# A Walk on the Wilder Side

## A Queer Reading of Thornton Wilder

By D.R. Lewis

# About Thornton Wilder

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was a novelist and playwright whose works celebrate the connection between the commonplace and the cosmic dimensions of human experience. He is the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes for both drama and fiction: for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and two plays, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. His other novels include *The Cabala*, *The Woman of Andros*, *Heaven's My Destination*, *The Ides of March*, *The Eighth Day* and *Theophilus North*. His other major dramas include *The Matchmaker* (adapted as the musical *Hello, Dolly!*) and *The Alcestiad*. *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, *Pullman Car Hiawatha* and *The Long Christmas Dinner* are among his well-known shorter plays. He enjoyed enormous success as a translator, adaptor, actor, librettist and lecturer/teacher and his screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* remains a classic psycho-thriller to this day. Wilder's many honors include the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. More information on Thornton Wilder and his family is available in Penelope Niven's definitive biography, *Thornton Wilder: A Life* (2013) as well as on the Wilder Family website, www.thorntonwilder.com. (*This biography was sourced from www.thorntonwilder.com.)*

# About D.R. Lewis

D.R. Lewis is a critic and writer based in Washington, D.C. He is the publisher of *The Sunday Critic* on Substack, and a regular contributor to *Washington City Paper* and *DC Theater Arts*. Lewis was the recipient of the 2024-2025 Helbing Fellowship, an award for emerging LGBTQ+ theatre writers from the American Theatre Critics/Journalists Association (ATCA) and Foundation ATCA. With the support of the fellowship, he published this collection of essays examining Thornton Wilder's life and major dramatic works through a queer lens. He was a Day Eight 2023-2024 Arts Journalism Fellow and a member of the organization's inaugural New Theatre Critics Cohort. He is a graduate of The George Washington University, where he received the 2016 Astere E. Claeyssens Prize in Playwriting. More of his work is available online at thesundaycritic.substack.com and drlewiswrites.com.

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# Prologue: Thorntons & Johns

Every day, thousands of drivers en route to New Haven, or heading in the opposite direction, pass the Mount Carmel Burial Ground in Hamden, Connecticut. There is no indicator on the shoulder of Whitney Avenue that on the opposite side of a little fence, behind neat rows of Revolution-era headstones interspersed with more recent graves, a literary legend lies at the foot of a mountain aptly called "Sleeping Giant." Grass has begun to creep over the edges of his stone, which is nestled among siblings and parents and now says "Thornton Wilde," an accidental nod to another giant. There are no mentions on this marker, or the larger slab that lists all family members interred there, of his three Pulitzer Prizes, seven novels, and dozens of plays, including the one many consider to be the best an American has ever produced.

"You know as well as I do that the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long," Thornton Wilder wrote in *Our Town*.[1] "Gradually, gradually, they lose hold of the earth…and the ambitions they had…and the pleasures they had…and the things they suffered…and the people they loved."

And what's left when memory's gone, and your identity, Mr. Wilder?

When Washington's Shakespeare Theatre Company mounted *Our Town* in the spring of 2022, the American theater and I were reeling from a lengthy shutdown induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. I was unprepared for what I saw that night, my memory of the play, like so many others, tinted with a rosy sentimentality. But after two years of being shut in, kept apart, on alert, and changed by fear, Wilder's clarion reminder of the preciousness of time and connections between people walloped me. In the following days, I read the play over and over, hoping to make sense of what we had been through with the wisdom found between its pages.

What struck me most was how familiar those singular characters sounded. I heard my parents, my teachers, my neighbors, and friends in them. In Grover's Corners, I saw the farms and streets of Central Pennsylvania, where I was raised. In the cemetery above the town, where "a whole mess of Gibbses and Herseys," are laid to rest, I envisioned the mossy headstones of my people, whose surnames are now middle names for cousins who don't know where the names came from; people whose stories are lost to time.[2] How did he know us? I wanted to know him, too.

There are rumors in my family of a cousin named John: that he had a male lover; that he knew Wilder. Their lives tracked closely, but separately, both traveling to Europe as young men, meeting and idolizing Gertrude Stein, writing stories, and living with their mother and sister. And when they died, they both ended up back at home, the dirt of the world on their shoes, beneath stones that betray the wandering lives they led.

John was born in 1906 and died in 1962, a life lived entirely in the time of Thornton Wilder. The only physical evidence I have of him, apart from his headstone, is an old photograph, an envelope addressed to him from a publisher at Doubleday, and a 1950 census record that shows him cohabitating with the man my great-grandmother thought to be his lover. The rest of his story

1 Wilder, Thornton. 2020. *Three Plays: Our Town, the Skin of Our Teeth, and the Matchmaker*. N.p.: HarperCollins Publishers. 90.

2 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 9.

hangs on hearsay and rumor. I don't know of anyone still alive who knew him. As a younger man, I sought confirmation of those rumors, hopeful that I was not the first or only gay man in my family. My research yielded few results and no confirmation. But just because I can't hold the answer in my hand, it doesn't mean he didn't live, or feel, as I do.

Among the many differences between John and Wilder is that the tangible pieces of Wilder's life—manuscripts, drafts, journals, and correspondence—are largely organized and accessible to the public at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. His papers have been compiled into books and biographies, and he has been quoted and examined extensively in essays and academic papers. But his story is also marked by rumors, like so many men of his generation, that stretch back longer than he has been gone.

"Opinions diverge as to whether a writer's sex life is a legitimate field for public examination unless it serves as subject matter and/or thematic matter for the artistic work, or unless it has, with the writer's complicity, emerged into public view as a defining force in the life and work," says *Thornton Wilder: A Life* author Penelope Niven, encapsulating a prevailing attitude of ambivalence.[3] "A very private man who often saw his fame as an intrusion into his personal life, Thornton Wilder seems to have studiously kept to himself the details of his sexual experiences, whether homosexual or heterosexual or both."

At worst, such an attitude maintains that sexual orientation—and especially gay identity—hinges definitively on consummated sexual intercourse between two individuals of the same gender. At best, it innocently overlooks romantic yearning, unconsummated attractions and infatuations, and relationships that transcend friendship or mentorship. In either case, it fails to recognize same-sex attraction, or gayness, as an inherent, sustained, dually physical and emotional experience; it fails to dignify *intimacy*.

"That's why I write fiction and plays instead of essays and poems," he wrote in a letter to a friend in 1926. "The things I have to say are so intimate that I would be ashamed to publish them under I and so pour them into men, women and children."[4]

Wilder's work and letters reflect an intimacy that, in its richness, must have been a defining force in his life and work. In ignoring it, or limiting the bounds of how we consider it, have we impeded our own understanding of the man and his work? In our deference to a man who's been dead fifty years, or outdated cultural norms and niceties, have we inadvertently perpetuated the forces that would have made same-sex relationships and literary success incompatible during his life? If *Our Town* truly is the greatest American play, as Edward Albee said, what does it mean to our national identity that its writer was probably a gay man?

The prevailing question on this matter has been, *Was he?* The purpose of this short collection of essays is to ask, *What if he was?*

In the first essay, I examine how Wilder's biographers have approached and addressed the rumors of, and hints at, same-sex attractions in his youth and adulthood. The second considers two pivotal characters in *Our Town*—the Stage Manager and Simon Stimson—and Cousin Brandon from the one-act *The Long Christmas Dinner* as proxies for their writer. And the final essay contemplates Thornton Wilder's relationship to gender, his father, and *The Matchmaker*'s Dolly Levi, who in her rejoining of the human race has captured the imaginations of gay men and their icons.

History is full of Thorntons and Johns. The ground is peppered with their modest headstones that obscure the lives they lived, as themselves and through fictional others; people who have "[lost] hold of the earth," but nonetheless once had ambitions, pleasures, sufferings, and people they loved; people who left behind questions to be asked, and answers to be sought.[5]


*Thornton Wilder's headstone at Mount Carmel Burying Ground, September 14, 2024. Photo by D.R. Lewis.*

3 Niven, Penelope. 2012. *Thornton Wilder: A Life*. First ed. New York: HarperCollins, 433.

4 Niven, 258.

5 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 90.

# The Intimate Wilder

## INTRODUCTION

To his readers, Thornton Wilder's life may as well have begun in 1926, when at age 29 he published his first novel, *The Cabala*. It was followed almost immediately by his smash hit, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which earned him his first of three Pulitzer Prizes. But in those years preceding his meteoric rise to literary acclaim, as Wilder honed his writing skills and began to flirt with many of the literary strands and conventions that would come to run through many of his works, he had already endured a number of deep infatuations and devastating heartbreaks that seemed to form the basis of his views on love and, with them, a resistance to sexual openness and romantic pursuit. The experiences in this period of young adulthood, when many are developing an understanding of their innate sexual desires and romantic attractions, have largely been overshadowed in Wilder's biographic works by a singular, albeit protracted, affair with Samuel Steward that would begin in Switzerland in the mid-1930s.

Nevertheless, Wilder's letters, journals, and friendships suggest that he grappled with, and was surrounded by, homosexuality throughout his long life. One may glean from them that for Wilder, shared emotional connection over art and literature was as, or probably more, critical to a same-sex infatuation than physical lust. On the heels of heartbreak in his late twenties, Wilder appears to have separated these two components of attraction, prioritizing emotional satisfaction—which could be achieved through close friendships regardless of gender or sexual orientation—over fulfillment of physical desire, which he embraced when opportunities presented themselves. Nevertheless, Wilder's biographers have focused primarily on fulfillment of physical same-sex desire as the determining factor in considering whether Wilder was a gay man, or at least a person who experienced same-sex attractions. Their approach is at odds with modern conceptions of gayness, which recognizes same-sex emotional intimacy as central to the experience as physical consummation.

Perhaps Wilder's reprioritization of platonic friendships over same-sex infatuations just at the time his star was rising can account for why his sexuality never had the firm hold on his reputation in the way that contemporary Tennessee Williams's did. Wilder was able to fly under the radar, and any allusions to homosexuality in his plays (such as *Our Town*'s Simon Stimson) existed well beneath the surface; his work, the focus of public consumption, was existential, but on a global or universal scale. There were no Bricks or Skippers in Grover's Corners.

But that's not to say that gay undercurrents are not there. In her 1979 biography *Thornton Wilder: His World*, Linda Simon declares confidently that Wilder, "did not bring his own sexuality to his works," a notion that has been parroted by others.[1] But is that really the case? Or is it only just there for those willing to see?

What can we glean, for instance, about his experiences of masculinity and tenderness in that most essential same-gender interaction between father and son? If *Our Town*'s Stage Manager is widely seen as a proxy for Wilder, and we accept that Wilder was a man who experienced a lifetime of same-sex attraction, how does that reshape our notion of that character's wisdom and role in the town and the text, not to mention his possible counterpart in town drunk Simon Stimson? And if camp and diva worship are regarded as shared culture experiences among many gay men, what does it mean that Wilder, who himself was prone to idolizing the women in his family and social circles, created a magnetic role for gay icons in Dolly Levi?

"I'm going to have a copy of this play put in the cornerstone and the people a thousand years from now'll know a few simple facts about us," the Stage Manager says of *Our Town*. "This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying."[2]

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1 Simon, Linda. 1979. *Thornton Wilder: His World*. First ed. N.p.: Doubleday., 105.

2 Wilder, Thornton. 2020. *Three Plays: Our Town, the Skin of Our Teeth, and the Matchmaker*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 35.

Thanks to the mountain of paper he left behind—as well as the family who have made those papers public, and the biographers, archivists, and scholars who have parsed and organized it—we have a strong handle on his growing up, his living, and his dying. Though there never was a "marrying" Wilder, there was most certainly a loving Wilder. Our handle on that part of him is much weaker.

## CONSTERNATIONS

For better or worse, the biographic road to Wilder's sexual reputation often begins and ends with historian, artist and writer Samuel Steward. He is the elephant in the room, the bull in the china shop, and, seemingly, the thorn in Wilder's private side.

But his persistent presence in Wilder's biography is itself remarkable, in light of inconsistencies and embellishments of his drawn-out tale, told in fits and starts over years. Against the reserved Wilders and prim intelligentsia with which Wilder was known to associate, Steward is an exceptional case. In many ways, he is an anti-Wilder in his elaborations, his sexual openness, and his aversion to abstraction when discussing the deepest parts of one's soul. If Wilder is the mayor of Grover's Corners, Steward is decidedly its "bad boy." And despite varying views on his reliability, shaking him out of Wilder's story has proven an impossible endeavor. His connection with Wilder's rumored attraction is practically as old as the rumors themselves; some would argue he started them.

