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Gender Roles in *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder

Behavioral and Symbolic Analysis of Characters

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Abstract

This study explores how gender roles are depicted in the play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, which is set in the beginning of the 21st century. It investigates the roles assigned to the characters based on their gender. Based on the symbolic interaction theory in gender and behavior traits through using the narrative analysis technique, the study examines the actions and behaviors of the central characters who show that they also take on the role of rebels who aspire for a change in their roles in the family structure and the society.

Keywords: Thornton Wilder, our town, symbolic, behavior, gender roles.

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1. Introduction

“The only lights on in town are in a cottage over by the tracks where a Polish mother's just had twins” (6)

Thornton Wilder chose to adapt Latin and Greek literature through using one of their dramatic forms and techniques which is the trilogy, or the three acts, in his play *Our Town*. He also intended that this play be read as well as performed. Therefore, it is crucial for any analysis of it to include the stage directions in the play text as well as the dialogue by the characters. The above stage direction announces the first action that takes place in the play. Why does Wilder choose to introduce twins rather than one baby? Wilder answers this question in the words of one of his characters, Mrs. Gibbs, in the second act of the play entitled “Love and Marriage”: “people were made to live two-by-two” (54) While this line usually refers to couples, it also hints at the binary correlations that are used throughout the play which clearly justifies Wilder’s choice for twins.

Although the gender of the twins is not revealed, being a male and a female could be the obvious thing that creeps into the minds of the audience. It is the start of a gender division and expectation or curiosity about the roles that are given to women and men throughout the play which is the focus of the analysis of this essay. Even though the scene of giving birth to twins is not performed on stage, the image of the action is drawn into the audience’s mind through the stage directions. These directions not only assign the mother a very traditional gender role but at the same time promote the notion of two separate entities that later on each will be assigned a particular societal role.

The setting of plays is often used to manifest themes about relationships between women and men at home or in public arenas that reflect the era (Copenhaver 262). Therefore, it matters whether men and women are at home or in public arenas, and that their behaviors reflect the time era of the action. In *Our Town*, Wilder uses two main family groups, the Gibbs and the Webbs, to shed light on the theme of gender roles at home and in the public sphere. This is provided by detailed descriptions of each individual in each family and their relationship with one another.

Since dramatic works, specifically plays, are considered “a lens for understanding society” (Copenhaver 22), the purpose of this study is to determine how

gender roles are depicted in this prize-winning American play. Although the core of this study might seem to be inclined towards a “woman-focused” study, the counterpart is also considered in the same study because gender studies are “multidimensional” (Stevenson, Paludi, Black, & Whilley as cited in Copenhaver 22). Thus, for the study to be more precise, the male characters will also be examined.

Based on the symbolic interaction theory of gender and by analysing the narrative, this study will explore the subject of gender and the gender roles assigned to the characters. Thus, this study will focus on two major research questions:

1. How does the play identify femininity and masculinity? How are women and men, respectively, portrayed?
2. What role has been assigned to each character? Do they fall into the realm of traditional gender roles?

So, in this essay, I will explore how Thornton Wilder challenges the traditional gender roles by portraying the experiences and limitations faced by women, highlighting the significance of their roles within the domestic sphere and the suppression of their aspirations due to the societal expectations placed on them, while also offering glimpses of their hidden strength and resilience.

2. Background on the author and play

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was an American playwright and novelist. He was born in Wisconsin but grew up in different parts of the United States and abroad, as his father was a journalist and diplomat. He studied at Yale University, where he became interested in theatre and began writing plays.

Wilder’s first major success as a playwright was in 1938 when he published *Our Town*. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for drama and has since become a classic of American theatre. He continued writing successful plays, including *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1943, and *The Matchmaker* (1954), which became the basis of the hit musical *Hello Dolly* in 1964.

In addition, Wilder wrote several novels that won him critical acclaim. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and *The Eighth Day* (1967) won the

National Book Award. Wilder was also awarded the first ever Edward MacDowell Medal in 1960 for his remarkable contributions to the American culture in his works.

Wilder's works are characterized by his interest in the complexities of human lives. His works explore themes that are related to the passage of time, the nature of relationships, and the frailty of human existence. He initiated a unique technique in theatrical productions for his time which was the incorporation of flashbacks and presenting information in a non-chronological order (Haberman 350).

