

## Elements of Japanese Noh in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*

### ソーントン・ワイルダー『わが町』における 能の要素

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**Abstract:** ソーントン・ワイルダーが能に非常に興味を持っていたことは彼自身の言葉からも知り得るところである。作家が受ける影響は数多であるゆえ、彼の作品が、実際に能の影響を受け、能を意識して書かれたものかどうかは計り知れないが、30代で書かれた戯曲『わが町』には能にみられる要素が多く含まれている。背景や小道具、そして明白なプロットは殆どなく、登場人物も典型として表わされ、ステージ・マネージャーの語りによって観客が想像の世界を広げる。時空さえも自由に操られ、遠近・過去未来が混在している。また、幽霊が現世への思いを断てずに登場し複雑な思いで過去を再現したのち静かに死の世界に戻っていく。音楽が劇と融合し儀礼的な要素を加える。そして何百年・何千年などの言葉の繰り返しが現実を超えた世界へと導いていく点など、能に見られる要素が多く含まれている。ワイルダーはこれらの要素によって、永遠に流れ続ける現在（歴史）の中の一瞬を生きる一個人の人生の真実を普遍的なものとして描こうとしたのではないであろうか。

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**Keywords:** Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*, elements of Noh, individuality, universality

ソーントン・ワイルダー、『わが町』、能の要素、個人としての存在、普遍性

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#### Introduction

The rise of *japonisme* in the late nineteenth century introduced Noh along with many other aspects of Japanese culture to the West. Although there were very few who actually saw the performance of Noh in the early twenties, the translations and writings of Noh provided great impetus to its appreciation,<sup>1</sup> and many artists who were seeking new means of expression were drawn towards

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the major works on Noh in this period include, "L'Introduction aux études sur le Nô" in *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* (by Noël Peri, 1909), "Noh" or *Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan* (by Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, 1917), *The No Plays of Japan* (by Arthur Waley, 1921), and *Le Livre de Christophe Colomb* (by Paul Claudel, 1927). I have used the spelling "Noh" throughout my paper, but have kept the

it. Among those who were influenced by Noh were Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Paul Claudel, Jacques Copeau, Arthur Waley, Bertolt Brecht and Thornton Wilder.<sup>2</sup>

Wilder's interest in Noh can be seen in his own statement in his "Preface" to *Three Plays*:

I . . . tried to capture not verisimilitude but reality. In Chinese drama a character, by straddling a stick, conveys to us that he is on horseback. In almost every No play of the Japanese an actor makes a tour of the stage and we know that he is making a long journey.<sup>3</sup>

Wilder's sister, Isabel Wilder, confirms his interest in Noh. She says, "The more he read about Japanese theatre, the more interested he became in Japanese theatre."<sup>4</sup> Wilder may also have been influenced by the works of other artists who were captivated by Noh. As Wilder mentions, "Paul Claudel used to mean much to me,"<sup>5</sup> and "I am deeply indebted to Ezra Pound."<sup>6</sup>

Since the influences on a playwright are numerous, we cannot pin down exactly the influence of Noh on Thornton Wilder. As an American playwright, the dramatic milieu would include all that make up his person.

[The dramatic milieu] includes . . . the American milieu [the immediate cultural situation], dramatic traditions that the playwright inherits from his predecessors, and the heritage of Western culture, especially as reflected in literature. These matrices are available to the dramatist not merely as conscious techniques of presentation or patterning like impressionism or surrealism, for example; rather they permeate the atmosphere in which he works in the same way attitudes and values permeate a culture . . . It comprises . . . all those attitudes, ideals and traditions that determine or affect values, supply strategies and pattern human activities.<sup>7</sup>

Many elements of Noh, such as the lack of conventional plot and the emphasis on inner drama, are similar to those of the Symbolist Theatre. The lack of scenery, which is one of the

original spelling ("Noh" or "No") in quotations and titles.

<sup>2</sup> For further references to the impact of Noh on the Western Theatre, see the following: Hazel Durnell, *Japanese Cultural Influences on American Poetry and Drama* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1983); Earl Earnest, "The Influence of Japanese Theatrical Style on Western Theatre," *Educational Theatre Journal* 21 (1961): 127-138; Earl Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1958); Leonard Cabell Pronko, *Theater East and West: Perspectives towards a Total Theater* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Thornton Wilder, preface, *Three Plays*, by Wilder (New York: Avon, 1976) x-xi.

