Our Town : An Anti-Realistic View Essay, Research Paper

Our Town:

An Anti-Realistic View

In his play, Our Town, the three time Pulitzer Prize winning dramatist, Thornton Wilder, uses techniques somewhat unconventional and anti-realistic compared to the works of other dramatists. Being more like a statement, the play’s theme is about enjoying the simple pleasures of life and daily routines. Wilder employs many unconventional or anti-realistic ideas and techniques to further advance the play’s universal theme and to incorporate audience participation.

The first technique that is distinguishable in the play is Wilder’s use of minimal scenery. The only thing the audience sees is an empty stage at the beginning of the first act. The scenery doesn’t get much more complex from there. Simple, roof-like structures hanging from the ceiling employ houses. Simple tables and chairs in the middle of the stage represent different rooms. The audience is forced to use their imagination. Even though there are no walls, no windows and no doors, the audience envisions a house.

Also forcing audience participation, pantomime is generously used by Wilder throughout the play. At one point in the play, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb snap string-beans together on a bench. The audience sees no string-beans or knives. Yet, the women keep their hands moving as if there really were string-beans in front of them. Even though these things are not visible, the audience quickly realizes what they are doing. And with the help of a few simple sound effects, the audience discovers that there is a pot that the two ladies are depositing their final products in. This scene might normally bore the audience or create a disinterest in the play if these objects were really there. By not seeing these objects, the audience obtains an interest in the scene by using their own minds to figure out what is happening.

Wilder’s third attempt to make the audience active participants in the play is the use of planted actors. These planted actors play their first role in the play in Act I when the Stage Manager invites any questions the audience may have for Mr. Webb about Grover’s Corners. One planted actor, referred to as Lady in a box’, asks, “Mr. Webb, is there any culture or love of beauty in Grover’s Corners?”. Mr. Webb seems to answer the question thoughtfully and to the best of his knowledge. These rehearsed, artificial spectators are randomly placed in the audience with a specific job of asking the Stage Manager and other characters questions and receiving answers about Grover’s Corners that actual audience members might want to know. This technique serves two purposes. The first purpose is to provide background information. Linking the audience to the play is the second purpose. These actors make the audience feel as if they are active participants in the play. And this feeling creates even more interest in the play.

Throughout the play, there are more techniques that Wilder uses that have nothing to do the staging or scenery. First, Wilder gives the Stage Manager the power to manipulate time and space. He shows the audience both flashbacks and flash-forwards to educate them of what has happened and what will happen. The first time the audience really sees that the play is non- sequential and random is when the Stage Manager tells them of Joe Crowell’s future. He states, “Want to tell you something about that boy Joe Crowell there. Joe was awful bright – graduated from high school here, head of his class. So he got a scholarship to Massachusetts Tech. Graduated head of his class there too. Going to be a great engineer, Joe was. But the war broke out and he died in France. – All that education for nothing.” This unconventional technique once again provides background information for the audience.

The final, and most significant example of Wilder’s unconventional techniques, is the use of a narrator. All the narration is done by the Stage Manager. The audience learns throughout the play that the Stage Manager has this god-like omniscience about him. He serves as our guide and our teacher. He guides us through the town and each character’s emotions, background, and future. He teaches us all the things Wilder is trying to instill in the audience. And for that reason, we can conclude that the Stage Manager is Thornton Wilder’s mouthpiece. Wilder found a way to indirectly express his views through the Stage Manager. The Stage Manager’s versatility also shows when he actually plays some of the characters in the play. He acted as Ms. Forrester, Mr. Morgan, and the minister. These characters are insignificant ones. Yet, that is not the point. The Stage Manager takes these opportunities to express more of Wilder’s views through asides.

Using these unconventional techniques, Wilder advances the play’s universal theme. He upheld its simple’ theme by using techniques that simplify aspects of the play. He removed props, manipulated time and space and used a narrator to exemplify his play’s theme. These strategically used techniques certainly did help advance the theme and at the same time turned the audience into active participants in the play.