But the facts of their initial meeting are among the few that go uncontested: Steward and Wilder met in Zurich, Switzerland in 1937 on the suggestion of their mutual friend, Gertrude Stein.[3] The story of their association begins to muddle there. In Steward's account, he had the dual-charge from Stein to deliver a vest that Wilder had reportedly left behind in Paris and to use the errand to discuss his own literary aspirations with a man whose work had already garnered the first of three Pulitzer Prizes. While there is no tangible evidence to back up many of Steward's claims—namely that they engaged in some degree of sexual, non-penetrative activity and that a walk in the rain inspired the opening of the final act of *Our Town*—there is plenty of evidence in Wilder's papers that they met; discussed the work of Walt Whitman (of whom Wilder once described himself as the literary "grandson"[4]), Herman Melville, and other suspected gay authors; and continued their correspondence for some years thereafter with additional meetings in other cities.[5] It was in one of those cities and during one of those meetings that Wilder left behind his watch, which Steward kindly returned to his hotel.[6]

Aside from poet and longtime Wilder friend Glenway Wescott, who Gilbert Harrison quotes in his 1983 Wilder biography *The Enthusiast*, Steward is the foremost and earliest named source regarding Wilder's same-sex attraction. His initial appearance in the Wilder biographical canon is Simon's *Thornton Wilder: His World*, but she skirts the details of their affair, omitting the sexual aspects of the relationship on which Steward would later elaborate to Harrison. She primarily suggests that the two were "friend[s]" and quotes an anonymous acquaintance (who is also likely Steward) with an air of exasperation: "[Wilder] was perhaps the most closeted one of his day…Despite all his advice and lecturing about the great homosexuals of the past, he would not have dared admit he was one of them; and all his life was spent in a series of elaborate charades to explain away his bachelorhood."[7]

Harrison's accounting for Wilder's sexual orientation, to which he devotes a brief chapter, is notable in the degree to which he attempts to somehow balance Steward and Wescott's suggestions with testimony to the contrary. "The idea that Thornton's attraction to men had a strong erotic component was challenged by many who knew him well," Harrison writes, referencing friends and colleagues Bill Nichols, Terry Lewis, Jerome Kilty, William Roerick, Charles Newton, and Frank Harding.[8] Indeed Kilty insists that Wilder was, "a most fastidious man," and, to Harding, "a neuter."[9]

Penelope Niven, whose 2012 *Thornton Wilder: A Life* was published three decades after Simon and Harrison's works, is more explicit in her examination and evaluation of Steward's accounts and reputation. She is also more adamant about debunking his claims, carefully cataloging Steward's embellishments and offering them as evidence of an unreliable narrator. In rehashing his quest to seduce an aged Lord Alfred Douglas as a means to spiritually connect with a long-dead Oscar Wilde, a pilgrimage inspired by a lesser connection to an associate of Whitman, she casts Steward as an attention-seeking star chaser with a bent for

3 Stein, Gertrude, and Thornton Wilder. 1996. *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder*. Edited by Edward Burns, Ulla E. Dydo, and William Rice. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 173.

4 Niven, Penelope. 2012. *Thornton Wilder: A Life*. First ed. New York: HarperCollins, 357.

5 Spring, Justin. 2011. *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*. N.p.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 51-53.

6 Wilder, Thornton to Samuel Steward, March 9, 1938. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

7 Simon, 64.

8 Harrison, Gilbert A. 1983. *The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder*. N.p.: Ticknor & Fields, 168.

9 Harrison, 168.

spurious scandal more than a credible once- or several-time lover of Wilder.[10] She considers, appropriately, but begrudgingly, that both may be true.

But despite the thirty years of social progress between Simon's biography and Niven's, and the developed understanding of all that encompasses a gay life, the biographers consistently hinge Wilder's sexuality on proof of physical consummation. Perhaps as the only major account of such an event, Steward's unshakable place in Wilder's history is a direct result of that reductive reliance on physical proof as confirmation of same-sex attraction, whether his story is entirely true to the letter or not. But just because Steward's experience is the first we know of does not mean it was the only one.

The focus on Steward's story and the physical act of sex reinforces an outdated notion of "homosexuality" as a transactional act, rather than a holistic life experience. In its singularity, Steward's account has also become the standard from which all other discussions of Wilder's sexuality are measured:

"Thornton went about sex almost as if he were looking the other way, doing something else, and nothing happened that could be prosecuted anywhere, unless frottage can be called a crime. There was never even any kissing."[11] Steward continues, "if there were others, I knew nothing of them, for there was a double lock on the door of the closet in which he lived…He could never forthrightly discuss anything sexual; for him the act was quite literally unspeakable. His Puritan reluctance was inhibiting to me as well…"[12]

## INFATUATIONS

Steward's account in combination with the absence of further proof of physical consummation, the resistance of friends to discuss Wilder's sexuality, and the insistence that Wilder was a "private man," whose half-century-old inhibitions are to be still adhered to by scholars has forged a picture of a man who was repellent to sex and romantic attraction.[13]

In Richard Goldstone's 1975 biography *Thornton Wilder: An Intimate Portrait*, which precedes the published accounts of Steward's story, the author contrasts Wilder with a range of authors who are known to experience same-sex attraction. "Most men in their late adolescence or even in their twenties commit themselves—sometimes deliberately, sometimes purposefully, but usually unquestioningly—to a heterosexual existence leading to marriage, children, and a circle of friends and acquaintances who have made similar commitments," Goldstone writes.[14] He then compares Wilder to Thomas Mann, Wilde, and Marcel Proust, among others, but concludes, "in contrast to all these examples, Wilder chose to make no commitment at all…Wilder's capacity for both love and affection increased with the distance that separated him from the object of those feelings."[15] Of course, in *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and *The Matchmaker*, Wilder extols the very family experiences Goldstone has him rejecting, though never adopts them for himself.

Others have taken Goldstone's notion that Wilder actively turned himself off from any flirtations with same-sex attraction a step further, to say that Wilder was somehow obtuse to his own desires, or outright unaware of them. In a Library of America note to an essay from Wilder on sex during his time at Yale, the editors assert this clearly: "He was homosexual—though never openly so, probably not even to himself."[16]

While Niven, for her part, refrains from making an ultimate judgment as to whether Wilder was gay, she does confidently assume his motives, had he purposefully concealed his attractions: "He would have instinctively protected his own privacy as well as that of his sex partners, not out of hypocrisy but out of affection, out of courtesy, out of propriety, out of respect for others, and himself."[17]

This attitude ignores the intimacy, however abstract, that can be found in Wilder's letters as a younger man in the throes of his first experiences with love and infatuation.[18] His messages to Dr. Charles Wager, a married Oberlin professor twenty years his senior, as a young mentee betray that image of the older Wilder as uptight and sexless. In these letters, many written before Wilder had any sense of the kind of fame he'd achieve, we see the excitement of his affections and infatuations. Wilder hints at his heightened feelings, his fascination with male bodies, and the sense of emotional connection he achieves with other men. They are more obvious than one would expect of a man who

10 Niven, 435.

11 Spring, 52.

12 Spring, 53.

13 Niven, 433.

14 Goldstone, Richard H. 1975. *Thornton Wilder, an Intimate Portrait*. New York: Saturday Review Press, 264.

15 Goldstone, 264.

16 "Thornton Wilder on Sex at Yale." 2020. Thornton Wilder. https://www.thorntonwilder.com/blog/2020/4/7/thornton-wilders-yale.

17 Niven, 440.

18 Wilder, Thornton Letters to Charles Wager. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

engages in such "elaborate charades."[19] These infatuations, which center on classmates and acquaintances, are described by Niven as "hero worship," but their language and the circumstances of the meetings they describe imply emotion that transcends polite admiration.[20]

They also tend to be directed toward people who are not only physically beautiful, but who share Wilder's intellectual, literary, or artistic interests. Wilder seems to have had an especially strong fascination with actors, beginning with Gareth Hughes, and continuing with Glenn Hunter and then Montgomery Clift, but the inclination was not exclusive.

Hunter was three years older than Wilder when the two met in Rhode Island in 1918.[21] Niven describes Hunter's letters to Wilder (which are the only side of the correspondence that survives), as offering a, "hint of infatuation, if not intimacy."[22] Hunter, who had big aspirations for a stage career, hopes "their relationship could grow through letters," and includes an invitation for Wilder to rent a room on the same floor of his New York City apartment building so they could live close together.[23] In another note, Hunter writes, "I wish I might have a long talk with you just tonight. I need patting on the shoulder by someone—like you—someone with whom I could tell what I hope and dream—how I loved being with you that night—more than you could know."[24] Wilder must have mailed Hunter a photo of himself, which the young man praised: "I like your picture so very much, Thornton, and am glad to have it. I'm going to find a neat little frame for it."

If he cared enough to send him a photo, and to have developed a relationship in which Hunter felt free enough to be so effusive, one wonders what Wilder's side of the exchange may have contained. Were there reciprocal hints at romance or sex? Would such letters be sufficient to meet the necessary level of proof?

The episode is reminiscent of another encounter earlier that year with Hughes, who Wilder had been following in newspapers for months. In January, Wilder worked up the nerve to call Hughes and request a meeting under the guise of inviting him to perform at Yale. Their meeting began around 4:30 p.m. in Hughes' apartment on Waverly Place,

*Sudio portrait captured during Thornton Wilder's freshman year at Oberlin College, 1915-1916.*
*Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/522422. Accessed August 23, 2025.*

and Wilder finally left at 1 a.m. the following morning.[25]

Wilder wrote of the meeting to Wager—who was aware of Wilder's infatuation and teased him about it—saying that Hughes was, "Ariel, but more pathetic than Ariel. He is sheer genius and poetry. And when his glasses are off, the divinest thing to look upon that I have ever seen. He was calling the comparatively gloomy and stone-like visitor 'Thornton dear' within three-quarters of an hour."[26]

Wilder elaborated that Hughes, "didn't want me to go even then," and, after making clear Hughes knew Shakespeare "up and down," Wilder makes reference to *Romeo and Juliet*: "[he] assured me it was the nightingale and not the lark I heard."[27] The following night, Wilder introduced Hughes to his mother, Isabella, and praised his social skills, as well as

19 Simon, 64.

20 Niven, 154.

21 Niven, 171.

22 Niven, 171.

23 Niven, 171.

24 Hunter, Glenn to Thornton Wilder, December 23, 1918. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

25 Wilder to Wager, January 18, 1918.

26 Niven, 155.

27 Niven, 155.

his beauty, to Wager. "No one can take his or her eyes off of him."[28]

If Wilder was unattuned to his attractions, would he have specified that he could not stop looking at Hughes? Is this unmistakable desire really nothing more than "hero-worship?"

Wilder's letters on Hughes are not the only examples of romantic and physical yearning in letters to Wager. In October 1917, Wilder described his efforts to get onto The Yale Literary Magazine, including an invited visit to the rooms of one of its editors, Stephen Vincent Benét. Wilder describes in detail the disarray of a small room several men used as their library, stuffed with hundreds of books. While waiting for his appointment to begin, another young man—"a most perfect of southern aristocrats"—entered the room and changed his clothes in front of Wilder.[29] Wilder then describes in farcical detail the search for a misplaced sock and the entrances and exits of other boys, including Benét, who took turns reading his spec submissions.

"I myself was obsequious and Uriah Heepish the while but you doubt not that I shall assert myself like Chanticleer in time. But what a glimpse I got of what I thought I would have to go to Oxford for. And I don't suppose they ever let it occur to them that they are so perfect. It takes one from the jaded middle-class, one too used to pinching and window-shopping and chatting with the grocers sons to really appraise the amenities, and timbres of such a group. And to think there was still a fourth I didn't see."[30]

Wilder's jealous insecurity about his economic standing compared to the boys who hold the power of publication is entwined with an appraisal of their attributes. He refers to the boy who changed his clothing as "fair-haired, good-looking," and with a "most beautiful southern accent." A second boy, "a dark one this time with tortoise-shell glasses and a proud subdued air…had a remote and wandering graciousness, that quite equaled in distinction the other boy's golden casualness." He seems to indicate that though he is jealous of them, he is drawn to them and, further, he wants to be one of them. What could Wilder have felt, in that small library, as a "perfect" young man stripped before him? He signs the letter, "Thornybusch."[31]

In a follow-up letter to Wager, which further chronicles his efforts to get published at Yale and a brief flirtation with joining the ROTC, Wilder closes with another illustration of his envy, this time of a boy still at Oberlin. "I can imagine that it is beginning to get chill and that the little stove in your room is in service again, and that the Socratean Method is penetrating into some others boys' tempers," he writes. "Remember the one–the one with the notable face; quite common here however in just that type–the one I am so jealous about, and the one who dared to reproach you about letterwriting. Does he call every Sunday afternoon?" Wilder senses his petty envy emerging and signs off, "But now I'm getting backbitey and take my leave. Your affectionate pupil, Thornton."[32]

It's clear that Wilder felt more comfortable in Wager's company than that of his patrician classmates at Yale, and that a lifelong reverence of the professor at least began as rooted in an affectionate infatuation. Wilder's letters to Wager—who is treated as a mentor, friend, and object of affection concurrently—are rife with over-the-top compliments and acknowledgments of his influence. The connection with Wager was likely Wilder's greatest takeaway from his time in Ohio.

"How many hours I sat under your rostrum, burning with awe and emotion, while you unfolded the masterpieces," Wilder writes following the success of his novel *The Cabala*.[33] "I am an old fashioned believer and when I assert that I believe that lives are planned out for us I am always thinking of the fact that my father....sent his two sons to Oberlin where the younger could get the nourishment without which he would have remained a bright blundering trivial hysteric."

These expressions of longing and hints of lust for Hughes, Hunter, and Wager do not support the assertions that Wilder, at least in this early stage of life, was refusing to acknowledge the attractions he was feeling, or was entirely unaware of them. On the contrary, he seems to be admitting to them, albeit with carefully selected language and literary allusion. If the words are not explicit, the subtext is clear.

And of the boys and men in his life at that time, Hughes, Hunter, and Wager do not constitute an exhaustive list: there's also the "young instinctive prince" he met on Cape Cod in August 1917 and casual correspondence with ballet dancer Hubert Jay Stowitts in 1915.[34] And all those possible flirtations, as few or many as there were, of which there are no records; all of this twenty years before he met Samuel Steward.

28 Niven, 156.

29 Wilder to Wager, October 1917.

30 Wilder to Wager, October 1917.

31 Wilder to Wager, October 1917.

32 Wilder to Wager, October 1917.

33 Wilder to Wager, May 25, 1926.

34 Niven, 144

Even if her extrapolation of Wilder's personal motives for concealing his sexual relationships later in life is naive, Niven's assessment of the societal factors at play is painfully level-headed: "[he was] the product of a repressive upbringing in an intolerant, unforgiving, legally repressive era."[35] Following graduation at Yale, Wilder joined the staff at the Lawrenceville School, a then all-boys prep school in New Jersey, in 1921. It would have been extremely difficult for him to have carried on affairs with other men while in residence at the school during the school year. However, the summer and winter breaks would have given him more room to explore, and it appears he did, with heartbreaking results, at least twice.

