realm of idea and type and universal that it is able to evoke our belief" (11).

This, then, forms the justification for Wilder's use of a non-realistic staging technique: as in Japanese "No" theater, stage settings and props (except an occasional chair, barrel or ladder) are eliminated, and actors resort to pantomime instead of realistic character acting. It is of the essence of the play (a crucial feature lost in the "realistic" 1940 film version of Sol Lesser)<sup>4</sup> that Mrs. Gibbs pull up an "imaginary window shade" in her kitchen (24), that the newspaperboy hurl "imaginary" newspapers into imaginary doorways (24), and that the milkman walk beside "an invisible horse and wagon" and carry "an imaginary rack with milk bottles" (26). The audience's imagination not being distracted by specifics, it is asked to actively imagine the invisible and thus to "see" the ordinary in a fresh way. Characters act out the routines of everydayness as in a vacuum of time and space, becoming universal types or allegorical abstractions in the process. The self-conscious theatricality of the play is further foregrounded by Wilder's use of the Stage Manager

---

<sup>3</sup> Wilder's 1958 "Preface" is reprinted in the 1962 Penguin edition. The quote appears on p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> For Wilder's ambivalent cooperation with Lesser's film version, which altered crucial aspects of the play both in techniques of presentation and in matters of plot and characterization, see Linda Simon, Thornton Wilder: His World (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 152-56.

(a device most probably borrowed from Pirandello)<sup>5</sup> who disrupts the realistic illusion by recurrently shifting roles and inviting questions from the audience, who provides moral comment and transcendent perspective, and who orders, selects and frames the various scenes presented into exemplary and static tableaux rather than episodes in an unfolding realistic plot. As we have seen, the effect of Wilder's foregrounded theatricalism was curiously double: a non-realistic, non-specific staging which pointed up the universality of the play's meaning fostered precisely the degree of "recollection" Wilder demanded, while it induced enough of a sense of distance in the audience to preclude the play from lapsing into bathos and sentimentality. Wilder could thus both shamelessly bet on the nostalgia and sentimentality of bourgeois audience identification with a small-town mode of life long lost, and turn such a complacent and uncritical identification against itself by pointing up our tragic "ignorance and blindness" (89) to the wonder and the beauty of the ordinary.

It is perhaps the play's ultimate weakness that it fails to make that final insight truly disturbing, fails to offer it as a sufficiently strong and inescapable antidote to the nostalgia of "recollection." Though Wilder himself was reputedly outraged that his first director had brought down his "cosmic drama" to "the level of Norman Rockwell's small-town scene painting,"<sup>6</sup> and though critics have argued that to look upon *Our Town* as a quaint period-piece treatment of small-town life is to ignore Wilder's more general, metaphysical and tragic intent, at a very fundamental level the play affirms the very values it partly ironizes and exposes. Wilder's use of the gimmickry of modernist drama, though ostensibly intended to make his audience "see" the value of life in freshly imaginative terms and to confront it with the tragic failure of human

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. W. E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama. Volume One: 1900-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 259-60.

<sup>6</sup> David Castronovo, Thornton Wilder (New York: Ungar, 1986), p. 91. In his 1958 preface Wilder had emphasized: "Our Town is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village; or as a speculation about the conditions of life after death. . . . It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life. I have made the claim as preposterous as possible, for I have set the village against the largest dimensions of time and space.... Each individual's assertion to an absolute reality can only be inner, very inner.... Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind—not in things, not in 'scenery'. Molière said that for the theatre all he needed was a platform and a passion or two. The climax of this play needs only five square feet of boarding and the passion to know what life means to us" (12). To producer Jed Harris Wilder observed in a similar vein that the play was not to be regarded as "a picture of rural manners"—"The subject of the play I wrote is: The trivial details of human life in reference to a vast perspective of time, of social history and of religious ideas" (quoted in Bigsby, A Critical Introduction, p. 264).

consciousness, is not finally subversive: on the one hand, it seems to urge the audience to a re-examination of its lives by undermining traditional forms of perception and conventional expectations of "theater"; on the other hand, it makes it too easy for the audience to seek refuge in nostalgic "recollection" of its folksy, bourgeois scenes, soothed by Wilder's reassuring adage that there *is* meaning and value in such unexamined lives, even if we do not normally perceive it. For all his intentions to the contrary, Wilder's play ultimately pushes not towards disturbance but assurance, towards reconciliation rather than conflict, towards acceptance and submission rather than resistance and confrontation. If the emphatically foregrounded theatricality works against and continuously interrupts too close and sentimental an identification with the simple small-town life of Grover's Corners, still in its overall effect the play bets on nostalgia for an earlier, simpler, more rural and pastoral America which it offers, if not as actual "reality," then as a highly stylized image which has the force and resonance of popular and national myth.<sup>7</sup>