According to a review by John Gassner in his book "*A Treasury of the Theatre*", *Our Town* is "nonillusionistic, presentational drama." It "achieves a significant presentation, or as Gordon Craig would have said, 'a noble artificiality.'" This implies that even though the play does not aim to create a realistic portrayal of events or characters, it presents a story in a manner that draws attention to the constructed nature within gender dynamics. However, within this constructed nature, it also invites an examination of how gender is depicted and questioned in the play. So, it prompts an investigation into whether the artificiality of the portrayal serves to reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles.

The play is set in the early 20th century (1901-1913), in the fictional small town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, whose residents' lives are followed through three acts, entitled "Daily life", "Love and marriage", and "Death", respectively. The first act, "Daily Life" introduces the town and its people and shows the daily routines of the residents. The second act, "Love and Marriage", focuses on the courtship and marriage of two of the main characters in the play, George Gibbs and Emily Webb. The third and final act, "Death", focuses on death, particularly Emily's death and its impact on the people of the town.

The play is known for its minimalist staging and the use of a narrator who addresses the audience, introduces the characters, and comments on their actions. The minimalism gives more weight to the immaterial themes that can be deduced from the titles of each act. Wilder explores the human experiences and emphasizes the idea of the fast passage of time as well as the value of the simple joys of everyday existence.

3. Literature Review

There are several studies that have explored *Our Town*'s treatment of life and death, but there are no recent critical studies on Wilder's works in relation to gender.

In his article "Personality Development of George and Emily in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*," Christophorus Anngganadewa examines the development of both characters throughout the play and concludes that George represents the typical American boy (47-48). He further argues that the stages of development in the characters throughout the play provide a universal truth about the personality development of any individual. He suggests that the play portrays personality development through the lens of everyday experiences, highlighting how seemingly insignificant moments contribute to one's growth. Lincoln Konkle adds that *Our Town* is an allegory in which "George himself is a representative of America" (122). He explains that George's life in the play embodies qualities and experiences that are reflective of the American national identity. In another article on American literary history, Kathryn Roberts states that the play provides "a vehicle to help any community become a self-sustaining cultural enterprise" (406). She explains that by showcasing the everyday lives, values and relationships within a small town, *Our Town* helps the audience understand the shared cultural experiences.

In another interesting study entitled "'Quite a Moon!': The Archetypal Feminine in *Our Town*," Min Shen argues that Wilder uses the "moon" as a symbol for femininity. The study examines the reaction of the characters to the different phases of the "moon" or "moonlight" throughout the play. It finally concludes that as the moon is fertile, time-telling, powerful, and beautiful in all its phases, so is the aspect it represents, femininity (5).

In "The portrayal of gender and a description of gender roles in selected American modern and postmodern plays", Bonny Ball Copenhaver examines how the play portrays a family structure in which each person acts as per their gender. According to the study, the existence of parental figures, mother and father, and children in the play in the formation of the nuclear family structure is what can be taken as a model for a perfect and harmonious family (374).

Likewise, examining the typicality of the family structure through its characters, Patrick Payne in his master's thesis "Finding the Man, Husband, Physician & Father: Creating the

Role of Doc Gibbs in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*,” analyzes the personality of Dr. Gibbs as a father, husband and doctor. He describes him as “good” in all aspects through his relationship with his wife, children and others in his community (48). Nevertheless, in understanding the role of the doctor, Payne finds that he reflects the men of the era, early twentieth century, who do not show affection or romance which are considered as weakness.

In “Teaching Gender Issues through Literature,” Glen McClish analyzes the communicative issues emerging from the actions and dialogues of George and Emily based on their gender. He concludes that communication between genders depends mostly on the personality of the partners who are involved (6). He asserts that, in *Our Town*, George initiates open communication with Emily about their relationship, against the stereotypical communicative pattern of the time that was prevalent in his father-mother traditional pattern. This suggests that the play portrays the traditional ideals only to present their opposite that continues to flow with the passage of time.

Several scholars have also investigated the portrayal of reality in the play. In “American Myth Values in *Our Town* Play By Thornton Wilder”, Uup Gufron writes that literature and reality are not separable, and that *Our Town* is a representation of the American traditional life at the time the play is set (48). However, according to Stephen Rojcewicz, not only did Wilder have a relation to classical Greek and Roman literature as a learner, but also, he had his own vision of the typical American life (2). Thus, he believed in the “Americanization of the classics” by developing texts to refer to and suit the American society’s ideals or beliefs, including gender roles.