<sup>4</sup> Durnell, 171.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson R. Bryer ed. *Conversations with Thornton Wilder* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992) 60.

<sup>6</sup> Bryer, 77.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas E. Porter, *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1969) 13.

characteristics of Noh, is also the characteristic of Greek drama and of Shakespeare's plays; he may take the device from Noh directly, or he may take it from other drama. He may make use of the elements of Noh consciously or he may use them unknowingly.

However, although it is impossible to determine with certainty the influence of Noh on Wilder, it is possible to examine the elements of Noh in his plays. This paper examines the elements of Noh in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.

### Elements of Noh

*Our Town* embodies many elements of Noh. There is no scenery, no realistic props except for necessary tables and chairs, and the actions are often presented in mimes. All these elements give an abstract nature to the play. Sets are not used on the Noh stage, since all changes of place must occur within the mind of the audience, and the abstract space of the bare stage is transformed to a specific locale by the words of the actor. In *Our Town*, the Stage Manager announces the place. He presents Grover's Corners in detail--its location on earth, its scenery, its history, its geological formations and its sociology. However, without any realistic scenery on stage, and without reference to any outstanding characteristic of the town, Grover's Corners remains a common town, a generalized town, any town in the vast stretches of history. "The absence of scenery," Wilder says, "intimates the universe,"<sup>8</sup> and with repetitive references to the sky, the stars the sun and the moon, he gives Grover's Corners a vast, cosmic significance. Human life is blended with a force larger than itself. Rebecca's speech furthers the significant location of the town. She recounts the amazing address on the letter sent to Jane Crofut:

Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America . . . Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God--<sup>9</sup>

(Act One)

Grover's Corners and its people are situated in the infinite universe and encompassed in the eternal mind. This dimension gives the whole play a celestial, ritual characteristic as well as a universal significance.

The ritual characteristic of the play is also an element of Noh. In *Our Town*, this characteristic is embedded in the plot itself. There is no real plot in the conventional sense of

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<sup>8</sup> Bryer, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (New York: Harper, 1938) 45. Henceforth, all quotations from *Our Town* are from this edition, and the references will appear in the text.

action: the play presents the daily life of Grover's Corners over the span of twelve years. This lack of conventional plot is also an element of Noh, in which the emphasis is on the evocation and exploration of common human themes and emotions embodied by the characters rather than on the development of a story. The plot of *Our Town* is about the everyday rituals and the lifetime rituals of the people in Grover's Corners. Act One presents the everyday rituals. It is called the "Daily Life" and it depicts the typical events that happen daily from morning to evening: the delivery of the morning milk and newspaper, the breakfast, children going to school, fathers working, mothers keeping the house, children playing after school, mothers going to choir practices, children doing their homework and finally people getting into bed. The events are common events that occur ritualistically every day, and some of them are repeated in Act Two and Act Three. The lifetime rituals are divided between the three acts. Act One presents birth and daily life, Act Two is called "Love and Marriage," with focus on two key ceremonies in life--the confession of love and the wedding--and Act Three is about death, the funeral. As *Our Town* presents life as ritual, the life in Grover's Corners requires a universal significance:

Because it is an interpretation of the archetypal, ritual has characteristics that set it off from other actions whether actual or imitative. It takes place in a universalized space and time, that is, it does not happen "here" or "there," but at the center of the universe, in a space that includes all space; it happens in a "present" that includes all time.<sup>10</sup>

The Stage Manager stresses the universality of ritual in the wedding scene: "M.... marries N.... millions of them;" "And don't forget all the other witnesses at this wedding,—the ancestors. Millions of them." (Act Two). Wilder says that *Our Town* attempts "an allegorical representation of all life."<sup>11</sup> He justifies his method of presentation in "Some Thoughts on Playwriting":

Imaginative narration--the invention of souls and destinies--is to a philosopher an all but indefensible activity. Its justification lies in the fact that the communication of ideas from one mind to another inevitable reaches the point where exposition passes into illustration, into parable, metaphor, allegory, and myth.<sup>12</sup>

The ritual characteristic of the play as well as the non-realistic techniques enable Wilder to

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<sup>10</sup> Porter, 201.