## DEVASTATIONS

The sheer volume of letters within the Wilder collection at Yale makes clear that Wilder, who traveled extensively, worked across disciplines and lived 78 years, was a man of many associations. Though not romantically involved with them, he had a knack for developing deep friendships with women, typically older than himself, throughout his life. He recognized this habit early and prophesied its continuance in a 1915 letter to family: "I'm going to be an expert in Old Lady psychology."[36] Among the most enduring friendships of his life were those with Amy Wertheimer, a married woman seven years older than Wilder, and Sybil Colefax, a British socialite and interior decorator thirteen years his senior.

In an autumn 1925 letter to Wertheimer, he makes clear his desire for a platonic female friendship: "I'm looking for a wise, intelligent and fairly tranquil friend. I should like it to be a lady, somewhat older than myself who will understand me so well (so humorously and with a touch of superiority) that I can write conceitedly and she will understand that that's my only way; trivially, and she will understand that that's my vacation; tragically, and that that's my nerves."[37]

Establishing this trust and his needs from their relationship, he then alludes to the first of the two heartbreaks, an "awful experience in Europe that left [me] so marred with woe that it is unimaginable that [I] will ever love again."[38] He is purposefully vague about the particulars of what occurred in the midst of this heartbreak, as well as exactly where and when it occurred. As a man who was a regular user of pronouns, he notably avoids them entirely in describing the affair, further avoiding definitive indication of the person's gender.

As their correspondence deepens over the following weeks, Wilder signals another budding infatuation colored by a mutual affinity for art and literature in the form of a French professor at Princeton, where Wilder was pursuing a Master's degree: "My fierce intellectual honesty requires my saying that his comments are not very deep or original, but he loves the same authors I do, their names keep coming back to his lips, he daydreams aloud in front of us–the other boys are bored—but Saint-Simion, Montaigne and Pascal must be treasure for him. When a great author is praised for some special beauty, above all for some transformation he has made of the troubles of his life into the gold of his art: lo, then I can be discovered crying in the corner. What about? I do not know. That's my private way of praising. It has nothing to do with grief or regret. What a funny way to applaud. It is weak and unmanly to weep because things are sad and that I do not do; but who forbids us to when things are beautiful?"[39]

The strengthening of their friendship arrived just in time for a second shattering heartbreak. Some months later, Wilder writes to Wertheimer that he had a humiliating encounter with unrequited affection that left him no more than "a heart and a pen" over the 1925-1926 winter break.[40]

"I loved with all the exaggeration one can imagine," he writes. "But I was not only not loved so in return. I was laughed at. The cleverest humiliations were set for me. And for a long time I am going to be the most cautious, the most distrustful (of myself) man in the world."[41] Wilder again leaves no hint to the gender of the person in question, omitting pronouns.

In a journal entry later that year, Wilder reveals the striking depths of his heartbreaks and their influence on his writing: "*The Cabala* was written because I brooded about great natures and their obstacles and ailments and frustrations. *The Bridge* was written because I wanted to die and I wanted to prove that death was a happy solution. The motto of *The Bridge* is to be found in the last page of *The Cabala*: Hurry and die! In *The Cabala* I began to think that love is enough to reconcile one to the difficulty of living (i.e. the difficulty of being good); in *The Bridge* I am still a little surer. Perhaps someday I can write a book announcing that love is sufficient."[42]

35 Niven, 440

36 Niven, 102

37 Wilder, Thornton to Amy Wertheimer, October 8, 1925. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

38 Wilder to Wertheimer, October 8, 1925.

39 Wilder to Wertheimer, November 4, 1925.

40 Wilder to Wertheimer, January 5, 1926.

41 Wilder to Wertheimer, January 12, 1926.

42 Wilder, Thornton, *Cahier E*. Thornton Wilder Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

In that same journal, Wilder writes directly of the portrayal of same-sex attraction onstage, criticizing a playwright's characterizations of two women in love. It was a Berlin production of Édouard Bourdet's *La Prisonnière*, which he saw on November 11, 1926, directed by one of his artistic heroes (and future *The Merchant of Yonkers* director) Max Reinhardt.

"The new change [to a dramatic trope] (i.e. lesbianism) is not profoundly enough done to justify its attempt," he says. "If the play were sincere the opening of the [second] act and all the Mme. Meillant scenes would be unthinkable. The young husband's casting off of his wife at the close is not in the [Christian] tradition exacted of Anglosaxon heroes who are expected to cling to their wives through incurable paralyses, etc…The assumption before a play that first [deals with] such a subject is apt to be that this is a typical case, and that Mme. d'Aiguines' hold over Iréne is the model of all such alliances…The fact is Boudet has written a play about ordinary heterosexual love in a powerful and tyrannical older man towards a girl and later gone back and back and called the unscrupulous man: a woman."[43] When his sister Charlotte endured a prolonged mental health episode following years of tumultuous same-sex relationships and her own struggles with intimacy, perhaps Wilder's reaction was colored by this experience, as well as his later friendship with Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas.[44]

Wilder would write again about sexuality 27 years later in a journal entry on, "Whitman and the Breakdown of Love and Sex."[45] In the passage, he groans about being overwhelmed by the "neurotic woes" of five friends who, though not explicitly named as gay people, are at least in part likely so. He echoes the stereotype of an unloving parent and, in the case of one man, the influence of an overbearing mother on her son's failure to achieve, "harmonious sexual adjustments." As Wilder laments the unhealthy acceptance and extension of love in these friends, he makes an aside: "I am more and more willing to agree with certain authorities that homosexuality is negative—that it is, even when apparently aggressive, a submission to solicitations. These solicitations are not necessarily those coming from the outside; they come from within also, from an exorbitant need for tenderness, i.e., to be valued by another."[46]

It's astonishing that in the first sentence Wilder distances himself from those who pursue same-sex intercourse, but then confirms that it is something he has thought about over time and with evolving understanding. He directly links the sexual and romantic, refuting Steward's assertions that his physical sexual consummations were decidedly unromantic (which, in the absence of other accounts, are taken as the standard). And though his relationships would indicate a distinct separation between physical and emotional fulfillment, he nevertheless links them as a function of love.

*A studio portrait of Thornton Wilder attributed to Danford Barney in the mid-1920s. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/522433. Accessed August 23, 2025.*

"Well, this is only a first skirmish with a deeply complicated subject," he concludes.[47] But it clearly wasn't. He was 56 years old, the alleged affairs with Steward were 16 years prior, and perhaps his greatest heartbreak, whose identity has never been revealed, occurred nearly 30 years before. In the entry, he alludes to Whitman's lover Peter Doyle only

43 Wilder, *Cahier E*, November 12, 1926.

44 Niven, 375

45 Wilder, Thornton. 1985. *The Journals of Thornton Wilder, 1939-1961*. Edited by Donald C. Gallup and Donald Gallup. N.p.: Yale University Press, 182.

46 Wilder, *Journals 1939-1961*, July 10, 1953, 183.

47 Wilder, *Journals 1939-1961*, July 10, 1953, 184.

as a, "streetcar conductor," but even this diss is an example of his personal association with a gay writer to whom he related and idolized.[48]

It's not outrageous to see why some may seize on the passage—with its judgment of homosexuality—as evidence against his rumored attractions or as a strong indicator of repressive self-loathing. But, on the contrary, it makes it clear that Wilder was grappling with homosexuality, in some capacity, throughout his life, and thinking of it in relation to emotional love.

It's not impossible that Wilder, facing two devastating heartbreaks in his twenties—at a time when the public revelation of his sexuality would be ruinous to his career and, most likely, his family life—would turn himself off from the prospect of a long romantic relationship in favor of platonic, emotionally fulfilling friendships, and seek physical fulfillment in isolated, sporadic encounters. If Wilder were able to separate his emotional connections from the sexual aspects of his attraction, he could then continue to experience some degree of fulfillment through shared intellectual and artistic appreciation. Wilder's attractions seem as much (if not more) to the mind—those who could engage on topics like literature and theatre, and who appreciated the beauty of the artistic world—as to the body anyway. The allusions to male beauty that show up in his letters to Wager and others are frequently entwined with references to intellectual connection. Such connections may have even heightened the physical attractions he felt for the men he encountered, or provided convenient cover for those attractions when relating his interactions to people like Amy Wertheimer or his family.

## CONSIDERATIONS

The period that followed his heartbreaks, when Wilder was approaching 30, reflects the evolving prioritization from romantic infatuations to deep friendships. Aside from Wertheimer and Colefax, and his continued correspondence with Wager, the mid- to late-1920s and early 1930s also saw the introduction of some of Wilder's soon-to-be closest friends, including Gene Tunney, Alexander Wollcott, Ruth Gordon, Gertrude Stein, and Alice Toklas. These connections coincided with his rise to fame and publishing success.

Though Wager was an early instance of Wilder's connection with straight male friends, he was certainly not the last with whom he developed a complex adoration. Consider Wollcott, to whom he dedicated *Our Town*, or champion boxer Tunney, with whom he hiked Europe. There's danger in labeling any instance of emotional intimacy between Wilder and another man as a same-sex attraction or romantic event and to do so would perpetuate the notion that masculinity and emotional vulnerability are incongruent attributes; that gay men are incapable of a relationship with other men that is neither romantic nor sexual in nature. But perhaps Wilder found a greater degree of comfort and safety in men with whom he knew there was no possibility of sexual connection; that even if infatuation was possible, consummation was not.

One could easily argue that his abstinence—real or perceived—is in part responsible for the "fastidious" reputation he's enjoyed as a writer, even contributing to preserving his legacy. Perhaps the inverse is also true, though: has a sexless perception of Wilder further cemented a reputation for nostalgia and sentimentality? Has it obscured his contributions to drama and literature as a structural experimentalist whose public and private experiences only sharpened his understanding of the miracles and struggles of daily human survival?

In an angry letter to Goldstone, who Wilder dismissed as not understanding of his work and thus an incompatible biographer, he writes, "for a large part of the reading public—and for you—*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *Our Town* are tender, tear-drenched, and consoling. But they aren't, they're hard and even grimly challenging."[49]

To live as Wilder was not simply to live as an observer, as many of his characters do. To live as Thornton Wilder was to live as an outsider; as an American expat in a Chinese boarding school; to experience separation from his family for much of his childhood; to view life on a cosmic scale when his own neighbors were struggling to see their country in the context of a global society; or to navigate the world as a man with same-sex attractions who embraced the value of a family model that was not compatible with his orientation.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his outsider status, Wilder produced work full of clear, definitive, universal truths that cut to the heart of our most enduring social conventions and institutions. Ironically, in their efforts to understand his same-sex attractions, his biographers have largely rooted their evaluations in those heterosexual institutions and norms, failing to consider that his experience cannot adequately be judged by them because they were not conceived with people like him in mind. What if a more complete evaluation of Wilder and his sexuality doesn't hinge on additional proof, but rather a different rubric? What if when we talked about Wilder and sex, we meant Wilder and *intimacy*?

48 Wilder, *Journals 1939-1961*, July 10, 1953, 184.

49 Wilder, Thornton. 2008. *The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder*. Edited by Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer. N.p.: HarperCollins, 663.

# Artists, Laymen, and the "Failure in Living"

## ARTISTS AND LAYMEN

Thornton Wilder's decades-long love affair with theatre began in his earliest days. As a young boy in Berkeley, California, he relished performances of classic plays in the William Randolph Hearst Greek Theatre, parlaying his observations from the audience into backyard productions of his own creation, with siblings and neighbors assigned to starring and supporting roles.[1] In young adulthood, he adopted a writing practice that would serve to hone his knack for creating dramatic tension quickly and economically. These "playlets," or short plays that often centered on religious themes, would become so numerous that by the time he wrote to friend Amy Wertheimer in 1926 of his proclivity for endowing his characters with his own most private feelings, he'd completed enough material to form the basis of his first published collection of dramatic work in 1928, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays*.[2] The volume followed the breakthrough success of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* the previous year, and was itself succeeded in 1931 by *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act*—which includes such beloved classics as *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* and *Pullman Car Hiawatha*. Taken in whole, Wilder's early short plays track the evolution of a writer experimenting to find his own signature storytelling structure and style; they would see complete realization in the delivery of the full-length *Our Town* in 1938, and *The Merchant of Yonkers* (later, *The Matchmaker*) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* thereafter.

"An artist is one who knows how life should be lived at its best and is always aware of how badly he is doing it," Wilder wrote in the foreword to *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*.[3] "An artist is one who knows he is failing in living and feeds his remorse by making something fair, and a layman is one who suspects he is failing in living but is consoled by his successes in golf, or in love, or in business." Wilder clearly fell into the "artist" camp.

The publication of *The Angel* and its foreword in 1928 came just a few years after the mid-1920s heartbreaks of which Wilder wrote to Wertheimer with explicit emotion and vague detail. By 1928, it's possible that he had already settled into a pattern of sexual and emotional separation that would track through adulthood. That Wilder thought to preface his first collected dramatic works with the assertion that each person is "failing in living" is a harbinger of the brand of existentialism that Emily Gibbs would come to lay bare in *Our Town*, though by the premiere of that play ten years later, he had smoothed its sharp edges into one of his most famous lines: "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?"[4] As an artist, Wilder assumes that he knows how life should be lived at its best—in the present, among people, with the understanding that every moment is a miracle—and channels that knowledge into the "fair" works we cherish today.

Life, and particularly the commitment to stop "failing in living," are at the heart of the full-length works. Whether it be the appreciation of the day-to-day motions and rituals of human existence in *Our Town*, the instinct to survive in the face of war and calamity in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, or the will to joyously persevere through poverty and grief in *The Matchmaker*, Wilder implores his audience to commit to living life, "at its best." There is a transcendence

1 Niven, Penelope. 2012. *Thornton Wilder: A Life*. First ed. New York: HarperCollins, 27.

2 Wilder, Thornton to Amy Wertheimer, February 7, 1926. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

3 Wilder, Thornton. 1928. *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays*. New York, NY: Longmans, Green, and Co, v-vi

4 Wilder, Thornton. 2020. *Three Plays: Our Town, the Skin of Our Teeth, and the Matchmaker*. N.p.: HarperCollins Publishers, 110.

from "layperson" to "artist" in each of Wilder's primary protagonists—Emily Gibbs, Dolly Levi, and George and Maggie Antrobus—when they finally see humanity for what it is and move forward through life (or afterlife) with that knowledge.