What identification the play bets on may well be diminished today by an awareness of the distance between our world and Wilder's. In 1938, with a world on the brink of economic collapse and the brutality of war, audiences may have been more ready to embrace a soothing and reassuring vision of the worth and significance of little lives, of all life. Fifty-odd years later we are more likely to be appalled by the play's school-masterish didacticism, by its social and moral conservatism ("you don't want to be the first to fly in the face of custom," George is told on the verge of marriage [57]), by its silencing of those who do not partake in the dominant discourse of small-town life ("Polish Town's across the

---

<sup>7</sup> Such unresolved inner contradictions also help to explain the ambivalent responses many critics have felt (and continue to feel) about the play. Mary McCarthy's retrospective response is not untypical; in 1956 she observed: "I remember how uneasy I felt when I decided that I liked Thornton Wilder's Our Town. Could this mean that there was something the matter with me? Was I starting to sell out?" (McCarthy's original review and her later response are quoted and discussed in Linda Simon, Thornton Wilder: His World, pp. 139-40). More recent critical evaluations show a continuing lack of consensus. Thus, for Rex Burbank, "the vision Wilder offers of the human condition in Our Town is essentially tragic. It is a picture of the priceless value of even the most common and routine events in life and of the tragic waste of life through failure to realize the value of every moment" (Thornton Wilder [1961], p. 90). For David Castronovo Wilder's tableaux are "frightening fixtures of our lives," and the play, even if marred by "hokum" and "didacticism," offers us a "striking fusion of folk art and existential dread" (Thornton Wilder [1986], pp. 89-90). For Christopher Bigsby, finally, Wilder's is "an anti-tragic stance.... Where the tragic spirit regrets the victory of the timeless and the universal over the individual, Wilder celebrates it, finding in this the justification for that individual, the key to his significance.... It is a drama without conflict. His characters struggle neither with fate nor with history" (A Critical Introduction [1982], p. 268).

tracks, and some Canuck families" [22]) and hence remain voiceless, as well as by the images it offers of the lives of men and women: the former obedient citizens devoted to family and community, unadventurous husbands who grow jealous when their wives stay out too late after choir practice (their only social diversion), the latter "cackling chickens" who are reduced to domesticity and housekeeping subservience (stringing beans and feeding chickens), their dreams circumscribed, their roles carefully presided over by benignly patriarchal husbands, their only leadership exerted in the managing of weddings, their resignation to woman's lot being celebrated as a silent mode of heroism:

[STAGE MANAGER:] And there's Mrs Gibbs and Mrs Webb come down to make breakfast, just as though it were an ordinary day. I don't have to point out to the women in my audience that those ladies they see before them, both of those ladies cooked three meals a day—one of 'em for twenty years, the other for forty—and no summer vacation. They brought up two children a piece, washed, cleaned the house—and never a nervous breakdown. (51)

Such passages reveal that *Our Town* can no longer bet on the unspoken assumption of a common ground between playwright and audience (unless, perhaps, it be a very old and very small-town audience). It may well be that Wilder's appeal to audience identification will no longer work in a world in which feminism and multiculturalism have become "facts" of American life: even if we can still be moved by his evocation of the "tragic waste" in human consciousness, the specifics of his vision today work against an acceptance of the metaphysical perspective. Seen in the light of the current multiculturalist debate, Wilder's universalism emerges as limited, parochial and false: his is a white, western, patriarchal, Anglo-protestant evocation of the national myth of a monocultural small-town America which, even if we look upon it less as a reality than a "literary conceit,"<sup>8</sup> is increasingly precarious to maintain. Wilder's America has become curiously quaint and unrecognizable.