However, in her study “The Use of Drama as a Portrayal of Reality”, Ansam Almaarroof argues that Wilder broke the norms of writing of his time. While writers of the time often wrote about travel and adventures away from home, Wilder adopted the “opposite extreme;” the life at one’s home, the American home (25). This is shown in the small details of the families in the play, focusing on each character’s precise role. Nonetheless, in her study “The Presentational phase of Thornton Wilder”, Barbara Etcovitch argues that Wilder depicted *Our Town* as a village only compared to the “stars” implying that it is universal and cannot be the opposite of city. It upholds the collective “group-mind” in identifying the “visual representations” in the play as the ideal principles. This denotes that while the main focus of the town is the two families’ characters, it still depicts what the American society has inherited as ideals for generations (108).

Regarding characterization, the Stage Manager has received the most critical studies. The Stage Manager is a unique and pivotal character who serves as the narrator, commentator, and guide for the audience. Acting as both an observer and a participant, the Stage Manager transitions fluidly between roles, occasionally stepping into the story to portray minor characters. According to Konkle, this character is a God-like figure who controls what is presented on the stage (109). His participation in the play is a metatheatrical technique that Wilder uses to break the fourth wall and address the audience directly. Joanna Mansbridge argues that the Stage Manager is a central role in the play, but not a “moral figure”. Rather, the Stage Manager is an “artistic expression of a social condition” (229).

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Gender Roles – Masculinity and Femininity

Many scholars have explored the most essential factors that make humans understand the notion of gender and gender roles. In his handbook of “Socialization Theory and Research,” David Goslin argues that different traits and attitudes as well as different tasks and activities are assigned to individuals based on their gender in all cultures (325-345). Researchers suggest that there are several theories which can lead to understanding why gender roles exist and how they develop. Eleanor Maccoby, Alice Eagly, Sandra Bem, Herbert Blumer, Lawrence Kohlberg, Albert Bandura, respectively, discuss the six theories that define gender and gender roles, which are biological, gender schema, cognitive development, structural-functional, social learning, and symbolic interaction.

According to the biological, gender schema, functional and developmental theories, the individual person is a passive participant in the process of acquiring knowledge of his/her role and, consequently, adapting to society (Eagly 157 and Bem 603). However, symbolic interaction theory engages the individual in the process of learning and adapting (Kohlberg 82). In brief, symbolic interaction theory is a wider perspective which studies the symbolic meanings of objects, behaviours, and people through the interaction between them to culturally define their gender identity and roles (Bulmer 8-10 and Howard & Hollander 2).

One of the earliest scholars who has examined the status of women in society was Simone De Beauvoir. She argues that women are not born as a particular type, but rather made through socialization. In her book *The Second Sex*, she argued that a married woman is considered her husband’s other, losing her own identity and presenting a “good show” around

people (543). Similarly, Toril Moi argued that women are defined as belonging to men by being either wives or daughters, and this assigns them to an inferior position, where they have no right to their “own subjectivity and responsibility” of their “own action” (92). Luce Irigaray further discusses how society has made a woman leave her family, house, and name in favor of a man. Even her sexual desire has no real “origin” and that it is merely a dictation of a man’s desire (33). This socialization has apparently been shaped by male dominance and the perpetuation of gender roles. This ideology has pervasively kept men and women in traditional gender roles which “thereby maintain male dominance” in all aspects of life (Tyson 91).

Hilary M. Lips has studied the difference of gender roles through the distribution of powerful and authoritative positions in a given culture. She concluded that the higher positions in politics and business were assigned to men because masculinity meant an authoritative position. This led to the notion that women are not as strong and, therefore, have submissive behavior (Lips 5).

In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler introduces the concept of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender is not an innate quality that an individual has but rather a social construct that is continually performed through a set of everyday acts and behaviors. She further argues that the category “woman” is constantly produced and reproduced through performative acts and cultural norms that intersect with other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality (192-199).

Therefore, it could be argued that all the above interpretations of women’s status in the family structure and community could be applied to the chosen work, given that women in the play are defined in relation to their men and domestic duties.

4.2 Resilience and Aspiration for Change

In 1920, not very long before *Our Town* was published, women gained the right to vote in America. In fact, the time period 1900-1920 was the most significant era to define the first wave of American feminism with the suffrage movements and other following social reform movements led by women (Reeves 86). However, despite the prominent publicity of “the new woman”, marriage and family remained the feminine ideal.