But what lies at the heart of Wilder's distinction between "artist" and "layperson" is not simply its shared "failure in living,"—or, as Dolly says in *The Matchmaker*, "we're all fools and we're all in danger of destroying the world with our folly"—but rather the diverging responses to that failure's inherent loneliness.[5] In his failure, the artist turns inward, to capitalize on creative instinct to make something to share with the world to "feed his remorse." The layperson, on the other hand, turns outward—centering his focus on business relationships, romantic pursuits, social sports—to seek meaning in living.

The characters who appear most like Wilder in attribute or attitude are similarly observers, outcasts, drop-ins, and misfits marred by their own unique brands of loneliness; perhaps they are proxies for the writer's own aspirational or feared existences. *Our Town*'s Stage Manager is the consummate observer of life in scales from the small-town, like Grover's Corners, to the cosmic. The same play's Simon Stimson is a long-suffering, wandering alcoholic who even in death cannot square his own existence within his community, or humanity. And in *The Long Christmas Dinner*, Cousin Brandon is a boozy bachelor uncle whose perennial place at the Bayard family's Christmas table goes unchanged over decades, even as the family shows little interest in who he is or how he feels.

## THE STAGE MANAGER

*Our Town* follows the residents of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire across several years of their lives around the turn of the 20th century. Each of the play's three acts correspond to themes—Daily Life, Love and Marriage, and Death and Eternity—with a young couple, George Gibbs and Emily Webb, at their center. A Stage Manager acts as the audience's guide through town and the story, instructing, annotating, and framing the small moments of these people's lives in the context of world history and social forces. By the third act, Emily Gibbs has died in childbirth and, unwilling to accept her fate, returns to Earth for one happy day. She is overwhelmed by how quickly time passes, and how recklessly humans squander the miracle of life. She realizes that to live is to do so unaware of the preciousness of our brief moment of existence. Wilder wrote the play to be performed on a sparse set with very little scenery, a convention employed in the prior one-acts, but which earned him a reputation for experimentalism among wider audiences with *Our Town*'s success.

Of all the characters in Wilder's dramatic canon, none is more closely connected with the image of Wilder himself than the Stage Manager (the stage version of Wilder's semi-autobiographical novel *Theophilus North* was adapted by a different writer, Matthew Burnett, after Wilder's death). Despite the appearance and ostensibly similar purpose of a Stage Manager in *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* and *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, in no other work does the device play such a pivotal role in the story. *Our Town*'s Stage Manager is known for his profound commentary on the state of humanity and its role in the universe. If Wilder ever felt resistant to being tagged as the real-life Stage Manager, he did himself no favors by playing the role in a number of productions throughout his lifetime.[6]

In his omniscience and social interactions, the Stage Manager straddles life in and above Grover's Corners. Like Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, he is both outside and inside the world he has curated for our viewing.[7] But whereas Tom, seen similarly as a proxy for Tennessee Williams, examines what Wilder would deem his "failure of living" through the prism of his memory and the imagined walls of the Wingfield apartment, the Stage Manager diagnoses such failures on a species level. If Tom is hyperrealistic in building his warped illusion, the Stage Manager is ultrasimplistic in constructing a world that is profoundly complex.

The Stage Manager sees humans for who we are and how we err. He is both a person and a prophet; a narrator and observer who foresees all fates, vices, and mistakes. He knows every inch of Grover's Corners; where pockets of people congregate and how their location and relation to others factors into the social order. He walks among the living and talks with the dead. He is both Thornton Wilder and everyman.

If we take Wilder at his word that there is that of himself in his characters—"men, women and children"—and we accept the Stage Manager as a proxy for Wilder himself, perhaps we can understand why major modern New York productions of *Our Town* have featured performers who increasingly mirror Wilder's attributes at the time of its premiere (white, male, forty-one years old, experiencing same-sex attraction) than original performer Frank Craven.[8] Jim Parsons and David Cromer fit the bill when they starred (and directed, in Cromer's case) in the 2024 Broadway production and 2009 Barrow Street Theatre productions, respectively. And Spalding Gray, who was 47 years old during the 1988 Broadway production, wrote of his own same-sex attractions.[9]

In many ways, *Our Town* is a play of contradictions—birth

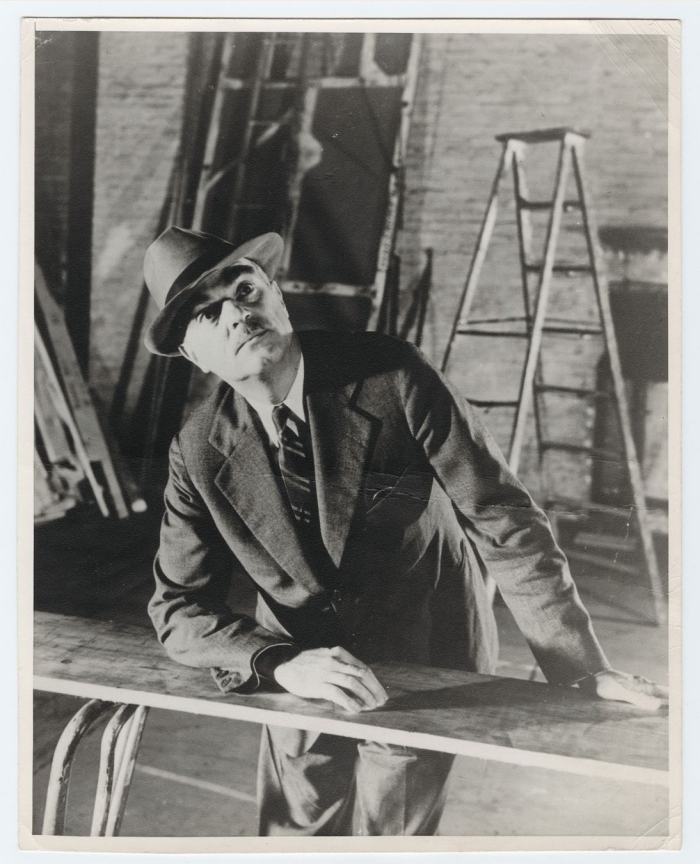
5 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 409.

6 Niven, 477.

7 Williams, Tennessee. 1999. *The Glass Menagerie*. Twentieth ed. N.p.: New Directions Books.

8 Wilder to Wertheimer, February 7, 1926.

9 Casey, Nell. 2011. "Spalding Gray's Tortured Soul." The New York Times, October 6, 2011. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/09/magazine/spalding-grays-tortured-soul.html.



*A production photo of Thornton Wilder playing The Stage Manager in* Our Town. *Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/522456. Accessed August 23, 2025.*

causes death, the security of marriage comes at the expense of personal freedom, beauty so wholly blankets the world that humans are blind to it—and the Stage Manager is himself an embodiment of contradictions. He is "in the ministry," but doesn't "quite know what it means" when marriage is referred to as a sacrament.[10] He knows the play is contrived, but still announces his plans to put a copy of it in the cornerstone of the fictional town's new bank. He knows that the comments of the dead might hurt our feelings, but has them proceed anyway. With one foot in the world and another above it, he can transcend the boundary between; he can code-switch in this would of his curation.

In that regard, the Stage Manager exhibits behavior that many LGBTQ people, closeted or not, have had to adopt in their lives, often for personal safety or emotional security. By existing both in a society that is dominated by the historically heterosexual institutions of marriage and child-raising, but also alongside it as someone who is not a participant in those institutions, he gleans a unique outsider's perspective. He briefly steps into other roles as well: Mr. Morgan, the owner of the store where George and Emily enjoy their strawberry phosphate; Mrs. Forrest, an old woman who George bumps into on Main Street while tossing a baseball; and the minister who marries the couple.

In their own way, each of these characters are also observers and outsiders, archetypes of a small town. The druggist is witness to the earliest kindling of young love, but also to the medications and intimate products his neighbors are purchasing from him. The minister looks after the spiritual lives of his flock, but in such a rarefied position, do his neighbors see him as on the level of themselves? As one of the eldest in her community, the old woman has seen the people around her grow and develop, but does the prioritization of youth like Emily and George push her to the margins? George doesn't notice her presence until they physically collide.

With the focus on Emily, George, and their families, Wilder leaves no room to flesh out the lives and personalities of these other characters. The Stage Manager speaks for them by becoming them. And if we consider them as extensions of the Stage Manager and, accordingly, Wilder, is it possible that consciously or subconsciously he was asserting that people like him—those who experience same-sex attraction and were therefore incompatible with the dominant social forces of marriage and parenthood in 1938 (and certainly 1901)—are all around, existing under the radar; that everyone else interacts with us only in passing, unaware of (or disinterested in) the interior lives we lead? Did those characters have heartbreaks and complicated relationships with their sexuality too? Could Mr. Morgan have had a furtive romance? Is it possible the minister's position provided cover for a sustained bachelorhood? Was Mrs. Forrest ever actually a missus?

Each of these roles clearly has a place in Grover's Corners, but in their fleeting presence is loneliness. And in his own omniscience—that privileged ability to speak from his outsider's point of view—the Stage Manager stands truly alone among the others onstage. The Stage Manager's remorse for his "failure in living" produces the play he's curating for us, with only momentary dabbles in business (as a druggist), love (as a minister), and sport (baseball, not golf, and unhappily). He is, like Wilder, an artist among laypeople.

## SIMON STIMSON

Simon Stimson, *Our Town*'s catty, alcoholic church music director, is seen in the first act preparing the choir for an upcoming wedding and chiding them for poor musicianship. After practice, three members of his choir—Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Soames—discuss his behavior, which tees up a later conversation between the Gibbses that makes clear Simon's drunkenness is a well known and worsening problem in town. Editor Webb and

10 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 77.

Constable Warren also encounter Simon as he wanders town in a quiet stupor while his unseen wife looks for him. And by the third act, Simon is among the dead in the cemetery, having committed suicide by hanging in his attic.

Simon is notable as the only character who exhibits an open despair through the entire play, which continues even after his death and puts him at odds with those souls around him who've made peace with it all. He is a foil for the town and its inhabitants, one whose accusations of ignorance in others only underscores his own, blinded to the beauty around him by anger. If the Stage Manager has been closely linked with Wilder as a proxy, the character of Simon Stimson mostly has not, though, like Wilder, his sexuality has been the subject of speculation by critics, scholars, and—as evidenced by Howard Sherman's *Our Town* oral history, *Another Day's Begun*—creatives.[11]

In some respects, Simon and the Stage Manager could not be less alike. While the Stage Manager has a deep sense of the entire town and its social order—its geography, names, history, and rituals—and is able to balance human follies with the beauty of humanity's continuity, Stimson scorns the community in which he lives as one of "ignorant" people. He participates in church life and wedding ceremonies as an obligation. While the Stage Manager exists in an air of immortality, Simon sits among the dead. And as the Stage Manager muses on the dead's gradual disconnection from life on earth, Simon remains tethered to a world that he could not fit into.

"Yes, now you know," he says bitingly and with mounting violence, per Wilder's stage directions. "Now you know! That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those…of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another. Now you know—that's the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness."[12]

Unlike the bit characters the Stage Manager plays, Simon is unable to fade into the background of the town. When the town has retreated into their homes for the night, he is awake and wandering. His epitaph is not a Bible verse, but musical notes, which he selected. His life and death are shrouded in secrecy, but marred by incessant gossip. His actions are subject to ridicule by his neighbors. His attempts to fit within the confines of the same heterosexual institutions the Stage Manager successfully exists parallel to have largely failed. Aside from his physical existence in Grover's Corners, he is isolated.

Simon's insistence that to be alive is to "go up and down trampling on the feelings" of others, and to "be at the mercy of one self-centered passion" are reminiscent of the words Wilder wrote to Wertheimer a decade earlier regarding his heartbreak over the 1925 winter holiday. He wrote then: "I loved with all the exaggeration one can imagine. But I was not only not loved so in return. I was laughed at. The cleverest humiliations were set for me. And for a long time I am going to be the most cautious, the most distrustful (of myself) man in the world."[13] The root of Simon's anger at his neighbors in the first act comes into focus in the third act. It's clear he encountered betrayal by others. He, like Wilder, responds with distrust and suspicion of the motivations of others. His reference to "self-centered passion," if taken in the sexual or romantic sense, suggests that Simon also had negative experiences in those regards. Perhaps it's that experience—a failed encounter with desire, maybe—that precipitated the "troubles" and resulting gossip.

After the choir practice in the first act, Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Soames discuss Simon's alcoholism and depression privately. Mrs. Soames' attitude toward Simon's behavior takes an unkind turn, which elicits a defensive response from Mrs. Gibbs, who dismisses her comments and insists that the preacher's acceptance of Simon is an example they all should follow.

"We all know about Simon Stimson," she says. "And we all know about the troubles he's been through, and Dr. Ferguson knows too, and if Dr. Ferguson keeps him on there in his job the only thing the rest of us can do is just not to notice it."[14]

"Not to notice it," Mrs. Soames retorts. "But it's getting worse."

"No, it isn't, Louella," Mrs. Webb says, siding with Mrs. Gibbs. "It's getting better. I've been in that choir twice as long as you have. It doesn't happen anywhere near so often."

It's clear that Mrs. Soames's fixation is on the alcoholism and Simon's conduct before the choir. She picks up on the visual and behavioral clues of his drinking. But Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs seem to see the drinking as a symptom of something larger, which Mrs. Soames hasn't been clued into. Their allusion to Simon's previous "troubles" implies that those who've been in town for a long period of time are more familiar with Stimson's talked-around history; that they see the alcoholism as a byproduct. These scenes are so fleeting, and the alcoholism so present in both the first and third act ("Hm, drank a lot, we used to say," says Sam Craig, a mourner reading Simon's epitaph), that it's easy for a production to conflate the "troubles" and the alcoholism as one and the same.[15] But Wilder writes of them distinctly.

