

*The Saturday Review  
of Literature*

# The Skin of Whose Teeth?

*The Strange Case of Mr. Wilder's New Play and "Finnegans Wake"*

JOSEPH CAMPBELL and HENRY MORTON ROBINSON

WHILE thousands cheer, no one has yet pointed out that Mr. Thornton Wilder's exciting play, "The Skin of Our Teeth," is not an entirely original creation, but an Americanized re-creation, thinly disguised, of James Joyce's "Finnegans Wake." Mr. Wilder himself goes out of his way to wink at the knowing one or two in the audience, by quoting from and actually naming some of his characters after the main figures of Joyce's masterpiece. Important plot elements, characters, devices of presentation, as well as major themes and many of the speeches, are directly and frankly imitated, with but the flimsiest veneer to lend an American touch to the original features.

"The Skin of Our Teeth" takes its circular form from "Finnegans Wake," closing and opening with the cycle-renewing, river-running thought-stream of the chief female character. The main divisions of the play are closed by periodic catastrophes (ice-age, deluge, war), devices which are borrowed from the cosmic dissolutions of "Finnegans Wake." Furthermore, Mr. Antrobus, Thornton Wilder's hero, is strangely reminiscent of Joyce's protagonist, H. C. Earwicker, "that homogenius man," who has endured throughout all the ages of the world, though periodically overwhelmed by floods, wars, and other catastrophes. The activities, talents, and troubles of the two characters have significant resemblances. In both works they are Adam, All-Father of the world. They are tireless inventors and land-conquerors; both are constantly sending communique back home; both run for election, broadcast to the world, and are seen in television. Moreover, their characters have been impugned. In each case the hero repudiates the charges against him, but the secret guilt which each seeks to hide is constantly betrayed by slips of the tongue. To add to the long list of similarities, both are seduced under extenuating circumstances by a couple of temptresses, and are forever "raping home" the women of the Sabines.

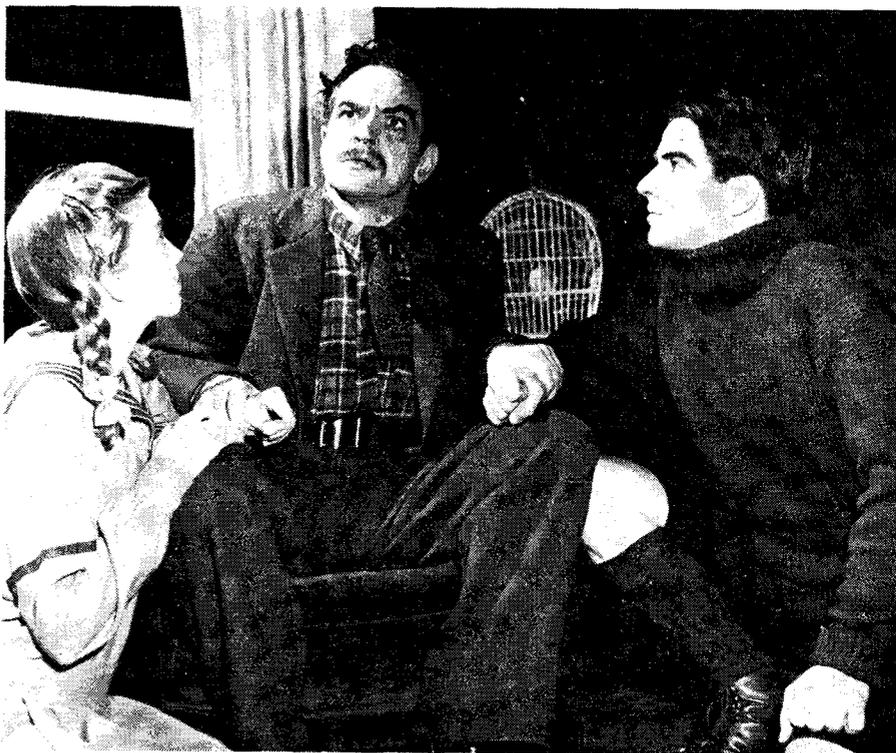
Sabine leads both authors to Sabina, the name of Mr. Wilder's housekeeper, who has been "raped home" by Mr. Antrobus from one of his war expeditions. Her prototype is the garrulous housekeeper of "Finnegans Wake." "He raped her home," says Joyce, "Sabrine ashore, in a parakeet's cage, by dredgerous lands and devious delts" (p. 197). To this delicious Joycean line Mr. Wilder is apparently indebted for his rape theme and the name of the Antrobus housekeeper.

The conversation between Mrs. Antrobus and Sabina in Act I carries the lilt of the Anna Livia Plurabelle chapter, and rehearses some of its themes, notably the patience of the wife while younger love beguiles her husband; and again, the little feminine attentions lavished on the man while he broods in melancholy (pp. 198-200).