Towards the end of the century, more American women occupied some sectors that were once reserved only for men. They had their places in education next to men and were employed outside homes. They even pursued a societal change in the family itself that led to a re-evaluation of traditional family responsibilities and gender roles' shifts at home (Sigel 193). However, there are several studies on occupations' divisions based on gender that show that women still have lower rank. In her article *Changing Jobs and Changing Chores*, Elizabeth Aura McClintock examined the association of occupations and housework performance to gender. She concluded that the stereotyped feminine and masculine jobs still exist, and they greatly vary based on gender (178).

5. Analysis

This essay will employ three concepts in the analysis of gender roles in the play which are masculinity and femininity, and ambition for change. The characters of the two families who are the center of the play are also the center of the play's themes, including gender. However, other characters also provide insight into the play's understanding of gender roles. The characters were analyzed only for specific characteristics and traits related to each part in a narrative style. There could be a repetition of certain events from the play in the different parts below only because they were analyzed through different views based on the given character's gender.

5.1 Gender Roles - Masculinity

In this part of the analysis, I will focus on the male characters to investigate the social dynamics and individual experience that shape their lives and what it is to be a man. I will also study the women's view of a man that also shape the perception of having a masculine identity. Starting with the main characters, I will explore their duties inside homes and their jobs. The analysis will include both the play text and stage directions since they equally produce the dramatic text in the play.

Although Wilder did not explicitly state that the Stage Manager must be male, the role was originally played by Frank Craven, a male actor. The Stage Manager often speaks in a direct, authoritative, and somewhat paternal tone, which aligns with the stereotypical roles that men were given in early 20th century theatre. The character's role as a guide and overseer of the play's events fits the cultural expectation that such figures of

authority would be male. However, many later productions of the play have experimented with a female Stage Manager, showing that the character's gender is not essential in the function of the role in the play. Therefore, his actions and words will occupy a large part of the analysis in all its parts in order to understand the social view of gender roles. The social expectation of gender roles will also be analyzed through the relative thoughts expressed by the characters.

The play starts with the Stage Manager introducing the scenery and the characters. He acts as the host of the play and describes the characters while presenting them. This way of characterization is then developed and reinforced by the words and actions of the characters. Some theorists refer to the Stage Manager as representing God, especially when other characters follow his orders to appear and leave (Konkle 110). Tyson suggests that male dominance helps shape the socialization that puts women in a lower rank; thus, Wilder sets forth the male dominance from the start of the play through giving the Stage Manager full authority on the world of the stage. The play, moreover, has presented several other characters with vivid details. A major character is the Stage Manager who presents the action of the play and information about the time and place. Additionally, he takes on some other roles that show the contrast of male and female roles according to the traditional norms. In fact, the Stage Manager being male, as overseen by Wilder in the first production of *Our Town*, is in itself a projection of the traditional gender roles, too.

The Stage Manager is given a higher position with a great deal of information. In the first act, which is called "Daily Life", the Stage Manager refers to a historical male figure in America to give the town a fine reputation. He says, "Bryan once made a speech from these very steps here." (5). This historical figure is William Jennings Bryan, who was the United States Secretary of State from 1913 to 1915. He was most famous as an orator and a considered brilliant public speaker. Wilder mentions him in the first act to enforce the idea that masculinity has a voice that always takes precedence in the society while implying that the other half, femininity, does not, yet.

The Stage Manager is not only the guide throughout the play, but he also plays the roles of some minor characters. He plays the role of characters of both genders. In Act 2, he takes on the role of Mrs. Forrest, telling George to "go out and play in the fields" after he almost hit her with a ball. The second role that is taken on by the Stage Manager is the role of Mr. Morgan. The first time Mr. Morgan is mentioned is in the first act when the Stage Manager describes the Main Street in the town and the shops on it. Mr. Morgan's drugstore is

one place that the Stage Manager gives an importance, saying that it is, along with the grocery store, a place that “*everybody in town manages to look into...once a day*” (5).

Although he is a very minor character, Mr. Morgan in Act 2 appears as extra masculine. With spectacles on, he has a conversation with George and Emily that includes a piece of advice on how to cross Main Street. Again, a masculine male is entitled to have his voice heard and integrate in the society more as well as be put in a high place from where he preaches.

