

The Skin of Our Teeth

Comedy in 3 acts by Thornton Wilder

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama

Synopsis

The play is a three-part allegory about the life of mankind, centering around the Antrobus family of the fictional town of Excelsior, New Jersey. The phrase used as the title comes from the King James Bible. Job 19:20. My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.

The main characters of the play are George and Maggie Antrobus (from Greek: ἄνθρωπος, "human" or "person"), their two children, Henry and Gladys, and Sabina, who appears as the family's maid in the first and third acts, and as a beauty queen temptress in the second act. The play's action takes place in a modern setting, but is full of anachronisms reaching back to prehistoric times. The characters' roles as archetypes are emphasized by their identification with Biblical and classical personalities.

For example, the name Lilly Sabina is a reference to the myth of Lilith and to the historical rape of the Sabine women, identifications made relatively explicit in the play's text. Henry Antrobus's name was changed from "Cain", following his murder of his brother Abel. This implies that George Antrobus is Adam, and Maggie Antrobus Eve, further supported by an event at the beginning of the play when Mr. Antrobus composes a song for his wife in honor of their anniversary, in which the lyrics: "Happy w'dding ann'vers'ry dear Eva" appear, though Mrs. Antrobus is referred to as Maggie throughout the play.

The murder of Abel is an underlying theme in the play, Mr. Antrobus pays far more attention to his "perfect" third child Gladys than he does Henry, because of the murder of his favorite child. As this treatment of Henry continues, throughout the acts is seen progression of Henry slowly becoming more angry with his family, which reaches its climax in the third act.

While the Antrobus family remains constant throughout the play, the three acts do not form a continuous narrative. The first act takes place during an impending ice age, in the second act the family circumstances have changed as George becomes president of the Fraternal Order of Mammals (apparent references to Sodom and Gomorrah but also to the Roaring Twenties), and the end of the world approaches a second time; the third act opens with Maggie and Gladys emerging from a bunker at the end of a seven-year-long war.

An additional layer of stylistic complexity is added by the occasional interruption of the narrative scene by actors directly addressing the audience.

The Skin of our Teeth opened on October 15, 1942 at the Shubert Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. It was produced by Michael Myerberg and directed by Elia Kazan.

Source:

Wikipedia