

A Wilder Night: Study Guide

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SO YOU'RE GOING TO SEE SOME ABSTRACT THEATRE...

ab·stract \ab-strakt\ (adj): existing in thought or idea, but having no physical or concrete existence

When we go to the theatre, we expect to be told a story that looks, sounds, and feels realistic. Perhaps we become so invested in the story and its characters that we forget we're in a theatre. Even if it's a fantastical story, we watch a slice of life for these characters and feel immersed in their world.



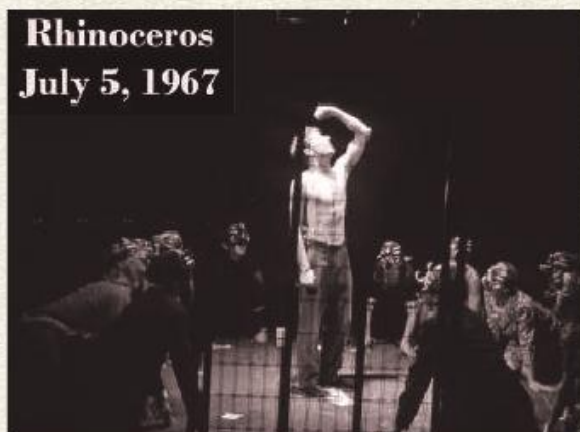
When it comes to abstract theatre however, the world of the play is created outside the realm of realism. You won't see many (if any) props or a realistic set that clearly defines time and space within the story. You might be reminded by the actors that you're in a theatre watching a play, and that everything you see is fake. Why? Because abstract theatre is a style of drama that focuses on *representing* situations, events, and feelings rather than *realistically portraying* them. To encourage the audience to think more about the themes of the story rather than the story itself, the realistic



elements of a play might be swapped with evocative imagery, which leads to a rather surreal experience.

"Abstract" is an artistic style that's found in all areas of visual arts, music, and dance.

The visual style of abstract theatre was created by two designers, Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, who experimented with different lighting techniques and set designs that created a unique— one might say abstract— aesthetic.



Rhinoceros
July 5, 1967

THE ABSTRACT AESTHETIC



We mentioned the lack of props and set, but how do you know you're watching an abstract play and not just a show with a low budget? Let's talk about why suggestive—or representational—design rather than realistic design is so important!



There are several dramatists that believe theatre is meant for much more than entertainment. A stage could—perhaps even *should*—be used to inspire the audience to think and change. By removing expected conventions of traditional theatre, a playwright might be able to focus the audience's attention on the message they're trying to share, which is often political. Without realistic lights, sets, or props, audiences aren't distracted from what the actors say and do and can more easily reflect on themselves or the social climate. When you see a piece of abstract theatre, you're not there for a grand spectacle or to escape reality for a little while—the playwright requests you come prepared to feel and to think.

Another facet of abstract theatre is “breaking the fourth wall.” The “fourth wall” in theatre is a term describing the imaginary wall between stage and audience. The fourth wall is broken by showing

the inner mechanics of a theatre (stagehands, hidden rigging), or by actors addressing the audience directly. This reminds the audience not to get too attached to the characters or the plot. Without empathy for the characters, an audience member might think of the character as a symbol and the plot as a parable.

Abstract theatre is distinctive because it allows the audience to have a greater presence in the theatre-watching experience. In the end, the play is just as much about *you* as it is about the stories and characters. It's unusual, and might even be uncomfortable at first, but give abstract theatre a chance!

After tonight's show, consider where your focus went! What were you able to experience because of the abstract?



TIME IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

1850s

- Technological advancements: mills, railroads, telegraphs
- Cotton in high demand; slaves become the majority of workers on plantations
- Native American conflicts

1870s

- Inventions: telephone; light bulb; phonograph; steam drill; headphone jack
- 15th Amendment ratified, giving black Americans right to vote.
- Native Americans ordered onto reservations; the Great Sioux War

1890s

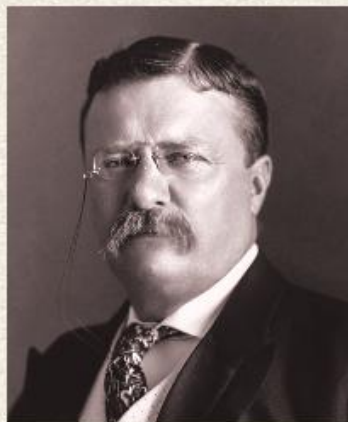
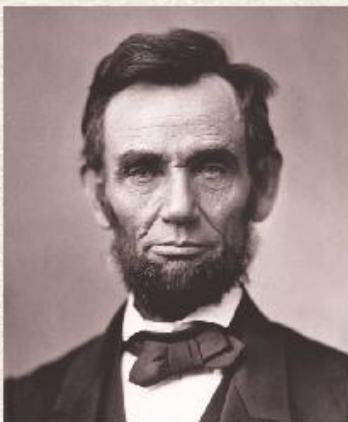
- Plessy vs. Ferguson; racial segregation approved under “separate but equal” rule
- Basketball; electricity; Pledge of Allegiance; the Boston Marathon; voting machine; underground public transportation

1860s

- President Abraham Lincoln passes the Civil Rights Act
- American Civil War

1880s

- Congress repeals Civil Rights Act of 1875, allowing discrimination based on race



The Long Christmas Dinner spans a full 90 years, while both *Pullman Car Hiawatha* and *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* occur in a singular decade of the 1920s and/or the 1930s.