11 Sherman, Howard. 2021. *Another Day's Begun: Thornton Wilder's Our Town in the 21st Century*. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic.

12 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 111.

13 Wilder to Wertheimer, January 12, 1926

14 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 42.

15 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 93.

Later, when the Gibbses are discussing the rehearsal, Mrs. Gibbs admits Simon's behavior was the worst she'd seen from him, despite her earlier protestations.

"I guess I know more about Simon Stimson's affairs than anybody in this town," Doctor Gibbs says. "Some people ain't made for small-town life."[16] The line indicates that Doctor Gibbs has treated Simon in his practice. But these two sentences diverge as to the kind of treatment Doctor Gibbs would have delivered. As a physician, he would have treated the physical ailments that Simon experienced throughout his life, perhaps exacerbated by the alcohol he consumes. But the second assertion, the judgment that Simon is among those who aren't cut out for small town life, implies a deeper, psychological understanding of the man's health. He knows that Simon's secrets, or "troubles," are incompatible with the small-town life that he finds himself successfully immersed in. Maybe Doctor Gibbs had clued his wife into Simon's medical history, including his psychological and sexual history, previously, which caused her to speak in his defense. At any rate, he takes the stance of so many others: "I don't know how that'll end; but there's nothing we can do but just leave it alone." He doesn't ask, and he won't tell.

Whatever Simon's troubles were, the pastor has kept him in his position despite them. Following that example, the rest of the town has accepted Simon and his troubles, or at least consented to collectively concealing them. But their obfuscation leaves the lingering question: what are the troubles that would have both required a moral excuse of a pastor and been so detrimental as to exacerbate an addiction? One would traditionally assume that grief, from a death or loss, or trauma, such as war or humiliation, would be the trigger.

It's unlikely that Simon's troubles would be rooted in war, however. The American Civil War ended nearly four decades prior to the play's setting in 1901 and New Hampshire's sole volunteer unit in the Spanish-American war stayed stateside. If Simon had endured a ruinous loss, such as the death of a family member or a financial disaster, what need would he have for moral excusal? Even in more repressive times, it's daffy to think that a commonplace tragedy would require a pastor's forgiveness. Mrs. Gibbs's assertion that the pastor is aware of Simon's trouble, supports him anyway, and sets an example that others should follow, implies the existence of something much less commonplace, much less socially acceptable.

Is it possible that Simon's problem, the one that drives him to self-medicate with alcohol, is, in fact, one of passion? Aside from the colonial sodomy laws that remained on the books in early American states, the social stigma and moral pressures Simon would have faced as a man experiencing same-sex desire would have made living as an out gay man practically impossible. But social stigma and moral pressures are not enough to vanquish desire, only to influence the responsive behaviors of those who experience it.

*A studio photo of Thornton Wilder in the 1930s. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/522463. Accessed August 23, 2025.*

Later in the act, Editor Webb and Constable Warren encounter Simon wandering silently through the night, alone. The constable shares, in the first and only mention of Simon's unseen wife, that he observed her "movin' out to hunt for him."[17] Constable Warren joins the chorus of unnoticing neighbors: "I looked the other way." His ignorance, a status quo-preserving gesture that is neither embracing nor scornful, echoes Mrs. Webb's earlier suggestion that they ignore Stimson's public outbursts, and Doctor Gibbs's advice to his wife to, "just leave it alone."[18]

But their insistence on looking away is at odds with Wilder's decision to keep bringing him back. Wilder wants the audience to notice Simon. And Editor Webb begins this scene with Simon and Constable Warren with reference to

16 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 43.

17 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 46.

18 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 43.

the moon, which casts bright light onto the darkness Simon is retreating into; perhaps a symbol of the town's ever-watchful eye.

"Town seems to have settled down for the night pretty well," Editor Webb suggests before repeating the sentiment and offering to walk Simon home.[19] Simon silently rejects the offer and continues walking in solitude. Their half-hearted attempts to stop him, and lack of concern when he quietly refuses, makes it clear that while the ritual is not embraced by the town's foremost citizens, it is accepted as a regular occurrence.

Editor Webb's repeated insistence that the town had gone to bed may be to signal that any available drinking holes are closed for the evening. Wilder previously has Editor Webb report on the status of alcohol in town: "We've got one or two town drunks, but they're always having remorses every time an evangelist comes to town. No, ma'am, I'd say likker ain't a regular thing in the home here, except in the medicine chest."[20] But is it possible that Simon isn't looking for something or somewhere, but someone? Is Simon's nighttime wandering an early dramatization of cruising?

It's reminiscent of a sequence in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, when Joe Pitt wanders Central Park at night to watch men have sex.[21] Like Simon's wife, Joe's wife Harper is alone at home. And like Simon, Joe has turned to alcohol to curb the inhibitions that keep him from engaging in affairs with men. Both men are facing the pull of something, and they can only find the courage to seek it in the dark of night.

"That's what it was to be alive," Simon says, "to spend and waste time as though you had a million years."[22] The irony of the statement is that Simon ended his life prematurely and by his own hand. His only legacy, aside from the secrets and the gossip, which like most of human life would disappear with time, are the musical notes on his gravestone of a song we don't know; the artist lost forever behind the art. Simon's sin—his "failure in living"—is not his suicide or even his sexuality, as the ministers and moralists of Grover's Corners would have likely said. To Wilder, it seems that Simon's sin was that he was an artist who never learned to escape the life of a layperson; that the possibility of night was always followed by the bright, lonely truth of morning.

## COUSIN BRANDON

In her biography, *Thornton Wilder: A Life*, author Penelope Niven makes the case that Wilder, who signed a temperance pledge as a young man at the behest of his father, turned to alcohol with increasing frequency later in life as a balm for his loneliness.[23] Her association of his reliance on alcohol in the early 1950s is concurrent with writings on homosexuality that appear in his journals.[24] Wilder certainly wouldn't be the first or only writer with same-sex attractions to turn to alcohol as self-medication for the insecurities and emotions that come as fallout of living in the closet (Williams's struggles with alcohol were well-documented, as were those of Wilder admirer Edward Albee and others), but Niven notes that Wilder asserted in 1957, "I drink a good deal, but I do not associate it with writing."[25] Though Wilder may not have linked alcohol with his creative process, he certainly infused it into characters like Simon Stimson and others that align with his personal attributes.

Wilder's play *The Long Christmas Dinner*, which was first published as the headline work of a collection of one-act plays in 1931, could be regarded as a response to his transient childhood. With the dispersion of his family and the specter of poverty that hung over them for much of Wilder's young life, holidays were rarely shared among the entire family.[26] Wilder's letters from the time show the extent to which those experiences away from family hurt him, and the recurrence of family themes not only in *The Long Christmas Dinner* and *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, but also *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, indicate that they loomed large enough in his mind to bleed into his work years or decades later.[27]

*The Long Christmas Dinner* covers 90 years of Bayard family holiday gatherings, tracking as children are born and grow to inherit the family roles their parents and grandparents leave behind as they die. Like *Our Town*, the play employs a spare set—a table and doors to signify birth and death—and is a brief study for a core theme that appears in the later play: though we exist and imagine ourselves as individuals, we are each a continuation of humanity, given a brief opportunity to exist in this little corner of the cosmos. Early in the play, Wilder introduces Cousin Brandon, an Alaska explorer who has returned home to the family with no wife or children of which to speak. He remains a fixture at the dinner table through dozens of years of gatherings, until his advanced age requires him to enter the portal to heaven too. While alive, he is prolific in his consumption of wine, but the family, focused on their own relationships and children, do not choose to delve into Brandon's life the way they do others.

As a result, we know little about Brandon's life, aside from his lack of immediate relations. His contributions to the conversation—a mention of a preacher's sciatica,

19 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 46.

20 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 27.

21 Kushner, Tony. 2011. *Angels in America*. Tenth ed. New York, New York: Theatre Communications Group.

22 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 111.

23 Niven, 632.

24 Wilder, Thornton. 1985. *The Journals of Thornton Wilder, 1939-1961*. Edited by Donald C. Gallup and Donald Gallup. New Haven: Yale University Press, 182-184.

25 Niven, 631.

26 Niven, 79.

27 Niven, 70-72.

a comment on the weather, a remembrance of the days before sidewalks, a passing mention of a new factory of the firm he shares with Roderick—are decidedly surface-level. Given the exceptional economy of the play, which covers 90 years in roughly 20 pages of dialogue, one may argue that Brandon's backstory is a casualty of the structure.[28] But, after he dies, he is replaced by another single cousin, Ermengarde (a name that will appear later in *The Merchant of Yonkers*), an older woman who finds herself alone at the table when the descendants of the original Bayards relocate their Christmas tradition to a different home and leave her behind.

Brandon fits exceedingly well into the archetype of George Chauncey's middle-class *queer*, who creates, "a place in middle-class culture by constructing a persona of highly-mannered—and ambiguous—sophistication."[29] This model employs stylish and masculine airs to conceal same-sex attraction to social and familial relations. It was a model into which one could argue that Wilder himself fit well, especially the, "pronounced Anglophilia (which, more precisely, was a reverence of the elegance and wit attributed to the English gentry)."[30]

What Brandon sought in Alaska is never entirely clear, but it is apparent that loneliness brought him home. Since returning, he is in close physical and economic proximity to his relatives, but their focus on one another creates an emotional distance that keeps him a peripheral member of the family regardless. The primary interactions with Brandon are to ask whether he wants more wine and to deliver the drink accordingly.

In Brandon, Wilder creates something of an inversion of Simon Stimson in the treatment of his alcoholism. For starters, his drinking is visible to the audience and seen exclusively in the context of celebration. His consumption is also fueled by his hosts, not himself. And his drinking is not seen as a hindrance to his career or family life. Unlike Simon, he lives to an advanced age and dies naturally.

For his part, Simon is never seen drinking. The audience is only attuned to it because of the other characters' descriptions. Any time Simon drinks, it is cause for concern in the community, and his consumption is driven not by others, but by private consternation. And it is not only detrimental to his status in town and relationships with others, but is regarded as bringing about, or at least contributing to, his premature death.

Both of these men, however, exist in a lonely space, no matter Wilder's treatment of them or placement in proximity to others. If Wilder's ideal family structure is rooted in "Love and Marriage" as the title of *Our Town*'s second act implies, neither Simon nor Brandon (nor the Stage Manager, for that matter) fit successfully into it. Simon's attempt to settle into marriage is a failure, as he wanders the night and self-soothes with alcohol. In his bachelorhood, Brandon is seen as a supporting player outside the traditional family structure and only in relation to the family centerpiece. His name is almost always affixed to an honorific: cousin or uncle. And in recasting Brandon's role in the family with the spinster Ermengarde, and then leaving her alone at the table, Wilder seems to offer a bleak assessment: the single sitter at the table is always at risk of being jettisoned by the core, *traditional* family.

Of all three of these Wilder proxies, Brandon fits most cleanly into Wilder's concept of the layperson. His "failure in living" was to go through life unremarkably alone, happily fixed in the outer orbit of a social structure to which he didn't really belong.

## VARIATIONS ON AN ARTIST

In each of their peculiarities, the Stage Manager, Simon Stimson, and Cousin Brandon represent the kinds of men Wilder could have become had the circumstances of his life, attractions, or relationship to alcohol played out differently. How many times and ways did Wilder game out the trajectory of his social life as he privately considered options of confronting and embracing his sexuality? In his residencies and travels, how many Simon Stimsons did he encounter in bars, parks, and churches? As he watched his siblings date, marry, and consider having children—and as he accepted that neither marriage nor parenthood were in his future—how did he envision his eventual place at the family holiday table he yearned for as a young man? In light of his religious education, interactions in a carousel of small communities, and extensive engagement with the classics, how did he conceptualize himself as not only a commentator on, but a mirror for, humanity?

The Stage Manager is obviously the closest and most recognizable proxy for how Wilder existed in the world and moved through life. Like Wilder, his craft is curating stories and characters who exhibit his impression of society; he grapples with faith and the purpose of social institutions; he fixates on the history and legacy of humanity, and our fleeting blip on the timeline of the universe; he appears as a sophisticated man floating seamlessly in and out of provincial life with one eye on the ground and the other toward the heavens. His strength and his staying-power hinge on his ability to come and go. He is the Wilder who went into the world.

Simon Stimson is the model of a Wilder who lacked the courage, knowhow, or ability to become a citizen of the world. He is the Wilder who didn't travel or adopt a resistance to romance; who took on the trappings of the heterosexual institutions he valued, though they were incongruent with his deepest emotional needs, and lost

28 Wilder, Thornton. 2011. *Wilder's Classic One Acts*. N.p.: Samuel French.

29 Chauncey, George. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*. Second Trade Paperback ed. New York, NY: Basic Books, 106.

30 Chauncey, Gay New York, 106.

himself in them; who rebuked the temperance pledge insisted upon by his father and turned to alcohol early as a means of self-medication; who didn't wander the world searching for his next story or the meaning of life, but instead walked the perimeter of town searching for a reason to see the coming sunrise; whose artistic inclinations were limited to reinterpretation, rather than outright creation. He is the Wilder who would have stayed home.

And in Cousin Brandon there is the version of a Wilder who mustered the bravery to set out on his own to find success, but came back empty-handed. He is the Wilder who resisted the urge to assimilate into heterosexual institutions for the price of a limited role in the social order; whose only tangible claims to the family were a partnership in business and a single chair at the holiday table; who didn't foresee the lonely, inevitable outcome of bachelorhood. He is the Wilder who went into the wilderness, only to return home.