## II

To move from *Our Town* to images of small-town life in contemporary drama is to be conscious of crossing a great divide and entering a world in which soothing assurances are no longer forthcoming, in which oblique ironies and grotesque reversals have become ways of dealing with the incontrovertible realities of irrational violence, racism, loss and alienation. Wilder's cosmos of benign pastoralism has given way to a

---

<sup>8</sup> The point is Bigsby's in his Critical Introduction, p. 266.

world in which disturbance lurks beneath seemingly complacent surfaces of ordinariness, in which the abyss yawns where we least expect it. David Rabe's *Streamers* (1976) offers the paradigmatic image: one of three young recruits awaiting shipment to Vietnam, Billy is a white, blue-eyed, college-educated, sports-minded all-American kid from a small town in Wisconsin, who finds his belief in decency, intelligence and humanity at odds with less clean and less rational impulses, glimpses of which he has caught in his Wisconsin boyhood:

[BILLY] Wisconsin's a funny place. All those clear-eyed people sayin' 'Hello' and lookin' you straight in the eye. Everybody's good you think and happy and honest. And then there's all of a sudden a neighbor who goes mad as a hatter. I had a neighbor who came out of his house one morning with axes in both hands. He started then attackin' the cars that were driving up and down in front of his house. An' we all knew why he did it, sorta ... It made me wanna be a priest ...<sup>9</sup>

Later in the play Billy will come to the horrifying realization that he, too, harbors a latent capacity for irrational violence as he catches himself in the act of confronting a black fellow soldier, razorblade in hand, and ready to kill another human being for crossing racial and sexual boundaries in what to Billy would be an unendurable act of homosexual miscegenation. To his own terror he is no more immune to the realities of racism, sexism and violence which lurk underneath the seemingly pastoral and benign surface of his small-town midwestern upbringing than his axe-swinging neighbor.

Two recent plays by women—which, like *Our Town*, won Pulitzer Prizes for their authors: Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* in 1981 and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* in 1983—likewise offer powerful dramatic images of the grotesque, irrational and sometimes tragic violence simmering below the placid, sunny surface of civilized, petit-bourgeois small-town life, in particular in the lives of its women. Both plays, also, as if in counterpoint to Wilder's non-realistic but ultimately soothing theatrical mode, resort to a starker mode of dramatic realism to explore the disturbing dimensions below the surface.

Set in a small-town Southern community with a deceptively pastoral name, Hazlehurst, Mississippi, Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* unfolds the troubled, dislocated lives of the three MaGrath sisters Lenny, Meg and Babe, who have been living in their grandfather's house since their mother, abandoned by her husband, got "national coverage"<sup>10</sup> by

---

<sup>9</sup> David Rabe, *Streamers: A Drama in Two Acts* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1976), p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Beth Henley, *Crimes of the Heart* (1982; New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 30. All subsequent page references in the text will be to this edition.

hanging herself in the basement together with her yellow cat. Ever since, crisis and disaster have struck the sisters' lives to the point of melodramatic overkill. Lenny, the oldest, has been holding the family fort and taking care of a dominant grandfather now dying of a stroke in the hospital. Pathetically lonesome, with a martyr-like talent for comical self-abasement, she has grown convinced that no man will ever love her as a whole woman on account of a "shrunken ovary" (34); she has broken off her one relation with Charlie, which she had initiated through a picture advertisement with the "Lonely Hearts of the South" club (35), and has subconsciously begun to identify herself with the old and infertile: her dead grandmother (whose sunhat and garden gloves she has taken to wearing) and her dear old horse Billy Boy, the announcement of whose death-by-lightning is disproportionately unsettling to her. Where Lenny is easily cowed and considerate to the point of self-victimization, Meg is defiant, level-headed and selfishly assertive. The "excuse" (66) for letting Meg have her way has always been that it was she who found the mother's body hanging in the cellar; afterwards she had steeled herself against pain, weakness and vulnerability by forcing herself to look at the most horrifying pictures of mutilated faces in a book on skin diseases and staring at a poster of crippled children, before gorging herself on icecream. Seemingly in control, Meg, too, has suffered crisis: her high ambitions for a singing career in California having failed, she has been forced to take a job as a clerk with a dog-food company, only to plunge into a nervous breakdown over Christmas. Now, out of the psychiatric ward, she is home, hating herself for her dependence on her grandfather's approval (yet unable to escape his patronizing influence) and plagued by guilt for the damage she has caused to Doc, a former lover who became crippled when the roof of the shed where they were celebrating the coming of Hurricane Camille caved in. The youngest sister, Babe, is even worse off: manoeuvred into marriage (by her grandfather) to "the richest and most powerful man in all of Hazlehurst," Little Babe ("always the prettiest and most perfect of the three") was expected to "skyrocket right to the heights of Hazlehurst society" (21-22). Now, after six years of a marriage marked by loneliness, emotional deprivation, and sexual brutalization, she has managed to avoid her mother's example of suicide by turning her violence full-blast upon her husband, shooting him in the stomach (while aiming for the heart). Bailed out of prison, she comes home to await sentence, forlorn yet exuberant, in a daze of unawareness yet convinced that jail will be "a relief" (33) since it will free her from patriarchal dominance and allow her to practice her saxophone.