Dr. Gibbs is portrayed as the town’s doctor, “coming back from that baby case” just before breakfast, as described by the Stage Manager in the first act. The Stage Manager remarks, “The only lights on in town are in a cottage over by the tracks where a Polish mother’s just had twins” (6). Doctor Gibbs is also referred to by Mrs. Gibbs as a Civil War expert. His wife confirms this fact about her husband and explains further how he has developed such interest and gained knowledge about the Civil War. Battlefields are for men, where they show their intelligence and strength, and that is why “Every two years he makes a trip to the battlefields of the Civil War...” (20), implying the reinforcement of a reminder of male supremacy.

Doctor Gibbs believes that the authority inside the house is given to his wife only in her role of a mother of his children. In Act 2, which is called “Love and Marriage”, Mr. Gibbs orders his son to do what his mother tells him to do. From a deeper angle, this gives Mr. Gibbs authority in giving orders, which indicates the dependence of women on men to have their voices heard, even in their own homes.

The description of the male characters is not only provided through what they do but also what they say. Mr. Webb is the editor of the Grover’s Corners Sentinel and is knowledgeable in terms of politics and media. He is also the father to Emily and husband to Mrs. Webb. The words that are said by Mr. Webb when he is asked to present the political and social reports of the town refer to how the system works in the town, that the town is run by “a Board of Selectmen”, and that “all men vote,” while women’s voices are not heard but rather conveyed by men’s powerful voices, “indirect”. The Stage Manager asks for Mr. Webb personal comments on what the reports say, he replies: “Very ordinary town, if you ask me” (24).

Before the marriage of George and Emily in Act 2, Mr. Webb has a prolonged conversation with George. Mr. Webb recalls some advice that was given to him by his father

before his marriage with Mrs. Webb. It is an indication of the process by which the society is built. Humans tend to adopt certain traditions through the comprehensive knowledge that descends from the past generations until they become societal norms. Mr. Webb's father says "Charles," the first name of Mr. Webb, "Charles, start out early showing who's boss, he said. Best thing to do is to give an order, even if it don't [sic] make sense; just so she'll learn to obey. And he said: if anything about your wife irritates you – her conversation, or anything – just get up and leave the house. That'll make it clear to her, he said. And, oh, yes! he said [sic] never, never let your wife know how much money you have, never" (60).

By looking at the advice, a man is supposed to be in charge of women, financially and mentally independent, and is granted agency. And these traits become a norm in defining masculinity. Such traditional masculine traits give men dominance over women, as suggested by Tyson earlier in this section.

George Gibbs is one of the central characters in the play. He is Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs' son. He is not good at algebra, which he exploits in his courtship with Emily Webb whom he marries in act 2 "Love and Marriage". His first request for communication with Emily is through asking for a favor related to homework as he says: "Emily, what do you think? We might work out a kinda telegraph from your window to mine; and once in a while you could give me a kinda hint or two about one of those algebra problems. I don't mean the answers, Emily, of course not ... just some little hint..." (29).

He is a traditionally masculine male, who is a star at baseball and wants to be a farmer. His uncle Luke has promised to take him over to work in his farm which he can own if he proves he is good at farming. Moreover, the only chore that is given to George around the house is chopping wood for his mother, as it requires muscles. So, strength and possession are vital for men when it comes to domestic roles and such roles give them a sense of importance and superiority.

In act 2, the Stage Manager brings up the incident that led to the meeting of George and Emily the first time. It was after George was elected President of the junior class and the next year's senior class, whereas Emily was elected Secretary and Treasurer. It shows women as the second and "the relative being" rather than an "autonomous being" (De Beauvoir 8).

Although masculinity can be seen through the behavior of the male characters and the roles they take on, there is still another definition through the eyes of women. Emily

mentions that a man should be perfect, but George tells her that it is hard. This brings back the notion that women have viewed men as “perfect” and superior, a belief that some young women still embrace whole heartedly. Emily was raised to believe this way as she refers to her and George’s fathers as perfect, saying “Well, my father is, and as far as I can see your father is. There's no reason on earth why you shouldn't be, too” (66).

By George later denying that a man should or can be perfect, it can be sensed that a great burden is imposed on men: to become what they possibly cannot. Mrs. Gibbs also tells George that he is a man now that he is getting married. The implication is clear here: a man is the one who decides to make a family and becomes responsible for its members, who are later considered his own. However, if for any purpose a man should travel away from home, his wife is expected to stay home. But even if he goes away, he still needs to feel dominating the “other’s” life as “otherness” is an essential part of the male thought (De Beauvoir 9). This is seen when George asks Emily “if I go away to State Agriculture College next year, will you write me a letter once in a while?” (69).