If Wilder saw creation as the artist's tool to address his "remorse," perhaps these characters—in their triumphs and trials—offer clearer insight into what Wilder's belief a "life lived at its best" truly was. Maybe Wilder's justification to himself or the higher power that he often wrote of was that by not becoming Cousin Brandon or Simon Stimson—and instead becoming a world figure and staving off self-medicated despair in stalled creativity or social emptiness—he was able to avoid the excesses of a "failed" life. Maybe their role in his remorse was to offer assurance that he was *not like those other men*, those real-life Simons and Brandons he surely encountered.

If Simon and Brandon exist to show the kind of man Wilder is not, then the Stage Manager offers an aspirational version of the kind of man he wants to be. Wilder makes his remorse actionable by distilling the essence of a life "lived at its best," and creating a character to dispense it. Wilder returns to his experiences as an educator, not asserting, *look how much I know*, but rather, humbly, *look how much I've learned*. If he cannot live at his best in every moment, then he will feed his remorse in the purest way he knows how: by immortalizing a version of himself who can.

*A studio photo of Thornton Wilder in the 1930s. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/522442. Accessed August 23, 2025.*

# Wonderful Woman

## INTRODUCTION

To varying degrees of explicitness, writers in the American theatre have turned to their art to provide cover for personal experiences and introspective exploration, from Tennessee Williams's Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* to David Henry Hwang's DHH in *Yellow Face* and *Soft Power*. By his own admission, Thornton Wilder was of the same ilk.[1] He blurred the lines between himself and his characters—like *Our Town*'s Stage Manager and *The Skin of Our Teeth*'s George Antrobus—by playing the roles himself in stock productions.[2] And imaginative readings of characters like *The Long Christmas Dinner*'s Cousin Brandon, who exhibits characteristics of the "bachelor uncle" trope, or *Our Town*'s Simon Stimson, whose sexuality has been questioned by scholars and theatermakers alike, provide fodder for more speculative analysis into Wilder's own rumored, repressed same-sex attractions.

Wilder's women—from *Our Town*'s Emily Gibbs, to *The Skin of Our Teeth's* Sabina and Mrs. Antrobus—are beloved for the emotional depth they afford the actors who portray them. Outwardly, these women carry fewer of the markers of Wilder's identity and biography than their male counterparts, and perhaps it's easier to see shades of his mother, Isabella, in Mrs. Antrobus, or the mothers in *Our Town* and *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*. But Wilder's explicit admission that he writes himself into all his characters, even the women, means they must also be considered extensions of him.[3]

Wilder's diaries and letters provide evidence that gender was a topic of lifelong fascination for him, not only in how it determines roles and responsibilities in the home or society, but also its implications for individual expression.[4] He saw specified gender roles play out in his home life as a child, and later saw friends, like Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, subvert and mimic those roles in stark and surprising ways. His own repressed same-sex attractions would have been at odds with the strict expectations of masculinity imposed by his father, Amos Parker Wilder, who reflected the expectations of contemporary society. But Wilder's dabblings in theatre and his deep friendships with queer people who stood in contrast to gender prescriptions would have regularly exposed him to alternative ways of living, loving, and habitating throughout his life.

In the early 1940s, on the heels of success with *Our Town* and failure with *The Merchant of Yonkers* (which would be revised as *The Matchmaker* more than a decade later), Wilder found himself in France working through the play that would become *The Skin of Our Teeth*. That play features two women who themselves stand in stark contrast with their own exhibitions of femininity: Sabina is both a maid and a mistress, tempting the man of the house while Mrs. Antrobus, the wife of that man, is tasked with holding the family together. Wilder's diaries from the time show a hang-up on such dichotomy:

"Woman lives in our minds under two aspects: as the untouchable, the revered, surrounded by taboos…and as the accessible, even—in spite of the mask of decorum and dignity-indignity—*inviting*. To maintain the first of these two roles all the buttresses of society and custom are necessary: the marriage institution, the prestige of virtue, the law, and custom. A woman on the stage is bereft of these safeguards. The exhibition of her bare face in mixed society, for money, under repetition, speaking words not her own, is sufficient….Under those bright lights, on that timeless platform, all the modesty of demeanor in the world cannot convince us that this is not our hereditary ghost, the haunter of our nervous system, the fiend-enemy of our dreams and appetites."[5]

The entry is yet another piece of evidence that Wilder viewed all characters, including (or perhaps especially) female characters as a vehicle for personal exploration. He admits here that they are viewed by audiences as extensions of our most intimate, self-exploratory, and perhaps sexual feelings. But while the entry leaves little room for a middle between the "accessible" (Sabina) and "revered" (Mrs. Antrobus), Wilder had already found it in *The Merchant of*

1 Wilder, Thornton to Amy Wertheimer, February 7, 1926. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

2 Niven, Penelope. 2012. *Thornton Wilder: A Life*. First ed. New York: HarperCollins, 591.

3 Wilder to Wertheimer, February 7, 1926.

4 Wilder, Thornton. 1985. *The Journals of Thornton Wilder, 1939-1961*. Edited by Donald C. Gallup and Donald Gallup. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 138–140.

5 Wilder, Thornton. *The Journals of Thornton Wilder, 1939-1961*. 24-25.

*Yonkers*'s Dolly Levi, a widowed matchmaker determined to procure a marriage for herself and secure her future in the process. In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder takes Sabina and Mrs. Antrobus to separate, extreme corners, and the women of *Our Town* fall primarily into the "revered" category as pillars of the family (or, in the case of Emily, a would-be pillar who lost her life in service to that role). But Mrs. Levi walks a fine line down the middle, inhabiting both the "revered" and the "accessible," and subverting her role as a respectable broker of the family through a series of innocent deceptions that toy with expectations of her in and outside of the play.

In her nimbleness and such subversions, Mrs. Levi becomes a proxy for an aspirational Wilder beyond the male characters who are more closely associated with him. In her, he is able to grapple with gender and its expression, as she performs her suitability for a prospective suitor, her social consciousness for the audience, and the limitations of the world in which she exists for herself. But through it all, she is determined to make the most of what is given to her and strive for more, a natural outgrowth of her newfound responsibility to humanity. What's more, Dolly has provided inspiration to subsequent generations of gay men—namely Michael Stewart and Jerry Herman, who musicalized *The Matchmaker* into *Hello, Dolly!*—evolving to become an object of attention for gay icons, and affection for people who long to find the same self-actualization and sense of purpose she finds in a world that is not particularly willing to validate her.

## GROWING UP WILDER

The association of theatre as a sandbox for playful gender expression was forged in Wilder's earliest dramatic experiences. Among the first shows he saw was *As You Like It*, a Shakespeare comedy that hinges heavily on cross-dressing and homoerotic undertones, in Milwaukee.[6] He was smitten and bitten by the same bug that so often captures the imagination of young people destined for a lifelong love of drama, and that experience was built upon during a subsequent stint in California. While his father served as a diplomat in China, Isabella volunteered at the Hearst Greek Theatre, which afforded her children the opportunity to perform in the ensemble and take in the shows.[7] Wilder attempted to recreate those experiences at home, staging original dramas in his yard with family and friends, to his father's remote disapproval. Amos Parker Wilder dismissed acting and drama as an unserious distraction from the larger ills of the world (an irony considering his son would go on to write plays that concerned humanity's most essential questions) and yearned to instill, "sense and steadiness," in the young Thornton, insisting he, "concentrate on his books and study to be quiet."[8] In 1911, the Wilder family reunited with their father in China, allowing Amos Parker to witness his son's artistic tendencies firsthand. He enrolled Thornton in the China Inland Mission School at Chefoo in hopes that a rustic education would, "make a man of him," and the experience catalyzed Amos's growing insistence that Thornton's creative gifts would be a detriment to his adult career.[9] He wrote to Amos Niven Wilder, Thornton's older brother, that Thornton, "will go through life radiating good nature, I hope, but unless he gets more 'practical' I guess you have to support him!—tho these dreamers sometimes surprise one."[10] He hardly means "dreamer" as a compliment, but the profits from those dreams-come-true would support the father in old age, and provide a home for the family for years.

Amos Parker's efforts to butch Thornton up extended beyond simply the practical. He seems to have chafed at the social implications of having a son who was not a paragon of masculinity, and aside from sending Thornton to all-boys schools in China and California, Amos Parker would later enlist Thornton in summer farmstays in Massachusetts and Kentucky in hopes the boy would find purpose in physical exertion.[11] Thornton did find some satisfaction in exercise throughout these experiences, particularly in the solitary acts of swimming and running (patterns that would continue in his travels around Europe), though they did little to temper the more sensitive tendencies his father hoped to suppress.

In 1912, when Wilder was 15 and away from his father's watchful eye, he dressed in drag for perhaps the first time in his life, donning a borrowed evening dress and wearing yellow rope as a wig for a costume party during a month-long voyage from China to California.[12] An additional attempt to perform in drag as Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* during the all-boys Thacher School's festival was thwarted by his father. As he was memorizing lines one night, the schoolmaster approached him and conveyed Amos Parker's disapproval of his son, "taking female parts."[13] The role was recast and Wilder's devastation at the humiliation—not only between father and son, but himself and his classmates—is a recurring topic in subsequent letters between Thornton, his father, and the rest of the family.[14]

It's obvious that incident remained top of mind for Amos Parker, too, perhaps because of Thornton's harping on it. By the conclusion of their schooling at Thacher, Amos Parker noted his sons were, "more manly in consequence,"[15]

6 Niven, 14

7 Niven, 27

8 Niven, 35

9 Niven, 40

10 Niven, 47

11 Niven, 142

12 Niven, 64

13 Niven, 73

14 Wilder, Thornton. 2008. *The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder*. Edited by Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer. New York, NY: HarperCollins. 29-34.

15 Niven, 73

for having attended, praising founder and headmaster Sherman Day Thacher for his role in transforming Thornton from, "a delicate, girl-playing, aesthetic lad in the early teens."[16] He continued, "this kind of boy making a one-sided, often unhappy, inadaptible man is familiar. By wise contact with outdoor life, wholesome farm work, physical weariness and honest country people, Thornton is really quite a man…What was done with him can be done with many another 'difficult' boy. But it requires wisdom."[17]

If Amos Parker's agenda was clear, so was Thornton's continued dissatisfaction with it. In public school the following year, Wilder staged an original skit to help raise money for a new gymnasium. "Of course I have adhered to your demand that I remain in masculine clothes," he wrote to his father. "When you have changed your mind as to it please notify."[18]

The tension between Amos Parker and Thornton reeks of an emasculation that would be familiar to plenty of gay men whose effeminacies and innocent crushes on other boys as children were the source of scorn from insecure fathers. Paternal relationships recur in Wilder's work, as extreme as the third-act confrontation between George and Henry Antrobus that has the fate of the warring world practically hanging in its balance, or as tender as that between *Our Town*'s Doctor Gibbs and George, which is among the play's most moving scenes.[19] There, Doctor Gibbs does not scold his son for leaving Mrs. Gibbs to do the chores he should have done, but through pointed questions allows the boy to arrive at his own acceptance of guilt. When George begins to cry—which could be construed as an act of effeminacy—Doctor Gibbs simply hands George a handkerchief, indicating his approval of the sensitive reaction, rather than rejecting it or humiliating George for it.[20]

Amos Parker's tactics to "make a man" of Wilder and discourage his exercises in drama carry plenty of irony: at boys schools, Wilder was probably exposed to homoerotic experiences that exacerbated the confusion around his sexuality; by pushing so hard against Thornton's love of theatre, Amos Parker probably fueled his son's rebellious obsession with it; and in failing to foster Thornton's creative talent and drive, he cemented himself as a discourager of emerging genius. Perhaps we cannot blame Amos Parker for his mistakes—how could he know that his son would come to be regarded as one of history's finest playwrights?—but we should be thankful that Thornton's drive to create was strong enough to push his father's disapproval aside. Literature, theatre, and the human spirit

*Thornton Wilder's Yale University graduation photo, 1920. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/522428. Accessed August 23, 2025.*

are certainly better for it.

But from a personal standpoint, what are the bounds of the father's emasculation? Wilder's letters as a young man reflect the crushes and confusing romantic feelings he exhibited for other men his own age, but also older, as in the case of Dr. Charles Wager.[21] Had Wilder been encouraged, or at least not discouraged, from acting on perceived effeminacies or outlets of expression—and not been conditioned to police them out of concern of his father—would he have felt free to act on those suspected urges and pursue love with another man? Would he have exhibited the hurried, detached sexual dysfunction that alleged lover Samuel Steward describes, or would he have indulged in sensuous sexual experiences beyond Steward?[22] And would he have felt comfortable enough to come out and secure his place as a trailblazer in American theatre, but also as a pioneer in the movement for queer visibility?

The Wilder of photos is dapper, but not dandy. He

16 Niven, 74

17 Niven, 74

18 Niven, 78

19 Wilder, Thornton. 2020. *Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and The Matchmaker*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers. 235-239.

20 Wilder, Thornton. *Three Plays*. 38-40.

21 Wilder, Thornton to Charles Wager, October 1917. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

22 Spring, Justin. 2011. *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*. N.p.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 52-53.

often wears a suit and mustache, markers of a brand of "manliness" of which father would surely approve. He looks like our image of the Stage Manager, or Mr. Antrobus, or Doctor Gibbs. But beneath the clothing and the skin exists the heart and soul that produced Emily Webb, and Sabina, and Mrs. Antrobus. Is it possible that for Wilder, repression was a cost of doing business? If Wilder had a father who accepted his effeminacies and encouraged his creative expressions, would we have a Simon Stimson and Cousin Brandon? Would we have a Dolly Levi?

## CALL ON DOLLY

*The Merchant of Yonkers* (and revised *The Matchmaker*) follows a day near the turn of the 20th century when Dolly Levi, a widowed marriage broker and jill of all trades, arrives in Yonkers to help wealthy hay and feed purveyor Horace Vandergelder procure a suitable second wife. Though his eye is on Mrs. Irene Molloy, a widowed milliner, Dolly is determined to secure the proposal for herself and use Vandergelder's money to ensure her comfort and elevate the community around them. Vandergelder is persistently resistant to her advances, which are both subtle and overt, and is determined to keep a niece named Ermengarde and his team of store clerks, including Barnaby and Cornelius, under his thumb. Through little fibs, maneuvers, and sheer force, Dolly succeeds, facilitating budding romances in Cornelius and Irene, Ermengarde and her artist beau Ambrose, and Barnaby and Irene's assistant, Minnie, in the process.