There are more than enough "skeletons in the MaGraths' closet" (6) to guarantee a garishly concocted melodrama spiced with just the right dosis of feminist sentiment to vouchsafe commercial success, but Henley

guards against such pitfalls partly by a tragi-comic tonal complexity (of which more later), partly by playing out the lives of the MaGrath sisters against a small-town Southern background so appallingly banal that it gives a touch of heroism to even their bizarre fumbblings to attain some dignity and self-worth. As Colby H. Kullman has suggested, "Henley's protagonists inhabit a Southern wonderworld packed with the cheap, the garish, and the vulgar—beehive hairdos and Tiger Claw perfume, blue rum Koolade and little colored marshmallows; soap on a rope and salt and pepper shakers shaped like little crocodiles."<sup>11</sup> In *Crimes of the Heart* the social spirit of small-town life is incarnated by the MaGraths' cousin, Chick Boyle, who as committee head of the Ladies' Social League feels responsible for upholding the community standards of (especially female) decency and conformity and who is deeply shamed by all the scandal in the family. Caricaturally seen, she is the dainty Southern belle-cum-village gossip, who will insist on calling the sisters by their full Christian names (Lenora Josephine, Margaret, Rebecca), mostly cares for outward appearance and social standing, and dutifully fills the expected female functions of periodic reproduction and moral guardianship. Behind her poses of the efficient social regulator and the suffering mother, she is insufferably selfish, ostentatious and insensitive, less concerned with helping the sisters cope with their misfortunes than with the social repercussions of their unorthodox behavior: Babe, she fears, will be "incurring some mighty negative publicity around this town" and Meg's "loose reputation" as "cheap Christmas trash" (6) will certainly not help. The sisters' fierce dislike of "Chick the Stick" (27) or "Little Chicken" (28) is a measure of their imperviousness to the pressure for conformity to small-town life. When Lenny, who throughout the play has been at her cousin's beck and call, finally claims the right of territory and with a broom drives Chick out of *her* home and up into a mimosa tree, she thereby not only asserts her personal autonomy but frees herself from dominion by the crippling conformity of hypocritical small-town life.

Nothing so points up the false-fronted hypocrisy of Hazlehurst, Mississippi, as the fact that Zachary Botrelle, its "richest and most powerful" (21) citizen and member of the state senate, can be exposed as a bullying redneck engaged in "shady, criminal dealings" (42) which, besides "graft, fraud, forgery, as well as a history of unethical behavior" (108), includes habitual sexual brutalization of his wife. It is equally damning, however, that the local lawyer hired to establish justice in Babe's case is twenty-six-year-old Barnette Lloyd, caricaturally seen

---

<sup>11</sup> Colby H. Kullman, "Beth Henley's Marginalized Heroines," Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present 8, 1 (1993), 21.

as "a slender, intelligent young man with an almost fanatical intensity that he subdues by sheer will" (40). Lloyd's comically intense fanaticism, however, is not oriented towards the disinterested service of justice and legal probity but towards the attainment of suspect private goals: he makes no secret of the fact that he has "a personal vendetta to settle" (41) with Botrelle and that, having more than a professional interest in Babe, he is not above using devious blackmailing schemes himself. Justice in Hazlehurst is thus presented as a muddled and thwarted sexist game, a selfishly motivated battle of male egos over a woman. Henley's indictment of the small-town South is sharpest, however, where it concerns the taboo combination of sex and racism: for as in Rabe's play, the violence erupts when Babe, in her desperate loneliness, transgresses the boundaries of race and sex by making love to a neighborly fifteen-year-old black boy, Willie Jay, a fact shocking even to worldly Meg ("I didn't even know you were a liberal" [48]). And lawyer Lloyd, for all his innocuousness, is shrewd enough to realize that, of the two, sexual harassment of the wife is still regarded the lesser crime. As he tells Babe: "Believe me, it is in our interest to keep [Willie Jay] as far out of this as possible" (56).