The wonderful letter which the wife

of Mr. Antrobus throws into the ocean at the close of Act II—that letter which would have told him all the secrets of her woman's heart and would have revealed to him the mystery of why the universe was set in motion—is precisely the puzzling mis-sive of "Finnegans Wake," tossed into the sea, buried in the soil, ever-awaited, ever half-found, ever reinterpreted, misinterpreted, multifariously over-and-under interpreted, which continually twinkles, with its life-riddle, through every page of Joyce's work.

In Mr. Wilder's play, the wife's name is Maggy—which is one of her names in "Finnegans Wake" (p. 111). She has borne innumerable children—again see "Finnegans Wake" (p. 201). Her daughter aspires to powder and rouge and fancies herself in silks ("Finnegans Wake," pp. 143-148). The two sons, Cain and Abel, the abomin-



Frances Heflin, Frederic March, and Montgomery Clift in a scene from Thornton Wilder's new comedy, "The Skin of Our Teeth."

ated and the cherished, supply a fratricidal battle-theme that throbs through the entire play, precisely as it does in "Finnegans Wake." Cain in both works is a peeping-tom and publisher of forbidden secrets. In Mr. Wilder's work he spies on and speaks out about the love-makings in the beach cabana. In Joyce's, he tattles the whole story of the love life of his parents (pp. 241-244).

**T**HE ingenious and very amusing scene at the close of Act I in which Tallulah Bankhead turns to the audience and begs for wood—chairs, bric-a-brac, anything at all—with which to feed the fire that will preserve humanity during the approaching ice-age, is a clever re-rendering of a passage in *Finnegans Wake*. In Joyce's work, when elemental catastrophe has almost annihilated mankind, the heroine goes about gathering into her knapsack various odds and ends, to be reanimated by the fire of life. As Joyce puts it: "She'll loan a vesta (i.e., borrow a light) and hire some peat and sarch the shores her cockles to heat and she'll do all a turfwoman can . . . to puff the blaziness on" (p. 12). Mr. Wilder here follows Joyce's lead even to the point of having his actress borrow a light with which to ignite the preserving hearth.

There are, in fact, no end of meticulous unacknowledged copyings. At the entrance of Mr. Antrobus, for instance: his terrific banging at the door duplicates the fantastic thumpings of Joyce's hero at the gate of his own home (see page 63-64) where he is arrested for thus disturbing the peace of the whole community. The great swathing of scarfs and wrappings, which Mr. Antrobus removes when he comes in, follows the mode of Joyce's hero who is characteristically enveloped in no end of costumery. In the famous passage on page 35, HCE is seen in heaped-up attire: "caoutchouc kepi and great belt and hideinsacks and his blaufunx fustian and iron-sides jackboots and Bhagafat gaiters and his rubberized inverness." Perhaps the chief difference between the protean HCE and the rigid Mr. Antrobus is revealed when the latter's wrappings are removed, leaving only a thin reminder of Joyce's grotesque folk-hero.

Throughout the work there are innumerable minor parallelisms. The razzing which Mr. Antrobus endures at the Shriners' Convention repeats the predicament of H. C. Earwicker throughout Book II, Chapter III (pp. 309-382). "The Royal Divorce" theme of "Finnegans Wake" reappears in the wish of Mr. Antrobus to be divorced from his wife. Neither of the heroes achieves his end; the wish itself being

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liquidated by catastrophe. The fortune-teller in Act II plays the role of Joyce's heroine, A.L.P. who assigns to all at the Masquerade the tokens of their fate (pp. 207-215). Later Mr. Wilder's gypsy coaches the seductress of Mr. Antrobus, just as "Grandma Grammar" in "Finnegans Wake" teaches Isabelle how to "decline and conjugate" young men (pp. 268-270). Trivia-wise, the key-word "commodius" occurs in the second line of "Finnegans Wake" and within the first two minutes of "The Skin of Our Teeth." Finally, at the end of Mr. Wilder's play, the Hours pass across the stage intoning sublime instructions. This is a device conspicuous both in "Ulysses" and in "Finnegans Wake." Many further similarities could be cited.

**I**T is a strange performance that Mr. Wilder has turned in. Is he hoaxing us? On the one hand, he gives no credit to his source, masking it with an Olsen and Johnson technique. On the other hand, he makes no attempt to conceal his borrowings, emphasizing them rather, sometimes even stressing details which with a minimum of ingenuity he could have suppressed or altered. But if puzzlement strikes us here, it grows when we consider the critics—those literary advisors who four years ago dismissed "Finnegans Wake" as a literary abortion not worth the modern reader's time, yet today hail with rave-notice its Broadway reaction. The banquet was rejected but the Hellzapoppin's scrap that fell from the table they clutch to their bosom. Writes Alexander Woolcott, "Thornton Wilder's dauntless and heartening comedy stands head and shoulders above anything ever written for our stage." And why not, since in inception and detail the work springs from that "dauntless and heartening" genius, James Joyce!