Other minor male characters outside the two families contribute greatly to the general description of the town but still denote the traditional view of men. Such characters include Joe and Si Crowell, Howie Newsome, Professor Willard, Simon Stimson, Constable Warren, Joe Stoddard, and Mr. Cartwright. When looking at their assigned jobs, it is noticeable that their responsibilities either need physical and mental strength or have a sense of authority, such as milk and papers delivery men, professor and choirmaster, police officer, undertaker, and a banker.

5.2 Gender Roles - Femininity

In this part, I will explore the female characters’ social dynamics and roles as well as the Stage Manager’s view of woman duty in the family and the society. Male characters’ views will also be investigated in order to explore the male’s definition of being feminine.

Two of the main female characters are Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb, both of whom are wives and mothers. They both are first introduced by the Stage Manager as housewives running households. They are constantly shown doing domestic chores, such as preparing meals and doing the laundry. The Stage Manager points out their domestic responsibilities through some lines that emphasize how life could go on for years only by

women's contribution to maintaining a system of life that is "full of productivity and effective action" (Haberman 94). The Stage Manager speaks directly to the women in the audience, reinforcing that this role of women is fully understood and has had no harm to women, saying: "I don't have to point out to the women in my audience that those ladies they see before them, both of those ladies cooked three meals a day-[sic] one of 'em [sic] for twenty years, the other for forty- [sic] and no summer vacation. They brought up two children apiece, washed, cleaned the house, -and [sic] never a nervous breakdown" (49).

The actions and behaviors of these two characters inside their homes demonstrate the traditional concept of femininity. For example, in the Gibbs' family, Mrs. Gibbs acknowledges her inferior position in the house by asking her husband to talk to George about chopping wood. She is a caretaker of the house and its members, including Mr. Gibbs. Mrs. Webb, on the other hand, shows what is expected of women inside homes by instructing her daughter, Emily to, for example, "come and help me string these beans for the winter" (30), and "bring that bowl" (32).

Emily is the central female character in the play, as her life, love and marriage to George, along with her life after death are depicted in every act in the play. She is an intelligent young girl and is also portrayed as a dutiful daughter who helps her mother with household chores and dreams of getting married, which she eventually does to George.

Although Emily takes on the traditional role of a woman, she always implicitly asks for acknowledgement from the other characters, particularly her mother. She does not receive it but is asked to stop or do something else. According to Lips, one of the gender stereotypes is the relaxed proscriptions which are socially unwanted qualities in one gender but are approved in another. Such qualities can subvert the women's identity as feminine, and this is not approved by society (25-26). For example, when Emily vents about her desire of "going to make speeches" all her life and asks if this can be approved and be "big enough?", her mother ignores the question. However, when she constantly asks if she is "good looking?" and "pretty enough ... to get anybody . . . to get people interested in me?" (32), her mother confirms that she is "pretty enough for all normal purposes". This refers to what De Beauvoir discussed in her book, *The Second Sex*, about viewing a woman as an "erotic subject", meaning that a woman does her best to reach a point where marriage is the "sole outcome" (164).

Emily feels oppressed by frequently being instructed on how to behave as a woman, but she never crosses the line between the traditional and non-traditional behavior because these instructions come from another female figure, her mother, reinforcing the social expectations and “normal purposes” that every woman should live up to. This is tragic as it shows that women amongst themselves do not have “solidarity of work and interest”. They do not see themselves as one unit, and ultimately, cannot “stand face to face with the correlative unit,” which is the unified group of women. This division among women implies their weakness (De Beauvoir 14).

Emily’s conversation with her mother about women being pretty and well-behaved for “all normal purposes” of a woman shows explicitly what traditional femininity is all about in the play. A female must be obedient and pretty for the sake of attracting a male. This notion is further emphasized by the action of Act 2, which depicts the marriage as the only purpose of a woman, restricting her to domestic duties and consequently assuring again the domination of man. De Beauvoir explains it that once a woman is married, she becomes her husband’s other, which means that “she cannot think of herself without man” (8). Wilder highlighted the marriage by giving it a whole act in the play. The marriage of Emily and George gave an opportunity for George to grow professionally by going to agricultural school and managing a farm, whereas it gave Emily an end to all her dreams outside the family.