Henley's small-town world, far from Wilder's, is one without moral certitudes or universal absolutes: in a world in which all is contingent and askew, the marginalized, oblique perspective may well be the only strategy of survival left. If their unorthodox behavior has driven the MaGrath sisters to the margin of the community, their adoption of a slanted, incongruously ironic perspective on their lives and situation (while less a matter of conscious choice than of tragic enforcement) may well be their saving grace. Not only does it form a way of eluding the tyranny of the normal, more importantly it forms a shield against a reality of loss, loneliness and pain, which otherwise might be unendurable. As several critics have noted,<sup>12</sup> though the MaGrath sisters are seemingly besieged by tragedy at every turn, their response is often disproportionately hilarious and incongruously comic or bizarre. As Gerald Berkowitz has suggested, it is the sisters' "moral and emotional displacement" that makes their response "always somehow just off-centre".<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Jean Gagen, "Most resembling unlikeness, and most unlike resemblance": Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and Checkov's *Three Sisters*," *Studies in American Drama: 1945-Present* 4 (1989), 121; and Billy J. Harbin, "Familial Bonds in the Plays of Beth Henley," *Southern Quarterly* 25 (1987), 82-83.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald M. Berkowitz, *American Drama of the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), p. 200.

- MEG: So, Babe shot Zackery Botrelle, the richest and most powerful man in all of Hazlehurst, slap in the gut. It's hard to believe.
- LENNY: It certainly is. Little Babe—shooting off a gun. (21)

Ironic incongruity is the order of the day. Explanations are grotesquely inadequate (why did mother hang herself? "She had a bad day. A real bad day" [31]; why did Babe shoot Zackary? "I just didn't like his stinking looks!" [27]), reactions are disrespectfully comic (why is Lenny so shy with men? "MEG, *biting into an apple*: Probably because of that *shrunk* ovary she has./ BABE, *slinging ice cubes*: Yeah, that *deformed* ovary" [34]). The news of Billy Boy's death-by-lightning elicits genuine tears, while an inadvertent reference to Grandpa lying in a coma sets off an explosion of laughter. Lenny's euphoric mood of regained self-confidence ("My courage is up; my heart is in it; the time is right! No more beating around the bush! Let's strike while the iron is hot!") is ironically juxtaposed to Babe's growing determination to commit suicide ("Right! Right! No more beating around the bush! Strike while the iron is hot!" [115]). Likewise, Babe's confession of how she shot her husband, then made herself a giant pitcher of highly sugared lemonade before following up *his* suggestion that she call the hospital, is so dazed and innocuous that it seems to bespeak a blurred or distorted perspective on reality, one befitting a world cubistically thrown out of kilter. Even Babe's suicide attempt is made grotesquely comical by an ironic mode of presentation: first we hear a comic thud upstairs as the hanging rope snaps, then (rope still about her neck) we watch her make comically ineffectual attempts to gas herself with her head in the oven, even struggling to light a match to give the gas a helping hand, before an epiphany about her mother's death causes her to bump her head against the oven, at which point she is found and counseled by Meg. If Henley's undercutting mode of ironic comedy precludes any sense of real tragedy, it also prevents the play from keeling over into the sentimental and melodramatic. Humor—oblique, grotesque, bizarre, incongruous—thus functions not only as a crucial strategy of defusion—of anxiety, tension, pain—in the lives of the MaGrath sisters, as a dramatic strategy it likewise forms the saving grace of Henley's play.<sup>14</sup>

In a world as oblique as that of the MaGraths in Hazlehurst each of the sisters yet strives and manages to attain some foothold in a regained

---

<sup>14</sup> A second crucial strategy of defusion for the MaGrath sisters is food, in particular an obsession with rich nutrients as a way of warding off pain. For a discussion of the role of food and drink as opiates and narcotics in Henley's play, see Billy J. Harbin, "Familial Bonds," pp. 85-86, and, more especially, Laura Morrow, "Orality and Identity in 'night, Mother and 'Crimes of the Heart,'" Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present 3 (1988), 30-38.

sense of self-worth. After a therapeutic night of driving and drinking in the moonlight with "Doc" Meg realizes that she did not ruin his life as she had always guiltily assumed. Most importantly, by being able to care again for someone, she finds that there is no harm in being vulnerable, hence no need to keep on anesthetizing herself against pain and weakness, hence no need to keep on lying about herself to grandfather (who, ironically enough, has meanwhile sunk into what promises to be his final coma). Her singing restored, Meg can now become the catalyst of change for others. Lenny, too, faced with the prospect of a life without grandfather, finally musters the courage to act on her own, chase Chick out of her home and "untell" (102) the breakup of her relationship with Charlie. Babe, in turn, has come to realize that, unlike her mother, she is not alone. Where even Lenny had for a moment suspected her of being "in-the-head-ill" (17), Babe is now assured of her fundamental sanity by Meg ("Why, you're just as perfectly sane as anyone walking the streets of Hazlehurst, Mississippi" [119]) and counseled on survival tactics ("But, Babe, we've just got to learn how to get through these real bad days here. I mean, it's getting to be a thing in our family" [120]).