<sup>11</sup> Bryer, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Thornton Wilder, "Some Thoughts on Playwriting," *Playwrights on Playwriting: The Meaning and Making of Modern Drama from Ibsen to Ionesco*, ed. Toby Cole (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961) 115.

mythicize the small town. Brooks Atkinson gave this comment in his review in the *New York Times*:

. . . Mr. Wilder has given [the play] a profound, strange, unworldly significance. This is less a portrait of a town than the sublimation of the commonplace; and in contrast with the universe that silently swims around it, it is brimming over with compassion. . . Grover [sic] Corner is a green corner of the universe.<sup>13</sup>

To emphasize this universality, the characters are represented as types rather than distinct individuals, as are those in Noh plays. The characters in *Our Town* represent universal human emotion or ideas, or the ideas of the society. Few of them are given first names, such as Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs, Mr. and Mrs. Webb, Professor Willard, and Constable Warren. They represent various segments of family and/or society, and the Stage Manager breaks in before they establish any separate existence by presenting their own individual ideas. He briskly interrupts the conversation between Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs in Act One when they start to talk about their personal desires and about another country because their functions are to play the roles of wife and mother and to give information about the town, the community and their family through their gossip. This can be regarded as wearing masks in Noh plays.

The free manipulation of time is one of the elements of Noh: time can be condensed, slipped, reversed, or split.<sup>14</sup> This is made possible because time (like scenery) is set with words, and it changes only within the consciousness of the audience. In *Our Town*, the Stage Manager sets the time, and he manipulates it freely. He exists in the audience time, in the time of right now, and introduces the play: "This play is called 'Our Town.'" (Act One). Then he slips back into the past immediately, sets the time in Grover's Corners, and starts to describe the town in the present tense: "The day is May 7, 1901. . . This is our doctor's house" (Act One). Time is reversed as the past comes after the present and the past becomes "now" on the stage. However, time is not simply reversed and the past made to come after the present; the past and the present intermingle, or rather, co-exist throughout the play. While the daily life in Grover's Corners continues, Mr. Webb is called out from Grover's Corners time to give a political and social report to the audience. He even converses

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<sup>13</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," *New York Times* 5 Feb. 1938, sec. 3: 18.

<sup>14</sup> There are also plays of Noh in which the story follows a very ordinary passage of time.

with the audience, and then slips back into the town again. The Stage Manager himself leaps back and forth in time: he exists in the audience time, but he easily assumes the roles of the druggist and the minister in Grover's Corners time, and he talks to the dead in Act Three. This "simultaneity of all time"<sup>15</sup> is an element often seen in the ghost plays of Noh: the ghost, who is actually a person in the past, temporarily assumes a character in the present, and then he assumes his true form and acts out the past in the present. The flashbacks, often seen in Noh, further intermingle all time. In Act Two, while George and Emily prepare for their wedding (Grover's Corners time, that is the past from audience time), the flashback brings a further past event, the beginning of their love, to the "now" on stage, with the Stage Manager (audience time) assuming a role in it. In Act Three, the dead Emily (Grover's Corners time) talks with the Stage Manager (audience time), and the flashback enables her to both relive her twelfth birthday (a further past) and observe herself living (Grover's Corners time) at the same time. The first flashback of the lovers does not go beyond the time span of the play, 1901-1913, however, the second flashback of Emily's return to her birthday in 1889 goes back in time beyond the very beginning of the play. Time is reversed, skipped, rearranged, and intermingled. It almost becomes an "abolition of time."<sup>16</sup>

This deliberate manipulation of time is not only pursued through the dramatic action of the play, but also through the words of the characters. The Stage Manager describes the town in the present tense in Act One, but this "now" on stage is interrupted by the future—that is, time after "now" (future), but time before audience time (past):

First automobile's going to come along in about five years — belonged to Banker Cartwright, our richest citizen . . . lives in the big white house up on the hill.

(Act One)

Here, future, present and past are fused together, and the single event is placed in the vast stretches of time. As Dr. Gibbs comes down the street ("now" on the stage), the Stage Manager mentions that he "died in 1930" (Act One), which is the future event from "now," but the past event from audience time. Past, present, and future overcome their contradictions and intermingle within the consciousness of the audience.

