

Drama Day |
University of Akron
November 4th

Study Guide: The Skin of Our Teeth

2017 marks the 75th
anniversary of *The
Skin of Our Teeth*.

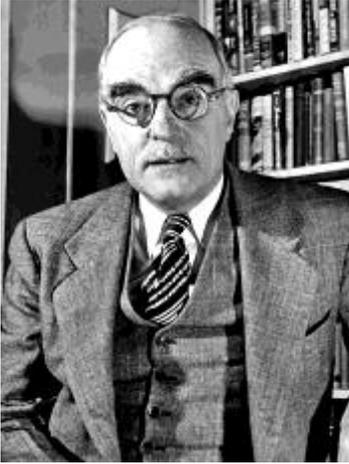
The Skin of Our Teeth explores themes of humanity's resilience in the face of destruction.

About The Play:

Written in 1942 in the midst of WWII, the play is a three-part allegory about humanity's resilience centered around the Antrobus family. Wilder's Pulitzer prize-winning play incorporates elements of satire, burlesque and interactive theater as it careens from Akron OH, to the Ice Age and beyond. James Slowiak, UA Professor of Theatre and director of the production, chose the play because it addresses a wide range of political and social themes, including racism, the refugee crisis, climate change and war. *The Skin of Our Teeth* comments on human survival and ethnocentrism in the face of disaster, natural and man-made.



“My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth. (Job 19:16-20)”



About the Playwright:

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was an accomplished novelist and playwright whose works explore the connection between the commonplace and the cosmic dimensions of human experience. He won three Pulitzer Prizes: for his novel; *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and two plays, *Our Town* and *The Skin of our Teeth*. Wilder's farce, *The Matchmaker* was adapted as the musical *Hello, Dolly!* He also enjoyed enormous success as a translator, adaptor, actor, librettist and lecturer/teacher. Wilder's many honors include the Gold Medal for Fiction and the Presidential Medal for Freedom.

Themes:

Absurdity

Much of the humor in *The Skin of Our Teeth* derives from Wilder's use of bizarre juxtapositions which place the characters in absurd situations and highlight the ludicrous aspects of seemingly ordinary events. Combining elements of twentieth-century America with events from the historical and mythological past creates an odd world where a middle-class family can have a dinosaur and mammoth for pets, the Antrobuses can celebrate their 5,000th wedding anniversary, and the children can recite poems even though their father has only just invented the alphabet.

Illusion vs. Reality

While traditional realistic plays try to create a "real" world on the stage, encouraging viewers to forget that they are watching actors play roles in a fictional drama, Wilder constantly interrupts this sort of theatrical illusion to remind the audience that they are watching a drama. When actors step out of their roles and speak directly to the audience, they highlight the fact that this is a performance taking place on a stage, a fictional world that can be altered and adapted by the ordinary people who are putting it together. Wilder repeatedly reminds the audience of the realities of sets, actors, and scripts, disrupting the conventions of naturalistic theater.

Cycle of History

The Skin of Our Teeth emphasizes the repetitive nature of human history. The Antrobuses have faced disasters in the past, overcome more disasters during the course of the drama, and are ready to engage in further struggles at the performance's end. Wilder emphasizes the circular quality of the characters' lives, each act finds them starting over again. The play concludes with the exact same words and situation with which it began—another reminder that the cycle of history (and human existence) is on-going.

Family

Wilder's play both parodies and idealizes the image of the nuclear family. George and Maggie Antrobus are extreme examples of the masculine provider and the feminine caregiver. His enthusiasm for his inventions and books and her single-minded devotion to her children might be viewed as humorously exaggerated. Yet, their adherence to their stereotypical gender roles seems to contribute to the survival of the human race in each act, suggesting that the perpetuation of civilization depends upon the perpetuation of a traditional family structure in some form.

(Credit: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/skin-our-teeth>)



Discussion Questions:

- The disaster of the first act is natural. What's different about the disasters of the second and third act? Why does Wilder change the disasters? What would be different about the play if he had chosen different disasters (the plague, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes)?
- Wilder wrote this play to span all of time. What themes do you see resurfacing and reinvented across the play? Do you feel the topics addressed are still as relevant as now as when it was published in 1942?
- Wilder stresses from the beginning of the play that the audience is watching a play. Why does Wilder insist that the audience not be allowed to forget that they are in a theater and that the play is an artificial construct, not a "slice of life".

Additional Resources:

1. More about Thornton Wilder:
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/ourtown/ei_wilder.html
2. Extra Study Guide Material: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/50862098/The-Skin-of-Our-Teeth-by-Thornton-Wilder-Teacher-Study-Guide>
3. Thornton Wilder Society: <http://www.twildersociety.org/works/the-skin-of-our-teeth/>



“We came through the depression by the skin of our teeth – that’s true! – one more tight squeeze like that and where will we be? –

Sabina