Babe is saved from suicide at least long enough to witness the play's final moment, as the three sisters gather around a gigantic birthday cake for Lenny, in a magic moment of community and sisterhood, a fleeting image of childlike happiness, surprise and togetherness ("birthday cake for breakfast" [124]). The scene is frozen as the lights "change and frame them in a magical, golden, sparkling glimmer," with saxophone music continuing to play beyond the dimming lights, suggesting that, even if this is only a fleeting moment of benignity, it will yet persist as a sustaining memory. Had it not been for the women's laughter throughout the play, with sisterly affection being offset by biting quarrels, resentment and betrayal, the final moment might have been shamelessly sentimental and wishfulfilling, a "happy ending" of a sort we no longer believe in. As it is, it effectively brings together a number of motifs spun subtly through the play: by bringing us back to the opening scenes where Lenny in pathetic loneliness sits singing "happy birthday" to a candle clumsily stuck in a cookie, the play's closing moment images its progression from isolation to community. Since this is the day when Lenny's new self has seen the light, Lenny's birthday cake, moreover, unlike what the icing spells, is appropriately *not* a day late, while Babe's desire to play the saxophone—symptom of her striving for a truly autonomous mode of being—is symbolically consolidated in the continuing sound of the saxophone heard at the end of the play. Perhaps, also, we are meant to hear in this "birthday cake at breakfast" a more ambivalent and disturbing echo of the "banana splits at breakfast" offered by the grandfather on the day of the mother's funeral (72-73), which taught

the girls for life to defuse anxiety and pain through the consumption of massive quantities of richly nourishing foods.

In the end, we should be careful not to claim too much for a play which, for all its entertaining and even moving qualities, remains limited in depth, scope and resonance. While the oblique humor prevents the play from lapsing into melodrama, it also subsumes potential tragedy into a soothing spirit of benignity and prevents us from truly feeling the moments of crisis, despondency, alone-ness and suicidal despair in these women's lives.

### III

Marsha Norman's masterful *'night, Mother* will not easily rouse such skeptical afterthoughts. Where in Wilder the breakthrough of realism serves a soothing rather than disquieting cosmic perspective, and where in Henley the potentially tragic is subsumed in a comic-grotesque mode of Southern Gothic, Norman's is a vindication of unmediated dramatic realism at its most powerful, moving, tragic, and disturbing. The play gives us the last evening in the life of Jessie Cates, forty-ish and epileptic, who announces to her innocuously possessive mother Thelma that this night she will commit suicide. What ensues is (in Norman's words) "a gladiator contest where the point is to keep the other person alive,"<sup>15</sup> a play that in its unremitting focus on the private lives of these two women can plumb to tragic depths of feeling and perception; as Robert Brustein has observed, Norman is "an American writer with the courage to look unflinchingly into the black holes from which we normally turn our faces."<sup>16</sup>

In giving voice and dramatic form to the silent lives of "little women" in the small-town, semi-rural, lower-middle-class "New South," *'night, Mother* may be taken as the equivalent in drama to "neo-realism" in fiction (one thinks of Raymond Carver or Bobbie Ann Mason, the latter, like Norman, from Kentucky). Jessie hails from a family mired in "little" things, the cluttering trivia of everyday domestic life that are so profusely present in the play—both in the mercilessly naturalistic setting and in the speech of mother and daughter—and that add up to a rich mosaic of petty, quotidian detail, as if to underscore Thoreau's adage, in *Walden*, that "our lives are frittered away by detail." Appropriately, the play opens with Thelma expressing her mortification at the coconut

---

<sup>15</sup> "Marsha Norman," in: David Savran, In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Brustein, "Don't Read This Review!" New Republic 188 (May 2, 1983), 27.