Wilder based *The Merchant of Yonkers* on Johann Nestroy's 1842 farce *Einen Jux will er sich machen* (*He'll Have Himself a Good Time*) and John Oxenford's 1835 *A Day Will Spent*, and drew additional inspiration from Molière's 1668 *L'Avare* (*The Miser*), though Dolly is his original and most consequential contribution to the story.[23] She is extremely savvy and practical, though still in love with her late husband, Ephraim, whose death sent her into a two-year period of mourning from which she has only recently emerged with the determination to live among people, and a realization that self-isolation is a foolish squandering of a most precious gift. She is clear that she does not expect to find the same kind of love she had with Ephraim in Horace, but that his wealth will allow her to make something more meaningful of the time she has left. This is not a kind of silly folly that she describes in a monologue. Poor, without a husband, and confined by gendered expectations of the period, the stakes could not be higher for her. Her survival hinges on the farcical machinations of her cat-and-mouse game with Horace, even if she doesn't want to let on that it's so. Determined to live a good life, full of spirit and charm, and hell-bent on making the most of what she has left, Wilder gave Nestroy's story a new axis on which to spin, and she is the perfect catalyst for his thesis, which comes via Barnaby in the final moments of the show: "the sign that something's wrong with you is when you sit quietly at home wishing you were out having lots of adventure."[24]

Taken with *Our Town*, which premiered before it, and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which premiered after it, *The Merchant of Yonkers* is something of a stylistic pit stop between the two. It has the musings on human nature that define *Our Town* (particularly in asides Dolly, Cornelius, Horace, and a third clerk, Malachi Stack, offer to the audience), but as a farce, it exhibits the structural whimsy that Wilder later employs on a grander scale in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Farce is at its best when played seriously, and Dolly embodies that notion; maintaining facade is of the utmost importance. Wilder's stage directions seem to get at this: "Uncertain age; mass of sandy hair; impoverished elegance; large, shrewd but generous nature, an assumption of worldly cynicism conceals a tireless amused enjoyment of life."[25]

She is an exemplar of contradictions: a middle-aged ingénue; a non-virginal romantic lead; an arranger of relationships that should arise naturally; a romantic pursuing a practical marriage; hungry for wealth to disperse, not hoard; down on her luck, but self-sufficient; a benevolent liar.

In walking the thin middle between the reserved "revered" and more aggressive "accessible" Wilder describes in his diary, Dolly embodies and at times leans into the outward femininities that would make her a suitable wife for Vandergelder (which he uses to write her off in his misogyny), but also exerts a brand of control that he can neither comprehend nor control; she is outfoxing the ultra-masculine man who would otherwise believe that he is stronger and more savvier than her. Little does he know that she will soon be running the business of the family, capitalizing on both her feminine and masculine strengths, to take over his world and improve it. Though she is poor, she has the power, and we cannot resist her.

Though Dolly may possess all the traits that allow her to win in the end, she begins the play in many of the same circumstances—albeit slightly adjusted—that Wilder existed in. She is a single, multi-talented misfit who survived heartbreak and cobbled together jobs to make ends meet under the persistent specter of economic collapse. Wilder's letters and journals from young adulthood show a man hungry for new experiences and social connections, curbed by his meager income, familial expectations, and self-consciousness.[26] As when Dolly found Ephraim, his early adult years saw two romantic encounters that were transformational in the romance they inspired in him, but both ended in devastation and retreat. For Wilder, they came at a pivotal moment as he was just beginning to enjoy literary success, and the road before him became clear. Like Dolly, he lived, loved, and lost, writing to a friend soon

23 Wilder, Thornton. 1939. *The Merchant of Yonkers*. First ed. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers.

24 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 415.

25 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 272.

26 Wilder, Thornton. *The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder*.

*Thornton Wilder (left) with* The Merchant of Yonkers *director Max Reinhardt (right), 1938. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/522455. Accessed August 23, 2025.*

after, "I am a heart and a pen."[27] Dolly is broken out of her isolation only by a realization that she is squandering her life and resolves to begin again with a clear head. Though her first pursuit of marriage hinges on love—personal, private, inexplicable—her second is all about practicality, as Horace brings immense wealth and security to the match. Like Dolly, Wilder seems to have accepted that love was not in the cards for him, so he retreated, away from the crushes and dabblings in affection that characterized his life before literary success, and leaned into his career entirely. Dolly never had children, defying a responsibility core to society's notion of women's role in that era, but she is nevertheless matriarchal. She cares deeply for the young people around her, arranging matches for love, while also setting them up for financial success. She is arranging lives in the way that Wilder does, though his matches are confined to the page and his imagination. He is building the world he wants to see, in his vision and his morality, as she is in Yonkers.

Wilder's life and work possess their own bevy of contradictions, too, though. He extols the virtues of family life, but remained a single man and had no children. He was adamant about living each moment to the fullest, but probably cordoned off attractions to other people. He wrote beautifully of love and relationships, but seems to have forbidden himself from pursuing uninhibited sex and romance. And though Wilder seems to have recognized and toyed with his same-sex attractions early on, he also seems to have turned his back on them in adulthood, remaining closeted in the period just before gay liberation would gain traction in the culture. Of figures at that transitional time, one sometimes hears a refrain of *being the first who could come out*. Playwright Paula Vogel said to me recently, Wilder "was the last playwright who could stay in the closet in the American landscape."

Though Wilder's gender would have given him an economic advantage over Dolly, their ultimate prospects in life were impeded by virtue of their birth and the period in which they existed. But in Dolly, Wilder instills the possibility for a "second act" he doesn't afford to Simon, Cousin Brandon, or even Emily Gibbs. There is something intrinsically aspirational about her character that arises from emerging out of her devastating mourning. She is reborn on the realization that her retreat into solace was damaging. It is an expansive revelation, one that sees a selfless acceptance that the world is larger than grief and experience. If Wilder did have a similar breakthrough, it could cut two ways: his own second act could be defined as the literary success following romantic setbacks and his father's discouragement of his career. But I suspect it's more pleading than that; a yearning for connection, for acceptance of the world he was born into and for it to accept him. Dolly's monologue, especially in its evolved form in *The Matchmaker*, which was informed by the intervening years, serves as both an admission and a reminder to himself that life is not over until it's over; and, more so, that life is meant to be lived among people.

For all of its empowerment, Dolly's final monologue is also a cry of mercy. "I'm tired of living from hand to mouth," she tells an imagined Ephraim.[28] Perhaps Wilder was, too. Where were the models who successfully reconciled same-sex attractions with public careers? Even if he'd wanted to be open about his sexuality and pursue such relationships, it would have almost certainly meant career implosion. So, though Wilder never married, he was wedded to his work, choosing security, consciously or not, like Dolly, even as his loving soul comes through so clearly in his work. Like Dolly, he could live vicariously through Irene and Cornelius, and Ermengarde and Ambrose; and also George and Emily, and any of the characters who are not his children, but his progeny, nevertheless. His career couldn't buy him love, but it secured his immortality.

## A BREEZE MIGHT STIR A RAINBOW UP BEHIND ME

Both gay men born approximately thirty years after Wilder, Herman and Stewart belonged to a generation that was in middle-age when the budding gay liberation movement, and then the onset of the AIDS crisis, encouraged or forced large numbers of gay men out of the closet. Raised on American musical comedy and early Hollywood films,

27 Niven, 256.

28 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 408.

their musicalization of *The Matchmaker* asserts Dolly as a stronger romantic lead and blurs the lines of her attraction to Horace, offering a more loving attitude toward him than the more pragmatic Dolly Wilder initially created. Though Stewart relied heavily on Wilder's plays to form the basis of the musical's book, he distributes her single monologue—in which she recounts her relationship with Ephraim, her financial reasons for marrying Horace, and her journey to "rejoin" the human race—into several smaller pieces spread across the musical's two acts. And what Herman chooses to musicalize is the most telling indicator of what the men connected to most strongly.

In Horace's solo, "It Takes a Woman," his misogyny is stated plainly, though with less self-awareness than in Wilder's plays. He wants his wife to be hyperfeminine, but also eager to conduct the household chores, and the resulting song is intentionally demeaning and cheeky. Herman is lampooning the kind of man who believes, "marriage is a bribe to make a housekeeper think she's a householder," a line Stewart preserved from *The Matchmaker*; one who sees a wife as an employee, or subordinate.[29] Dolly hums a reprise of the melody in the musical, but Herman would later add a more pointed reprise for her in the 1969 film version: "It takes a woman to quietly plan/To take him, to change him to her kind of man/And to gently lead him/Where fortune can find him/And not let him know that the power behind him/Was that dainty woman/That fragile woman, that sweetheart/That mistress, that wife."[30] Horace seems to be the only one who doesn't realize that Dolly is in the driver's seat, and that she intends to use his rigid notions of femininity and masculinity to her advantage.

But more than that, what Herman and Stewart connect to most strongly is the "second act" that brings Dolly to the audience from the start. Herman writes of this in his memoir, *Showtune*:

"What I wanted to do with the song, 'Hello, Dolly!' was to capture the moment when this lady who had locked herself away from life finally gets the guts to put on all her old finery and walk down the staircase to face the world again," he said. "That was such a brave, tough thing for her to do. I just loved her for it."[31]

There is no staircase in Wilder's Harmonia Gardens, though his stage directions indicate she has put on an elaborate dress. Herman's (and director Gower Champion's) introduction of the grand staircase heightens the occasion and tees up the title song, maximizing the sense that Dolly is enjoying a kind of "coming out." It is a triumphant, powerful moment that Herman would later replicate to some degree in *Mame* ("It's Today") and *La Cage Aux Folles* ("I Am What I Am"). It is evident that he saw in Wilder's Dolly a yearning to be her truest self, and wrote a song that would glamorize her declaration (inspired, according to Herman, by Alice Faye in the 1940 film *Lillian Russell*.)[32]

Herman also writes that Dolly's reentry into the human race inspired him to face his own repressed attractions in the period following the musical's opening. With Wilder's character whispering in his ear, he did what Wilder would not. "During this time in my life I also became more comfortable with my sexuality," Herman says. "I began dating and feeling good about who and what I was."[33]

The best songs in *Hello, Dolly!*, "Before the Parade Passes By" and "It Only Takes a Moment," explode with the same feeling of reinvention and rebirth as the title song. The former is especially resonant as an anthem of self-acceptance.

Herman and Stewart didn't change Dolly, they added to her, accentuating the nimbleness and irrepressible spirit that Wilder imbued her with from the outset. *Hello, Dolly!* has come to be loved by generations of gay men who recognize Dolly's quirkiness not as a hindrance, but an asset, and they've come to worship the actresses—who mostly achieved gay icon status in their own right before playing the role—who are themselves drawn to those aspects of her personality. One could argue that Dolly, particularly in her musical form, lends herself to many of the elements core to the *camp* sensibility Susan Sontag set out in her 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp."[34] Channing's portrayal captured, "instant character…a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing,"[35] while Streisand, too often wrongfully dismissed as too young to play the role effectively, embodies a "spirit of extravagance," which elevates the character into a vision of glamour beyond Wilder's—and perhaps even Stewart and Herman's—imaginings.[36] Midler's portrayal was defined by many of the vocal mannerisms and physical movements central to her Divine Miss M persona, and in doing so reflects, "little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character,'" that make Wilder's savvy chameleon so distinct from his other women.[37] In each instance, the elements that connected the performer to Dolly are part of what endeared them to gay

29 Wilder, *Three Plays*, 269-270.

30 Streisand, Barbra, performer. "It Takes a Woman (Reprise)," by Jerry Herman, recorded 1968-1969, track 3 on *Hello, Dolly!*, 20th Century Fox Records, 1969, vinyl LP.

31 Herman, Jerry, and Marilyn Stasio. 1996. *Showtune : A Memoir*. New York, NY: Donald I. Fine Books, 71-72.

32 Theater Talk. 2002. ""Kid Victory" / Jerry Herman on "Hello, Dolly!"" New York, NY: CUNY TV, 2017. Aired March 11, 2017. Video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf9ORDmvBxo.

33 Herman and Stasio, *Showtune*, 94.

34 Sontag, Susan. 1964. "Notes on "Camp."" Partisan Review 31, no. 4 (December): 515-530.

35 Sontag, "Notes on "Camp"", 525.

36 Sontag, "Notes on "Camp"", 523.

37 Sontag, "Notes on "Camp"", 530.

fans in the first place.

I reject the notion that Midler's 2017 portrayal of Dolly is too far removed from Wilder's 1938 Dolly to be connected to the man. Dolly's DNA is his, in any adaptation or form, and especially given how close Stewart's book is to Wilder's original text. Wilder cannot be extracted from the character, or the piece, even as she has taken on a life of her own.

At the heart of gay culture—including diva worship—is some sense of recognition in one another; shades of shared experience; common triggers and triumphs; mutual aspirations and dreams. Wilder made Dolly from the stuff of hopes and fears; of a masculine femininity, and a feminine masculinity; of romantic memory and repressed desire. He gave her an outlet for a meaningful life, if not a perfect one. He gave a gift, which Stewart and Herman accepted and glamorized, then passed onto the audience with an expanded capacity to dream alongside her, because to rejoin the human race means that you always were a part of it, even when you felt you weren't.

So, when actor Lee Roy Reams—who played Cornelius in the 1978 Broadway revival of *Hello, Dolly!* and directed and choreographed the 1995 Broadway revival—put on the elaborate dress and came down the stairs as Dolly in the 2015 Wick Theatre production in Boca Raton, Florida, he was not simply performing as Dolly in drag.[38] He was making good on the promise of progress; doing exactly what Wilder had been denied.