Being feminine is, furthermore, seen as being emotionally volatile, which means that a woman sees things around her based on her state of mind. For example, in Act 1, Emily thinks the moonlight is terrible before she falls in love with George. However, towards the end of the same act, the start of her courtship with George, she is depicted to be fascinated by the moonlight and the smell of Mrs. Gibbs’ plants. The moon itself is a feminine symbol that correlates with fertility as suggested by Min Shen in her article “Quite a Moon”. She argues that both the moon and the womb of a woman have similar phases of birth, death, renewal and rebirth. So, both are “givers of life”, implying that this is the main purpose of women (4).

Femininity can also be viewed through the eyes of women themselves in relation to how they view men. In Act 2, Emily tells George to be perfect just like her father. Emily’s assumption of her father’s perfection and her generalization to include all men reinforces the idea of male supremacy, which is handed down from generation to generation. As a result, a woman is expected to be inferior and ultimately imperfect. This is a social

discrimination based on professions and “natural causes” which prevents women from seeing their real value (De Beauvoir 31).

Women take on their traditional role by conforming to what men expect from women. For example, when George hints about going to the agriculture college and receiving letters from home, Emily positively responds and adds that she would make her letters “interesting” (70).

In Act 3, the dead Emily provides a clue about what a woman could do and is still expected to do, even at times of change towards the end of the play. Despite the current economic change in their life, and being able to afford a “Ford”, Emily points out that women are still not allowed to drive by saying “I don’t drive, though”, referring to the fact that women’s proper activities are not outside the home (Copenhaver 205).

However, one of the minor characters, the milkman Joe Crowell, points out to the only female working outside home as a schoolteacher, Miss Foster, who is getting married and, consequently, quitting her job. The fact that she leaves her economic freedom to enter a world where she is compelled to take on the status of the “other” to a man who is the only one entitled to map her life, is a bump in the way of women’s evolution and social development (De Beauvoir 192-206).

5.3 Ambition for Change

This part of the analysis will explore how Wilder sets the play as traditionally as possible in terms of gender and gender roles but, at the same time, provides some hints that could slowly sweep the audience’s minds towards acknowledging a change of a mindset in term of gender.

The play was published during a time when feminism had just had its breakthrough success through the suffrage movement. Thus, the play starts at nighttime, just before dawn, when the only light on was over a house of a mother giving birth to twins. Being the opening of the play text, these twins can emphasize the birth of a new era of acknowledging the existence of women as equal to men. Based on Reeves’ suggestion that this world is made up of two spheres, private female and public male arenas, the twins symbolize the two spheres as equivalent, which best marked the industrial era as well as the

whole time span of the play (26). The fact that both twins are “gettin'[sic] bigger every year” (10), emphasizes the equal growth and transformation of both genders.

Moreover, Emily stands out as the Stage Manager’s peer. Not only does Wilder give her the courage and voice to vent about her dreams and ambitions about the rights that women long for, but he also gives her a supernatural power to return to life, confirming the end of women’s silence about their rights. It is interesting to see Emily in the first act talk about her dreams and getting silenced by her mother, but here in the end, given the voice, by Wilder. This shows a moral justification of her existence by men, and this points towards the transformation of women in the society (De Beauvoir 19).

Women’s domestic subjugation is also voiced by other characters in the play. For example, Mrs. Gibbs complaining to Dr. Gibbs about George not helping her is symbolic of feminism complaining to authority about the American society not being of help in its maneuvers, based on the symbolism of George representing the American society and Dr. Gibbs as the authority and law, according to Konkle and Annganadewa who view the play as well as its main characters as symbolic (122, 47-48). Nevertheless, Mrs. Gibbs does not complain and wait for anyone to decide or fix things for her; she goes outside to chop wood herself. This is to show that feminism is taking a challenging move towards independence and change through concrete actions.

Another indication of the desired change by women is the conversation between Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb about the desire to travel the world and see something new. According to Almaarof in her study of *Our Town* as a portrayal of reality, at the time of writing the play, writers other than Wilder wrote about travels and adventures abroad of mostly male characters. This is expressed in George’s plan to go away from Grover’s Corners to study at the agricultural college. However, stating the tradition and then bringing in a glimpse of the tide of change through the lines of Mrs. Gibbs encourages for sympathy with the simple ambitions of women. She expresses her desire of traveling to “a country where they don’t talk in English and don’t even want to” (21).