having fallen off the last "snowball" cupcake in the house: "I hate it when the coconut falls off. Why does the coconut fall off?"<sup>17</sup> Though it is Jessie who announces her intended suicide, her mother is fully as lost: unwilling or unable to face the truth about herself, her past, her loveless marriage, she leads an unthinking, unexamined life, submerging critical self-awareness in trivial domestic routines, an empty, gossipy friendship with Agnes, and a self-indulgent reversal of mother-daughter roles: she has grown dependent on her child for the provision of sweets and goodies and the practical organization of her life, while Jessie has taken over the mother's task of automatic service and the provision of responsible and healthy food (left to herself, the mother would refuse to drink milk and consume only sweets and tunafish).<sup>18</sup> Norman's lean, sparsely poetic dialogue is wholly consonant with the limited boundaries of these women's lives and characters, yet the play leaves their human dignity intact. As the stage directions indicate: "Under no circumstances should the set and its dressing make a judgment about the intelligence or taste of Jessie and Mama. It should simply indicate that they are very specific real people who happen to live in a particular part of the country. Heavy accents, which would further distance the audience from Jessie and Mama, are also wrong" (3). Any touch of condescension that might interfere with close audience identification is to be avoided. Playing time, indicated by a profusion of clocks on stage, coincides with real time; there is no intermission. Nothing must distract the audience from being drawn into the play's relentless crescendoing to its inexorable conclusion, as Jessie enters her bedroom for the final shot through a door which has been the "focal point" of the set throughout: "a point of both threat and promise ... an ordinary door that opens onto absolute nothingness" (3).

In Norman's play the black gulf opens on an average ordinary Saturday night, as Thelma sits waiting for her daughter to manicure her nails, only to be informed that that very evening her daughter intends to use her father's gun on herself. Knowing the extent of her mother's childlike dependence on herself, Jessie calmly and methodically programs her mother for a future without her, painstakingly working off her "schedule" of domestic routines, grocery lists and kitchen utensils; she has even drawn up a list of presents to be given at future birthdays and Christmases. Jessie's remarkable self-control, together with her "quirky sense of humor" (2)—"Jesus was a suicide, if you ask me" (18)—and Norman's unsentimental, clipped-down use of language, prevent the play

---

<sup>17</sup> Marsha Norman, *'night, Mother* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 5. All subsequent page references in the text will be to this edition.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the role of food in the play, see Lynda Hart, "Doing Time: Hunger for Power in Marsha Norman's Plays," *Southern Quarterly* 25 (Spring 1987), 75-79, and Laura Morrow, "Orality and Identity in *'night, Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart*," pp. 23-30.

from lapsing into pathos or melodrama, even as we are made aware of the strong emotions pulsating underneath Jessie's apparently cool and placid rationality. It is our foregrounded knowledge of Jessie's unshakable determination to leave life that gives trenchant poignancy to the ensuing dialogue and emotional battle between mother and daughter. For Jessie is also determined to use her last moments for a last desperate attempt to get through to her mother, hoping that in the face of death a degree of communication and understanding will come about that was impossible in a life mired in predictability, meaninglessness and futility:

MAMA:       How long have you been thinking about this?  
 JESSIE:      Off and on, ten years. On all the time, since Christmas.  
 MAMA:       What happened at Christmas?  
 JESSIE:      Nothing.  
 MAMA:       So why Christmas?  
 JESSIE:      That's it. On the nose. (29)

As she tries to explain and justify her extreme decision to her mother, the reasons for her suicide emerge with painstaking, if understated clarity, as a series of real personal losses and grievances. The product of a loveless marriage, she feels abandoned by a dead father with whom she felt a special rapport that is still wilfully resented and not understood by Thelma (the father's contempt for his wife had found expression in his refusal to speak to her even on his deathbed, and in his making an alternative "family" of animals out of pipecleaners for his daughter). She has been abandoned by her husband Cecil, who could not cope with her epileptic condition, and still feels more deeply hurt, humiliated and rejected than she is willing to admit ("you don't pack your garbage when you move" [61]). Her teenage son Ricky, whose whereabouts she does not know, has become a petty criminal and dope addict. Knowing how much alike they are ("We look out at the world and we see the same thing: Not Fair"), she feels responsible for his failure: "He walks around like there's loose boards in the floor and you know who laid that floor, I did" (60). But mostly she has suffered from a lack of control and autonomy in her own life, symbolized most painfully in her unpredictable and uncontrollable epileptic seizures. She deeply resents the intrusion of her privacy by her brother Dawson and his wife Loretta who, as a result of her epilepsy, have become intimate with her without her having had a say in the matter ("They know things about you, and they learned it before you had a chance to say whether you wanted them to know or not. They were there when it happened and it don't belong to them, it belongs to you, only they got it" [23]). And her most incriminating accusation of her mother comes when she discovers (what her overly protective mother had always kept from her) that she has been epileptic from age five and not, as she had been led

to assume, since she fell off a horse during her marriage to Cecil: "That was mine to know, Mama, not yours" (70).