In terms of social acceptance of same-sex love, we are generations removed from Wilder. But perhaps the reason we return to Dolly—that Wilder needed to introduce her to the worlds of Molière, Nestroy, and Oxenford's original plays, that Herman and Stewart needed to give her new ways to communicate, that she calls to us and our icons—is that not so much has changed on the individual level. How many still face emasculation or scorn for their effeminacies? How many must still make the choice between love and security? How many are waiting for their second act, or the opportunity to walk among the human race as their fully realized selves?

Dolly is a force of love and a force of life. Herman didn't connect with the dress or the stairs, but rather the decision to put it on and walk down. Dolly's life hinges on that choice. In many ways, Wilder's did, too, and he chose a path that allowed him to move our spirits and stir our souls every day, at the expense of something so precious that Dolly spent two years locked away after she'd lost it.

Like gay icons, characters and costumes give us room to imagine ourselves in a time, a place, a world, or a body other than our own. What would Wilder have become if he'd made a different choice? What would he have written had he never known the devastation of heartbreak and specter of poverty, or felt the strain of living in a society that dictated how to behave and how to feel? A person with less resolve would've given up on their creativity when they were told to.

But Wilder was no ordinary man, so he did what he knew how to do and created a character who did what he couldn't: make the world bend to him, not through exercises of power or dominance, but through love and benevolence.

In Dolly, Wilder found his perfect match. Ours too.

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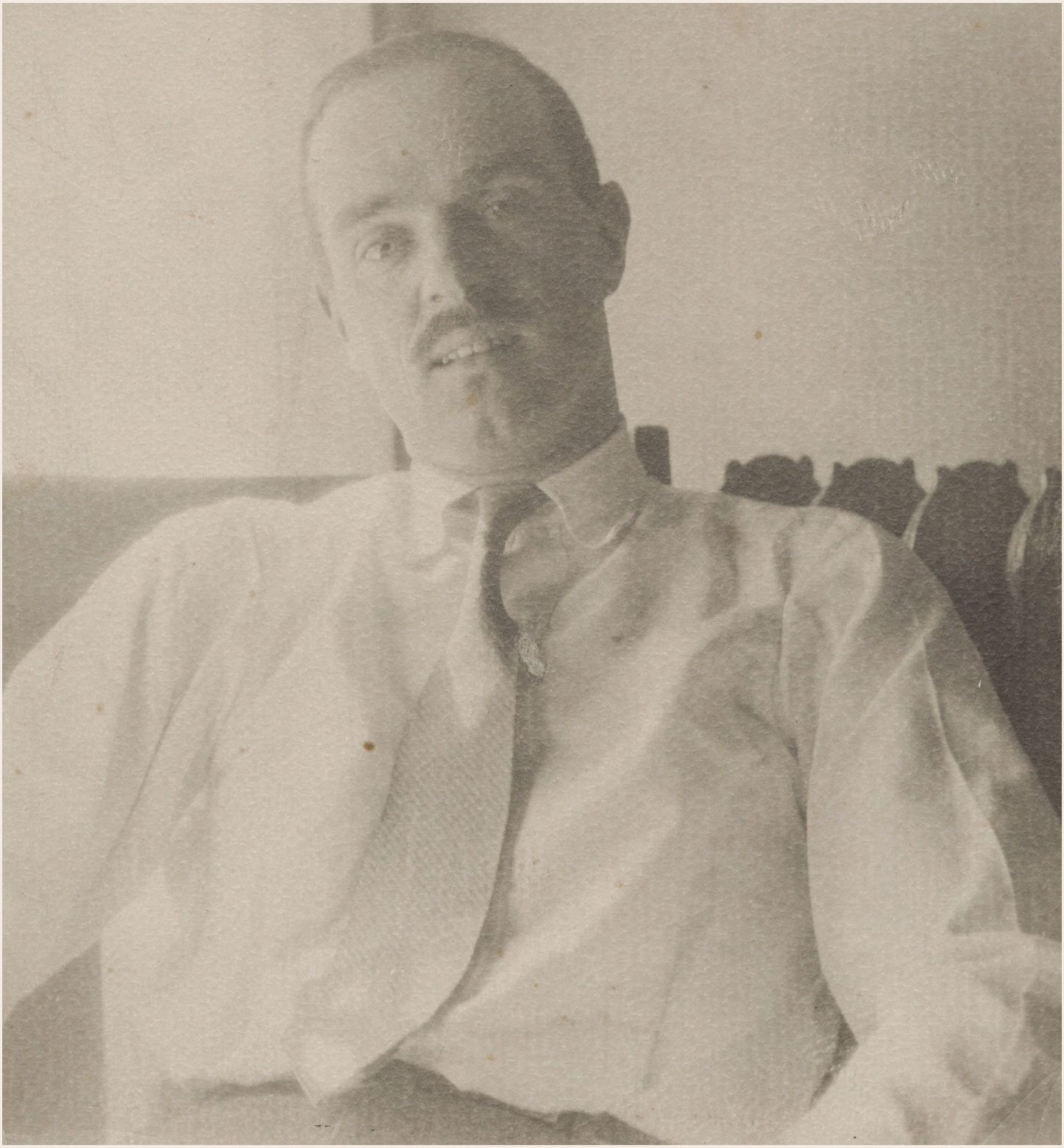
38 Playbill. 2015. "Hello, Dolly! in Drag! See Song and Dance Man Lee Roy Reams as the Iconic Leading Lady." November 10, 2015. https://playbill.com/article/hello-dolly-in-drag-see-song-and-dance-man-lee-roy-reams-as-the-iconic-leading-lady-com-370953.



*Thornton Wilder relaxes in Chicago in the early 1930s. Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/522448. Accessed August 23, 2025.*

# Postscript: Eleven O'Clock in a Grover's Corners Gay Bar

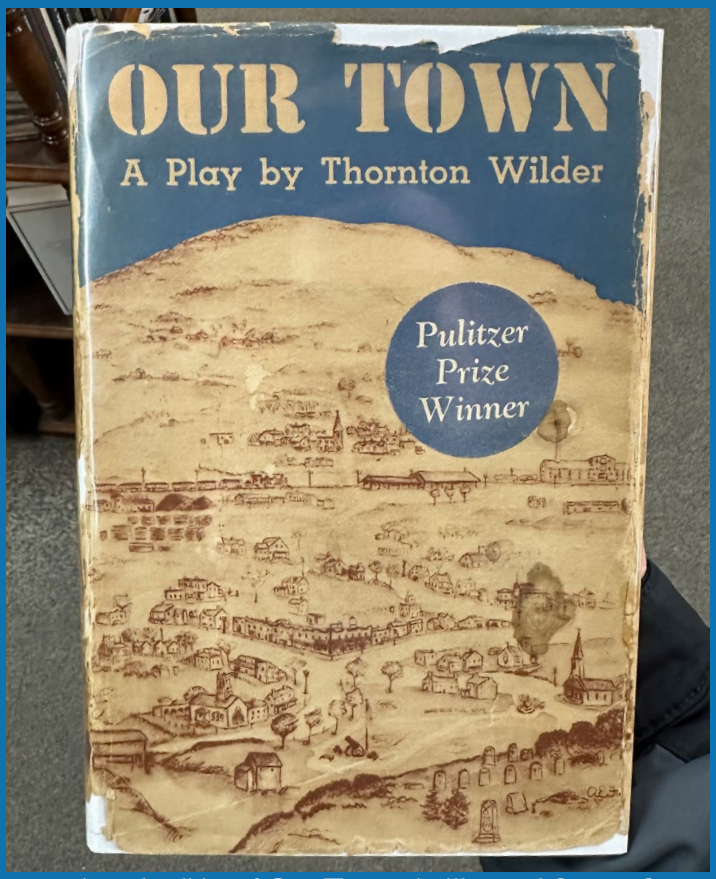
It's easy to be deceived by handwriting and all its beautiful imperfections: wonky grammar and misspellings scrawled across ruled diaries and loose paper. Free of typeset or editorial review, the ink looks like blood from the writer's hand, but it is no less immune than printed text to the little fibs and fears that shape words before they leave our mind. Overcoming the embarrassment of intrusion, a reader can fall quickly into a false sense of intimacy and the deception is complete.

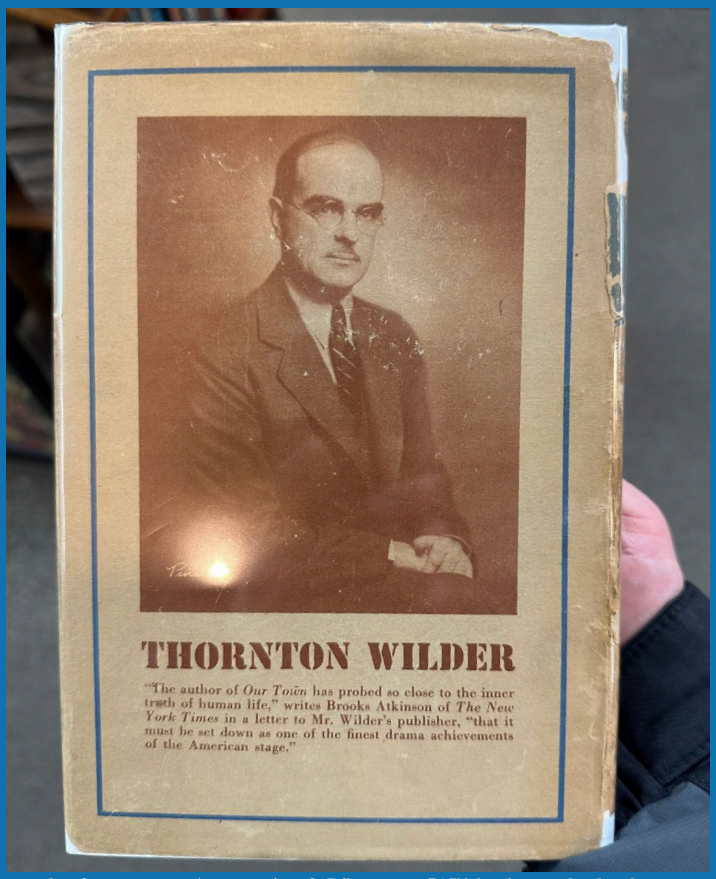
In this project—a work of criticism, not biography—I have tried to be cognizant of that deception in embracing the task of the critic: to appreciate and make meaning of someone else's life and work though my own. I have imagined how it would be to move about the world as a character called *Thornton Wilder* through his scribbled and printed words. I have mined the overlap in our life experiences and considered the divide between our generations. This is an undertaking that I could spend the rest of my life doing, given the immense trove of material and lingering questions he left behind. But I have focused largely on his major plays, and know that I have barely scratched the surface.

This brief foray into his world was made possible by the endorsement of the American Theatre Critics/Journalists Association and the financial support of Foundation ATCA's Helbing Mentorship Program, which promotes the voices of emerging LGBTQ arts writers through scholarship, mentorship, and professional development. The publication of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1927, when Wilder was 30, enabled him to make a living from his writing (and the adjacent opportunities that resulted from it), though he had written extensively (perhaps obsessively) for many years before. Almost 100 years later, the challenge of making a living as a writer, especially as a critic, has not gotten any easier. Opportunities like the Helbing Fellowship are vital to writers, and I am especially grateful to its steering committee—Christopher Byrne, Jay Handelman, Billy McEntee, Gerard Raymond, Frank Rizzo, and Martha Wade Steketee—for their encouragement, feedback, and mentorship through this project.

I am also indebted to the Wilder family, who have made his papers available at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, and Penelope Niven's comprehensive biography, *Thornton Wilder: A Life*, which served as a critical entry point to Wilder's world. Their willingness to make Wilder's work, diaries, and correspondence available to the public is a model in stewarding a literary legacy and a gift to researchers. Reading and reflecting on Wilder's words has been an exercise in self-exploration, too, and I'm very grateful to them for that opportunity.

The theatre is a living form. I wonder what will become of Wilder's plays as the economics of producing theatre




*An early edition of* Our Town. *An illustrated Grover's Corners is on the front cover. A portrait of Thornton Wilder is on the back. Photos by D.R. Lewis.*

become increasingly precarious (*Our Town* calls for nearly two dozen performers) and as the major plays approach release into the public domain. Wilder's letters indicate he sensed *Our Town*'s growing reputation for sentimentality and was dismayed at the dismissal of what he saw as humanity's enduring tendencies as nostalgia. When *Show Boat* was released into the public domain, Target Margin Theater deconstructed and reconstructed the work into *Show/Boat: A River*. When *Our Town*, then *The Merchant of Yonkers*, then *The Skin of Our Teeth* are released into the hands of the public, I wonder what theatermakers will do with them, and what we will learn about their writer in the process.

Could George Gibbs become a tomboy, or the drug store a gay bar? Could Henry Antrobus's tumultuous relationship with the world and his father be reshaped by accentuating a different kind of repression? Could Horace Vandergelder become Hortense Vandergelder? Wilder free-wheeled with Euripides, Molière, Johann Nestroy, and Henrik Ibsen. Will others do the same with him?

"You know as well as I do that the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long," says the Stage Manager in *Our Town*. "And they stay here while the earth part of 'em burns away, burns out; and all that time they slowly get indifferent to what's goin' on in Grover's Corners."

Life goes on in Grover's Corners, and December marked fifty years since his death. Imagine how much has changed since then in the ways we organize for LGBTQ rights, or how we talk about ourselves and our experiences, or how we envision ourselves in the public. What would he think of it? What would he think of us?

"We all know that *something* is eternal," the Stage Manager says. "And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars…everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings."

The humans have kept living, and the theatre keeps evolving.

For the purposes of this work, maybe it's not actually the Stage Manager who says it best, but Sabina: "The end of this play isn't written yet."

*D.R. Lewis*
*Washington, D.C.*
*January 2026*

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