

Paper #1 Assignment

Due Friday 10/10, a 5-page, wordprocessed paper on one of the topics below. (You may write more than five pages if you need to; write at least **5 full** pages.) The works on which you may write this paper are Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, *Our Town*, *The Long Christmas Dinner*, *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays*, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *The Woman of Andros*, and "The Warship." Be sure to review the document on SOCS on how to write literary analysis essays, especially if you choose a C/C topic. (Don't write a mini-essay on each and never the twain meet; rather, alternate between the two works with each point or category.)

Note: You are not required to answer every question within a topic question. The questions are meant to provoke thought on the issue and may provide individual points to support your thesis. However, do answer or address anything that is underlined within the topic question. If you want to write about an issue other than those provided below, talk to me **well beforehand**; we will collaborate on writing a topic question similar in form to those below. Many of the topics below would be appropriate for the research paper as well as this assignment.

TOPICS

1. A. We think of comedy as progressing toward a happy ending with a lot of laughter along the way, but that is a simplistic definition. Many writers have called their works comedy, though they may have meant "satire" (social criticism through indirect means: irony, wit, humor) as distinguished from comedy (affirmation, celebration). Write on one of the works we've read as **either COMEDY or SATIRE.** Support your classification by applying specific criteria from theories of comedy in the supplementary readings or the documents on SOCS ("Comedy vs. Tragedy," "Frye's Theory of Comedy," "Bentley's theory of Farce") or an extended definition found in a literature handbook. For **comedy**, what is the nature of the initial chaos? Is there any way to interpret the resolution of the plot as order? Are the characters a representation of humanity as less than we are, as Aristotle said, or "in the image of the ape," as Eric Bentley said in his essay on Farce? Does the work take place in or otherwise suggest through imagery an "ideal green world" (as in Northrup Frye's essay "The Mythos of Spring")? Is there an inversion of social order or something else? Is anything about life, love, society, etc. affirmed? How does the comedy (humor) serve the comic vision (optimistic, affirmative),? For **satire**: what is/are the target/s of attack? Is the satire Horatian ("the needle") or Juvenalian ("the club")? Is there one or more characters who represent the values from which Wilder criticizes the behavior or social order or . . . ? (In other words, does any character serve as a spokesperson for Wilder?) What are those values? Does the work imply that people can learn, can change, can grow? satiric vision = (implicitly) existential.

1. B. You could also do an analysis of the **COMIC TYPES AND TECHNIQUES** for one of the works we've read. What subgenre of comedy would you assign the work to? Low or high Comedy? Farce? Comedy of manners? Or is it a mix of types? How does Wilder get us to laugh at specific points? Incongruity of language, character, action? Wordplay? (Innuendo? Puns?) Repartee? Slapstick? Dramatic irony? Parody? Again, you may want to make use of theatre and drama handbooks to be precise in the terms you employ. Be sure to analyze how the comedy (humor) serves the comic vision (optimistic, affirmative), if you think it expresses that vision, or the satiric vision (existential), if you think it expresses that vision.

2. C/C the **FAMILIES** in two of the works we have read. What do these families show us about “the family”? What is the function of the family in a society? What about individual roles within the family (parents, children, siblings, spouses)? Does Wilder portray the family as inherently tragic or as doomed by certain historical movements or metaphysical forces or psychological influences? Is there any implicit suggestion of what a family should be?

3. Analyze the view of **HISTORY OR TIME** in one of the works, or C/C in two. Is the view of history or time evolutionary (or progressive), cyclical (or static), or entropic (or decline)? What determines the direction of history? Are historical movements and events inevitable or is history open-ended? Are these larger actions of importance to individuals? Is there a macrocosm--microcosm relationship?

4. Support your interpretation of the treatment of **DEATH AND/OR DYING** in one or more of the works we've read. Is death seen as a biological, social, or metaphysical phenomenon? How is death represented and why did Wilder choose that way to represent it? Does death as subject function only on a literal level, or is there also a metaphorical level? If a metaphor, of what? Is there any social commentary on causes of death?

5. Although Wilder was American, in scholarly studies he is usually treated as a modern dramatist and novelist influenced by European writers. Analyze in one or C/C in two works that we have read, what Wilder has to say about **AMERICAN** values, institutions, history, etc.? Does he question the principles upon which the nation was founded, or criticize American society for falling away from those principles, or what? Is there anything particularly American about what or how Wilder writes? you could apply Wilder's own definition of “American” found in the three essays from *American Characteristics and Other Essays* (on reserve in the library): “Toward an American Language,” “The American Loneliness,” “Emily Dickinson.”