The future presented in the play, however, is not limited to the future of Grover's Corners time but stretches towards the future of audience time. The Stage Manager says that he will put a copy of *Our Town* in the cornerstone of the new bank in Grover's Corners

<sup>15</sup> Edmund Fuller, "Thornton Wilder: The Notation of the Heart," *American Scholar* 28 (1959): 215.

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Cowley, "The Man Who Abolished Time: Thornton Wilder and the Spirit of Anti-history," *Saturday Review* 6 Oct. 1956: 51.

"for people to dig up ... a thousand years from now." (Act One). Time stretches towards the future endlessly, and it also stretches towards the past, as the Stage Manager mentions of past civilizations:

Babylon once had two million people in it, and all we know about 'em is the names of the kings and some copies of wheat contracts . . . and contracts for the sale of slaves. Yet every night all those families sat down to supper, and the father came home from his work, and the smoke went up the chimney,--same as here. And even in Greece and Rome . . .

(Act One)

Every human life is a part of the vast stretches of history. It is unique but it is repetitive and universal.

Wilder's preoccupation with human life in connection with time was developed through his study of archaeology at the American Academy in Rome, and it became one the main ideas in his plays:

One of those ideas is this: an unrelenting preoccupation with the surprise of the gulf between each tiny occasion of the daily life and the vast stretches of time and place in which every individual plays his role. By that I mean the absurdity of any single person's claim to the importance of his saying, "I love!" "I suffer!" when one thinks of the background of the billions who have lived and died, who are living and dying, and presumably will live and die.<sup>17</sup>

However, even though Wilder realizes that his joy or his grief is "but 'one' in the ocean of human life,"<sup>18</sup> nevertheless it has its reality, and he sees himself "making an effort to find the dignity in the trivial of [his] daily life . . . and the validity of each individual's emotion."<sup>19</sup> Wilder's affirmation of life--his belief in the preciousness of the smallest events in life--is expressed through Emily's final farewell to the earth.

Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners ...Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking ... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. 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?

(Act Three)

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<sup>17</sup> Bryer, 74-75.

<sup>18</sup> Thornton Wilder, "Joyce and the Modern Novel," *A James Joyce Miscellany*, ed. Marvin Magalaner (New York: James Joyce Society, 1957) 14.

<sup>19</sup> Bryer, 76.

The Stage Manager answers: "No. Pause. The saints and poets, maybe--they do some." (Act Three). And, of course, Wilder, the playwright does, who believes that "the pure event, an action involving human beings, is more arresting than any comment that can be made upon it."<sup>20</sup> Wilder believes that drama should be this "Experience for experience's sake."<sup>21</sup> Noh is also an event to be experienced rather than appreciated.

Emily's return to the living world after death--the return of the ghost--is one of the well-known elements of Noh.<sup>22</sup> However, it is not only Emily who appears as a ghost in the play. All the people in Grover's Corners seem to be ghosts. At the beginning of Act One, the Stage Manager introduces Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs:

There's Doc Gibbs comin' down Main Street now, comin' back from that baby case. And here's his wife comin' downstairs to get breakfast.

As soon as they enter on stage, the Stage Manager states:

Doc Gibbs died in 1930. The new hospital's named after him. Mrs. Gibbs died first--long time ago, in fact.

(Act One)

Joe Crowell, Jr. is also commented on as he enters delivering imaginary newspapers:

Want to tell you something about that boy Joe Crowell there. . . Goin' to be a great engineer, Joe was. But the war broke out and he died in France. All that education for nothing.

(Act One)

It seems that all the characters are ghosts who have come back to live again, to act out universal human emotions and to represent an archetypal community. The ghosts in Noh, too, come back to earth always with some purpose.

Emily's return to the living world embodies further elements of Noh. In Noh, a human being who maintains an attachment to this world even in death becomes a ghost, which has to tell its story. The ghost needs to be prayed for or to be understood so that finally it may be detached from this world.<sup>23</sup> The influence of Buddhism can be seen in this idea of the ghost

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Richard H. Goldstone, "Thornton Wilder," *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (London: Seeker & Warburg, 1958) 99.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Goldstone, 100.

<sup>22</sup> The return of the ghost is a well-known and an important element in Noh. However, there are also plays in which ghosts do not appear, such as god plays.