The same tradition-against-change method is deduced by Wilder’s mentioning the male public speaker William Jennings Bryan in the beginning of Act 1 and then highlighting the build-up of Emily’s desire to become a public speaker. Based on Konkle’s suggestion that George represents America, he finally acknowledges her by complimenting her speech. She works on the speech for long, in reference to the struggle and fight of women

for long to get to a place equal to men in society. Later, she affirms her desire to become a public speaker when she talks to her mother towards the end of Act 1.

Although women are the ones expressing their ambition for social change, men affirm this recognition, too. In Act 2, which is called Love and Marriage, the conversation between Mr. Webb and George about who is leader of a family after marriage suggests the turning of the tide of change in the society. Mr. Webb explains what he had been taught by his father before his marriage with Mr. Webb, but then had a successful marriage because he did not listen to his father. It indicates that the change is the desire of both spheres who believe that following traditions cannot work anymore in the revolutionary era.

According to De Beauvoir, men tend to see women as equal in marriage except for some hints of inferiority that are related to certain duties due to biological differences (30). The Stage Manager refers to this equality by repeating the phrase “live two by two”, even though it is an abstract equality. The new status of a married woman is further pointed out through the words of the milkman about his teacher who is getting married. He discreetly affirms that married women can still hold on to their own ambitions if they want to, and that marriage cannot be the end of her dreams. He does not see why marriage can be an obstacle as he claims that “if a person starts out to be a teacher, she ought to stay one” (8).

In the beginning of Act 3, the traces of change that Wilder wants to draw the audience attention to are obviously spoken of by the Stage Manager. He highlights how the change has already gained ground in the town during the nine-year timespan between the first and second acts. Moreover, his words draw attention to the more economic changes that will make significant transformation of the people of the town. Although the Stage Manager does not specify women, it implies that a different economic condition will contribute to the social change that women in particular long for (De Beauvoir 192).

Finally, according to Min Shen, the archetypal moon that Wilder continues to refer to throughout the play represents the “serene yet powerful feminine force” (11). Mr. Webb acknowledges this feminine power, which is represented by his daughter Emily, and says “quite a moon!” (44).

6. Conclusion

This study has examined gender roles in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* in relation to three aspects: masculinity, femininity, and resilience of women and their aspiration for change. The birth of twins that initiates the action of the play is a symbol of two equal entities: man and woman, suggesting the revolutionary era of gender equality even if the play depicts the two genders largely occupying traditional roles. The play dictates society's view of gender roles through the Stage Manager, whereas a new vision of gender is presented through the characters' actions and behaviors.

It has been noted that the play depicts the standard nuclear family in which the roles in it are set and binary in term of gender. Opposites in each familial are presented to highlight their roles through the interaction between them, and further show how the characters are not content with the roles that the society confined them to. For example, Mrs. Gibbs expresses a desire to travel to Paris and Emily aspires to become a public speaker, both ambitions traditionally associated with male roles.

The female characters in the two families display discontent and rebellion through their actions. For example, Mrs. Gibbs does not wait for her son to chop wood for her but does it herself, which is symbolic of the capability and independence of women. Also, Emily displays an opposite independent defiant entity. She expresses her opinions freely and bravely to George about how he is supposed to change his behavior with her.

When it comes to the other characters in the play, they are assigned roles based on the traditional gender roles because the change is to come through the central characters. The Stage Manager presents all the minor characters by giving information about their situation and jobs, assigning the outdoor, too-early, and too-late jobs to male characters and the indoor and home chores to the female ones. The roles these characters take on are seemingly unchangeable and static. However, the aspiration for a better and more equal position for genders is the main message of the play that recurs through the main dynamic characters.

The modern tone of the era is slowly creeping into the town through the interaction between the characters. It is only until the final act that we know that life is changing in the town through "gradual changes" and people "coming in fords". However, there is a contribution to gender equality and rise of femininity way before that through the female characters' behaviors, opinions, and actions, and also through the acknowledgement of women's future roles by the male characters.

This essay refutes the conventional view of most of the studies on *Our Town*. Several studies agree that Wilder set a high value on the traditional gender roles and the typical family structure. However, this essay concludes that although the play depicts those conventions of gender, it particularly reveals the new current of the century and shows how limiting these roles are in its reproduction of them. In *Our Town*, female characters experience the feminist resilience even at times when they comply adherently to the concept of woman which society imposes based on gender.

7. Works Cited

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