It is only recently that Jessie has gained sufficient physical stability (no seizure for "a solid year" [66]) and control over her memory and mind ("I'm feeling as good as I ever felt in my life" [66]) to act upon her realization that life has nothing better in store for her: "I'm just not having a very good time and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse. I'm tired. I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used" (28). Her most painful recognition is that her helplessness and powerlessness come from the loss and virtual absence of a sense of self, that, as a person, she has failed to develop and will not in the future:

That's what this is about. It's somebody I lost, all right, it's my own self. Who I never was. Or who I tried to be and never got there. Somebody I waited for who never came. And never will. So, see, it doesn't much matter what else happens in the world or in this house, even. I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it. Me ... who might have made a difference to me ... I'm not going to show up, so there's no reason to stay, except to keep you company, and that's ... not reason enough because I'm not ... very good company. (Pause) Am I. (76)

If Jessie's suicide comes out of a *Bartleby*-like state of "incurable forlornness," it is presented not primarily as the self-destructive offshoot of a severe depression or an accumulation of bleak disappointments, but as a conscious and autonomous act of choice ("MAMA: You don't have to. JESSIE: No, I don't. That's what I like about it" [27]), a premeditated and self-imposed moment of control, perhaps the sole avenue of self-definition open in a life so far entirely defined *for* her:

I can't do anything ... about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it. Shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there's nothing on I want to listen to. It's all I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it. And it's going to stop. And I'm going to stop it. So. Let's just have a good time. (36)

Jessie's evening, in fact, is an extended "show" of control, an untriumphant vindication of her life which culminates in death. In the process, she subjects her mother to a reversal of positions, reducing her, in effect, to the very helplessness and powerlessness which have marked her own life as an epileptic daughter. As Jenny S. Spencer has suggested, however, "what Jessie ultimately demands from her mother is both infantile and impossible: not only complete control over the evening, but her

mother's unqualified love, undivided attention, unmitigated support, and, with it, at least passive collaboration in the suicide."<sup>19</sup>

Understandably, Thelma, who has to so large an extent organized Jessie's existence for her (virtually picking a husband for her, taking her in the house after her marriage stranded, and providing her with "something ... to take care of" [32]: herself) will not give up her daughter's life without a battle-to-the-death. In the course of the play she will try everything in her power to avert the execution of Jessie's plan (even making hot chocolate with the milk she hates so much). We watch her being propelled through the entire range of human emotions and reactions—from disbelief, outrage, pity, contempt, through cruelty, despair, fear of death and physical aggression, to self-incrimination, guilt, and powerlessness—but every response, lacerating as it may be, bounces off the wall of Jessie's terrifying and unself-pitying "no". As Mama, screaming her desperate affirmation of life, realizes, Jessie is as impervious to her pleading as was her husband when he left his "gone fishing" sign: "Who am I talking to? You're gone already, aren't you? I'm looking right through you! I can't stop you because you're already gone!" (78)

Mama's position in the play is much like that of the narrator in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener": both muster everything in their personality to help save a lost human being, only to find that the other is indeed "incurably forlorn" and insists on its absolute preference. Both, also, are left with the sense of implication in the tragedy they were unable to avoid. "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" cries Melville's narrator, in pitiful recognition of his own human inadequacy. In the end, Thelma can only crumple into helpless resignation as she sits there numbly taking in her daughter's instructions about what to say and do after the shot. When it comes, the shot makes her realize that no one can organize or control another person's life and that, in her possessive protectiveness, she has never truly "seen" her own daughter: "I didn't know! I was here with you all the time. How could I know you were so alone? ... Jessie, child. ... Forgive me. (*Pause*) I thought you were mine" (88-89). As she stands by the stove, holding the hot chocolate pan, Thelma stands eye to eye with the tragedy of misperception (of herself as much as of her daughter) that has been her life, a "tragic waste" and failure of human consciousness more commanding and disturbing than anything in Wilder's more cosmically oriented drama:

How can I get up every day knowing you had to kill yourself to make it stop hurting and I was here all the time and never even saw it. And then you gave me this chance

---

<sup>19</sup> Jenny S. Spencer, "Norman's 'night, Mother: Psycho-drama of Female Identity," *Modern Drama* 30 (1987), 370.

to make it better, convince you to stay alive, and I couldn't do it. How can I live with myself after this, Jessie? (73)

In *'night, Mother* Marsha Norman has written a play less about suicide than about a woman's right to personal autonomy, even if that right must tragically articulate itself in self-destruction. Without offering the soothing reassurances of *Our Town* or the grotesque but ultimately benign ironies of *Crimes of the Heart*, she has drawn forth the disturbingly tragic dimensions of women's lives in small-town America, in a play which, precisely because it focuses so unrelentingly on the specifics of these ordinary lives, is able to strike universal chords of resonance.