<sup>23</sup> The final disposition of the ghosts depends on what type of ghosts they are. Usually, the ghosts of the dead are prayed for towards salvation; the vengeful ghosts either attain enlightenment or are repressed; and the evil demonic ghosts are defeated.

returning to earth, as in Buddhism, a soul cannot achieve salvation unless it recognizes that all attachments to the things of this world are delusions. Emily has been happy in her life and is not ready to leave worldly existence. She chooses her twelfth birthday and returns to earth. However, this time she must be both the participant and the observer of her life. The Stage Manager says: "You not only live it; but you watch yourself living it." (Act Three). The use of the ghost enables Wilder to represent life from an objective point of view, from the vantage of the dead, so that Emily's recognition becomes more poignant than any statement that can be made on it. The epiphany of the significance of ordinary daily life and the recognition of the blindness of people are too painful for Emily, and she returns to her place among the dead. As in *Noh*, the dead have to free themselves from their attachment to earth and gradually forget their worldly existence. The Stage Manager says:

They [the dead] get weaned away from earth--that's the way I put it,--weaned away. 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. They're waitin' for something that they feel is comin'. Something important, and great. Aren't they waitin' for the eternal part in them to come out clear?

(Act Three)

Wilder believes in this "eternal part." However, he does not state clearly what it is, but rather leaves it in question. The Stage Manager says, "everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings." (Act Three). Against the background of the vast stretches of time and space in the play, Wilder seems to be searching for this "eternal part" both in the individual human life and in the repetitive, cyclical pattern of all human life. Every single event of every human being has an eternal significance since it creates each part of the eternal continuum of all human life. Wilder says:

Just think of what it means to every American to believe himself permanently, directly, and responsibly bound to world destiny. The significance that this belief imparts to the simplest dealings and the simplest events seems to me the beginning of all great achievement.<sup>24</sup>

The structure of the play combines both the linear and the cyclical patterns: the birth, the marriage, and the death presented through the three acts are unique events for the individual (linear pattern), but are universal repetitive rituals for the community (cyclical

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<sup>24</sup> Bryer, 10.

pattern).<sup>25</sup> The combination of the linear and the cyclical patterns can be seen in the compilation of a full Noh program. There are five categories in Noh plays--god plays, warrior plays, woman plays, madness (or sometimes living person) plays, and demon plays--and a full, formal program of one day is made up of five plays, one play from each category in the given order, thus forming a linear pattern. However, the play in the last category has an unfinished quality which looks forward to the following performance (which will start with a god play again) in a cyclical pattern. Moreover, an excerpt from a god play is often chanted by the chorus at the very end of the program, suggesting the cyclical link to another god play. The five plays which comprise the program of a day correspond to nature. As Noh was originally performed during daytime, the god play was performed in the morning, the warrior play towards noon, the woman play at midday, the madness play in the declining sun, and the demon play towards the growing darkness. And the cyclical pattern in *Our Town* is also related to nature: Act One (birth and daily life) begins in the morning in spring, Act Two (marriage) takes place in the afternoon in summer, and Act Three (death) ends at night in the winter. The continual references to nature--the sky, the moon, and the mountains—are also an element of Noh.

The Stage Manager embodies elements similar to the characters of Noh. He is like the waki (often a travelling priest) in Noh, who draws out the ghosts and then remains a representative of the audience. He is like the chorus which essentially keeps the story moving, setting the scene, and describing the characters and action. He even has some characteristics of the narrator who retells or adds to the story between the acts introducing a period of real time into the fantasy time. Wilder says that the Stage Manager role was a "hang-over from a novelist technique."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps in the very greatest dramatic representations — as in *Othello*--the ultimate point of view that the beholder should take upon the action is nowhere indicated, but distributed throughout the work ... It may be, though, that in an age in which an audience contains such varying approaches to fundamental questions of life a commentator is useful for delivering signposts."<sup>27</sup>

The Stage Manager helps to create an archtypal community against the vast stretches of time and space. He celebrates life and emphasizes universal human emotions. He reminds us of the metatheatrical nature of the play, and at the same time, he gives us the sense of

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas E. Porter discusses these patterns fully with a chart. See *Myth and Modern American Drama*, 214-224.