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The United States Civil Service Commission announces an unprecedented need for civilian Library Assistants in naval station libraries and in other Federal agencies including some of the larger libraries in army posts throughout the country. Persons with from six to eighteen semester hours of library training in approved library schools, or from six to eighteen months of paid library experience, or from three to twelve months of recognized library apprenticeship are urged to make application to take the written test for these positions.

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# A Negro Looks at the Negro Press

WARREN H. BROWN

NOTE: This article is published under the auspices of the Council for Democracy. Mr. Brown is Director of Negro Relations for that organization.

**M**Y race in the United States can be divided into two groups: Negroes and sensation-mongering Negro leaders. So much is heard from some of the latter that the former are often ignored and more often misunderstood. That is bad for the Negro. It is bad for the white. It creates the impression that the Negro who speaks loudest and most is representative of most Negroes. That, happily for all of us, is not the case.

I was born in the South and raised in the Midwest. I taught in a southern Negro college. I have now lived for twenty years in various northern Negro communities. During that time I have come to know the northern Negro, his problems, and his leaders.

The Negro that I know, North and South, is not what his agitator-leaders say that he is and want him to be. Despite the desperate times that he has lately been through and the all-out effort from certain quarters to turn his bad times to disruptive account, he has not been swept off his American balance. That is fortunate for America. Because it is fortunate for America, it is fortunate for the Negro. Despite his sometimes snail's-pace progress, the Negro knows that in America—for the long pull—he can't lose.

But the drive to embitter and unbalance him, which began during the depression under Communist auspices, has gained momentum with American entrance into the war. Nowhere is that drive being so aggressively promoted as in the incendiary columns of the Negro press.

Most Negro newspapers are what they condemn the most prejudiced whites for being. They are Negro first and American second. They foster segregation by aiming to make all Negroes race-conscious before they are America-conscious. They feed and prosper by sensationally playing up the Negro at his worst. When they publish news of the white community, it is generally an account of the white man at his worst. Every incident that can be used to breed ill-will between the races is seized upon. If the incident is important, they play it up sensationally. If it is trivial, they in-

flate it until it seems important. In season and out, they present a distorted, dishonest picture of America—and of the progress, place, and opportunity of the Negro in it. Of course, there are some notable exceptions, Negro newspapers that are edited with exceptional skill and high ethical standards.

When a Negro runs seriously afoul of the law, the Negro press seldom stops to ask the facts. It goes to town in flaming headlines to turn the matter to race-rousing account.

Recently, in New York City, a demented Negro attempting to escape arrest was shot by a white policeman. *The People's Voice*—Harlem newspaper—did not wait for an official investigation. It chose to ignore the fact that, under the Police Commissioner and courts of New York, a fair trial can be assured. Instead, this paper broke out its blackest type for a "police brutality" story. Behind the story was the editor of the paper, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a Baptist minister and New York City Councilman. The Rev. Mr. Powell called for "mass action." The kind of language he used made it plain that what he was asking for was mob action. He went further than that and—in a Negro parody of the Ku Klux Klan—cried out for the



—SRL-Arni Photo  
Warren H. Brown

Negroes of Harlem to take the law in their own hands:

"We Won't Take It Any Longer," his editorial declared. "We refuse to be law-abiding citizens if there are to be special laws for Negro people.

"This is the final warning. If the officials of New York don't make the laws the same for all people, they must accept full blame for any consequences."

In August three Negro soldiers on guard duty near a Louisiana town were accused of making improper advances to a white girl. They allegedly confessed. The case went to court. A jury found the soldiers guilty. Southern juries in such cases would hardly be called unprejudiced. But statements made by the accused pointed out their own disregard for military regulations and serious indiscretion to the well-established Southern sex taboo.

**B**UT the Negro press, from coast to coast, turned loose a typographical flood that left out nothing which might embitter and arouse the nation's Negroes.

"Southern Justice—Soldiers Found Guilty by White Jury," was the headline in the Los Angeles *Sentinel*.

"Torture Three Soldiers in Louisiana Scottsboro Case," ran the streamers in the Indianapolis *Recorder*.

"I Wanted to Serve My Country—They Wouldn't Let Me," was the played-up quote in the Houston, Texas, *Informer*.

"Parents Worry as Letters Tell of Possible Klan-Mob Violence," from the *Ohio State News*.

"Men Face All-White Jury in Frame-Up Case," from the San Antonio *Register*.

Recently reports were received in the United States of several incidents involving Negro troops in England. Some of the Negro weeklies without firsthand information twisted reports out of all proportions.

Just how the job was done can be gathered from the headlines in the *Amsterdam Star News* (New York City):

"U. S. Forces Britain to Jim Crow Troops."

"Churchill Puts Issue in Lap of Uncle Sam."

"Angry Parliament in Uproar over Vicious Treatment of Black Soldiers."  
"Pacific Called 'White Man's War'."

It is true that the Negro does not yet, everywhere in the United States, receive adequate justice. It is true that American prejudices have been called forth among white troops in England. But the kind of justice for which the Negro strives is undoubtedly delayed by the Negro press. Its