6. C/C masculine **AND** feminine **gender roles** in **ONE** of the works we've read, **OR C/C the feminine OR masculine gender roles in TWO** of the works we've read. What do the male characters want? What do the female characters want? Do the women have any power or are the men all-powerful? Are there different powers for each gender? At the end of the work(s), has anything changed, or are the women still in a subservient role? Are the women doomed by fate or something that functions as fate? Is either work sympathetic to the plight of women in patriarchal society? Is there a feminine way of doing things versus a masculine way of doing things? Are there examples of each gender in the work(s) that are the epitome of what is wrong with gender roles, or what gender roles should be?

7. Wilder was, at least early in his life, a devout Christian whose father spoke of the heritage of the Puritans with pride. Whether Wilder continued in those beliefs is uncertain, but it is nonetheless true that virtually all of his works are imbued with a **RELIGIOUS** understanding of the universe, the earth, the human condition, the behavior of individuals. Write an essay that interprets Wilder's beliefs in one or more of the works that we've read. What are the theological implications in his work(s)? What is the Gospel according to Wilder? What beliefs about God, the devil, heaven, hell, etc. does the work(s) suggest? Are the works allegorical? (Textual evidence may include names, personality types, actions, dialogue, setting, stage directions, etc.)

8. C/C the **THEATRICAL STYLE** (how the play is staged) of two of the plays we've read. Consider stage directions, speeches, plot construction, set, and any other indications of the theatrical style Wilder employs. If you choose this topic, be sure you formulate a thesis about Wilder's choice of style in relation to his thematic purpose.

9. Argue that one of the plays we have read is Wilder's attempt to write a **TRAGEDY**. There are many theories of tragedy; apply at least one of the following: the **Aristotelian** definition (tragic hero, *hamartia* ("near miss" so that the tragic hero is an almost perfect person except for the one *hamartia*, defined both as tragic flaw **and** mistake, sin, or error in judgment), reversal of fortune, *anagnorisis* (recognition or epiphany), catharsis of compassion and terror); **Hegel's** philosophical version of the old sayings, "Damned if you do, Damned if you don't" or "Choose your poison" in which human values are in conflict with each other and the tragic hero is forced to choose between two goods or two evils and will suffer either way; **Nietzsche's** symbiotic relationship between the Apollonian and Dionysian; **Kierkegaard's** comparison of ancient versus modern tragedy; (All of these theories may be found in *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, ed. Robert Corrigan, or *European Theories of the Drama*, ed. Barrett Clark, copies of which are on reserve at the library under my name. Clark is better for Nietzsche than Corrigan. The explanation of Aristotle's theory of tragedy is better in the anthology in which the supplementary readings are assigned than in Corrigan. You can also look at the document on **SOCS**: "Four Classic Theories of Tragedy.") Be sure that one paragraph in the body of your essay shows that the work does manifest a tragic vision of life, or the universe, or the human condition.

10. Write an essay on the generic nature of the three-minute plays in *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays*. Are they closer to fiction than drama, in whole or part? Are the stage directions stageable? (Of course, anything is possible, but practically speaking, for a company that doesn't have unlimited resources in terms of money or facilities). Or are they closet drama? Is there enough conflict to hold an audience's attention on the stage? Are the characterizations complete or do they require the "fleshing out" of actors? Is the dialogue realistic? Work better on stage or page? Would individual plays work better as full-fledged stories with third or first-person narrators? By no means should you try to write on all of these plays, but do write on more than one.

11. The story of the five victims of the fall of the bridge of San Luis Rey is framed by chapters entitled "Perhaps an Accident" and "Perhaps an Intention." In Part One, the narrator says, "Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan die by plan" (7). Brother Juniper set out to prove the latter, that God controls our destinies (or at least our appointment with death). Brother Juniper further claims that "each of the five lost lives was a perfect whole" (9), and that "he saw in the same accident the wicked visited by destruction and the good called early to Heaven" (115). Write an essay in which you argue which side of the deterministic issue *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* takes. (You can call this topic **DETERMINISM, FATE, DESTINY, KARMA, KISMET, or PROVIDENCE**.) You may make references to other works by Wilder on this profound universal issue, but don't lose your focus on *The Bridge*.

12. At the end of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilder has the Abbess think,

"But soon we shall die and all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning."

Write an essay that analyzes *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (or c/c it with another Wilder work, e.g., *The Woman of Andros*) as a study of **LOVE**. (And by that multivalent word, I mean (or, rather, Wilder means) romantic/sexual love but also more than just the romantic love between a man and a woman. What are the blessings/curses of love? Why does love make one suffer? For romantic/sexual love, is it something more than just nature, the procreative instinct? Are there examples of love in the work(s) that demonstrate what love should be?