<sup>26</sup> Bryer, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Bryer, 24.

knowing the town to be "our town," as he addresses us, "Here's your friend Mrs. Gibbs. . . And Mrs. Soames who enjoyed the wedding so--you remember?" (Act Three). He assumes a role (even that of a minister) in Grover's Corners at the most decisive moments in the lives of George and Emily, as a witness to their love and marriage, and he enables the dead Emily to return to earth. As C. W. E. Bigsby notes, he is "the Stage Manager God."<sup>28</sup>

The use of music in the play is also an element of Noh. The music of Noh is an invocation and a requiem: it calls forth profound human emotion and then puts it in repose. The music in *Our Town* can also be said to be an invocation and a requiem. The choir practice in Act One and the music at the wedding in Act Two (which includes the song sung at the choir practice) are all sung at the church, and invoke love and community spirit. The hymn at the funeral, which is also the same song sung at the choir practice, invokes universal feelings and serves as a requiem for the dead. The music emphasizes the ritual's universality.

The repetition of the words "hundreds" and "thousands" is also often seen in a Noh play. It underscores the vast stretches of time and space, and gives human experience and emotion universal significance. Wilder aims at this universal significance, however, he also attempts to present the "frightening range"<sup>29</sup> of time and space in which each individual plays his role. Grover's Corners as Wilder says, is presented as if it is seen "at ever greater distances through a telescope."<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

As stated above, *Our Town* embodies many elements of Noh.<sup>31</sup> There is no scenery and few basic props. The characters are presented as types, and they often act in mimes. Time is not restricted to the conventional flow of time but is "scrambled, liberated,"<sup>32</sup> and there is no plot in the conventional sense of action. The Stage Manager acts as a chorus, as a representative of the audience and as an artist that manipulates the play. The play has strong ritual characteristics, and the structure embodies both linear and cyclical patterns.

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<sup>28</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby, "Thornton Wilder," *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 262.

<sup>29</sup> Bryer, 76.

<sup>30</sup> Bryer, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Although the play embodies many elements of Noh, there are, of course, many other elements that are not in the play. For example, the aesthetic rule of *jo*, *ha*, *kyu*, the instrumental music, the dance and the mask.

<sup>32</sup> Bryer, 33.

The return of the ghost is a characteristic of Noh. There are also the use of music, the constant repetition of the words "hundreds" and "thousands," and the references to nature. All these elements locate Grover's Corners in "the omnispatial, omnitemporal 'now' and 'everywhere' of the eternal mind,"<sup>33</sup> and present the town as an archetypal community. They enable Wilder to raise the action "from the specific to the general,"<sup>34</sup> and to address the play to the "group mind."<sup>35</sup> They emphasize universality, and at the same time, they underscore the horrifying vast stretches of time and space in which an individual lives his/her life. And it is through these elements that Wilder attempts to relate the unique to the universal, and to find a value for the smallest events in the daily life of the individual against the boundless dimensions of time and space. Wilder says in his speech:

Now, how would we "present" any individual, or ourselves--ourselves in this room--existing and somehow related to totality? How do we do it in such a way that we would be freed a little from the terror of shrinking to nullity? First we would seek for our place in myths. Myths are the dreaming soul of the race, telling its story.<sup>36</sup>

The elements of Noh mythicize the small town and enable Wilder to search for the individual's relation to this "totality." The events in the life of an individual are unique and linear in pattern, but for the community, the same events are universal rituals and cyclical in pattern. The life of an individual is but a spot in human history, but is nevertheless a part of the vast stretches of history. The unique is a part of the universal.

This ritual, non-realistic technique tries to express the complex of attitudes that comprise the myth in its own terms, that is, as ideal interpretations of experience by the community. *Our Town* is a play that uses this technique, that expresses an American myth--the ideal of equality, democracy and meaningful daily life for the common man that emanates from a specifically American complex of attitudes--in a ritual mode.<sup>37</sup>

Whether Wilder was aware of the elements of Noh in *Our Town* or not, these elements, which are completely free from the limitations of realism, and which have strong ritual characteristics as well as the other worldliness, enable the playwright to create a theatrical image "larger than life."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Porter, 213.

<sup>34</sup> Wilder, "Some Thoughts," 113.

<sup>35</sup> Wilder, "Some Thoughts," 106.

<sup>36</sup> Wilder, "Joyce," 15.

<sup>37</sup> Porter, 202.

<sup>38</sup> Earle Ernst, "The Influence of Japanese Theatrical Style on Western Theatre," *Educational Theatre Journal* 21

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