1910s

- World War I 1914; America enters in 1917; the war ends 1919.
- Oreo cookies; American Girl Guides (AKA, Girl Scouts); Grand Central terminal; first transcontinental airline flight; daylight savings time.

1930s

- Wall Street Crash of 1929 leads into the Great Depression:
- President Franklin D. Roosevelt enacts the New Deal
- Amelia Earhart solos across the Atlantic

1900s

- President Theodore Roosevelt becomes “the modern president”
- Roosevelt grants protection to Indian ruins; designates lands as national monuments
- Air conditioning; National Parks system expansion; first passenger flight; NAACP formation; Ford Model T.
- First Native American Senator, Charles Curtis, elected to the Senate in 1907.

1920s

- A consumer mass culture society: surging economy; city living; ready-to-wear clothes
- 19th Amendment grants women the right to vote.
- Time Magazine; Warner Brothers Pictures; Route 66
- Indian Citizen Act of 1924



“WILDER” THEMES AND MOTIFS

CYCLES AND MEMORY—Many abstract plays experiment with the concept of time, often using repetitive events or cyclical structure. In *The Long Christmas Dinner*, Wilder uses the event of a family's Christmas dinner as the backdrop for the theme of memory. Despite all the changes within this household, there is an aspect that stays the same. Similar phrases and events happen in every generation, reinforcing the notion of memory and continuance. A family, though it changes and grows, is a stronghold of tradition and history.



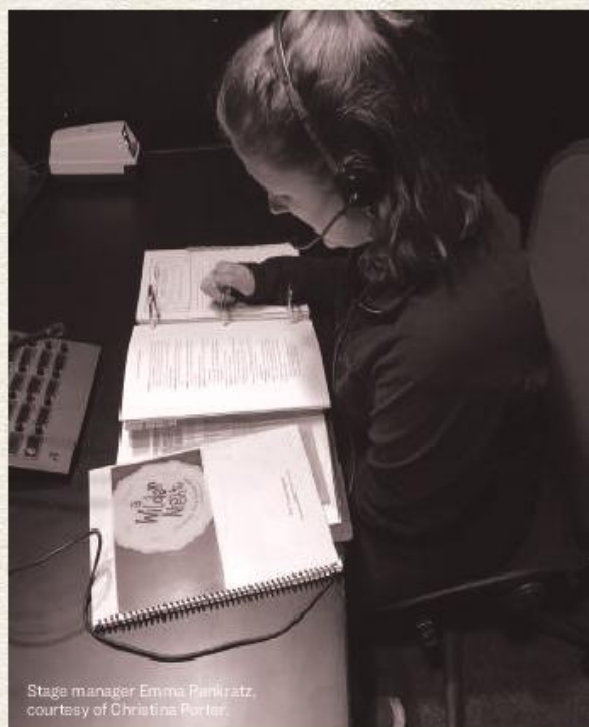
TIME AND SPACE—You'll see in *Pullman Car Hiawatha* just how many places one train can go. Many abstract plays—and certainly many of Wilder's plays—traverse planes of time and space, meaning that the story of the play doesn't always stay on earth. *Pullman Car Hiawatha* in particular explores galaxies and classical art, philosophy, and nature—all through the lens of someone who might be able to see beyond the tangible.



FAMILY CHATS—Both *The Long Christmas Dinner* and *Pullman Car Hiawatha* feature the motif of familial conversation. At first glance, these conversations seem simple, perhaps superficial at times, but Wilder uses them to unearth some existential topics about what humanity faces as we go through life. Within the chatter, truth is established and beauty is recognized.



THE STAGE MANAGER



Stage manager Emma Pankratz,
courtesy of Christina Porter

A common motif amongst Wilder's works lies within the role of the Stage Manager (SM). Many audience members may know Wilder's famous play *Our Town* and the character named Stage Manager. A similar character type appears in two of the three plays today, though he isn't necessarily called out or named.

What is a stage manager, and what do they do? Why would Wilder choose to use the SM as a recurring character in his plays?

The SM actually serves many roles in a production: supervising the physical aspects of a stage production, assisting the director during rehearsals, and being in charge of the stage during the performances. He or she ensures that every aspect of the production runs as smoothly as possible from pre-rehearsals through rehearsals and into tech and performances. The SM assumes full responsibility of the stage during the performance of a play.

Within *Pullman Car Hiawatha* many things are happening on stage, and the SM character orchestrates what occurs. In *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, the SM actually plays other characters, but they are minor and brief and generally there to help the audience see Ma and her personality. They also interrupt to remind us that we are watching actors perform roles on the stage. Both of these roles show the stage manager character moving the plot forward. He controls what the audience sees on stage, which characters speak or get the "spotlight," and the the continuity of the production. This is especially evident in *Pullman*. It is as if the stage manager represents God (IF "all the world's a stage," then surely the SM must be God)—and if he does, then the other characters are representative of various walks of life.

Contrasting the presence of the stage manager in these shows is the absence of such a character in *The Long Christmas Dinner*. Without said character, life is truly one long dinner. It is repetitive and never-ending. The plot doesn't appear to move along smoothly. The characters themselves lack guidance and direction, and they fear what happens beyond their dinner table.

Wilder uses the stage manager as an authoritative figure to not only guide the audience through the play, but the actors as well—he omnisciently allows the plan of the story to unfold.

"Either we live by
accident and die by
accident, or we live by
plan and die by plan."
-Thornton Wilder

THORNTON WILDER

Thornton Niven Wilder was born on April 17th, 1897 in Wisconsin. Wilder endured bullying during his childhood years for being "overly intellectual." Fittingly, he hid from his bullies by escaping to the school library. It was in the library that he first started writing plays.

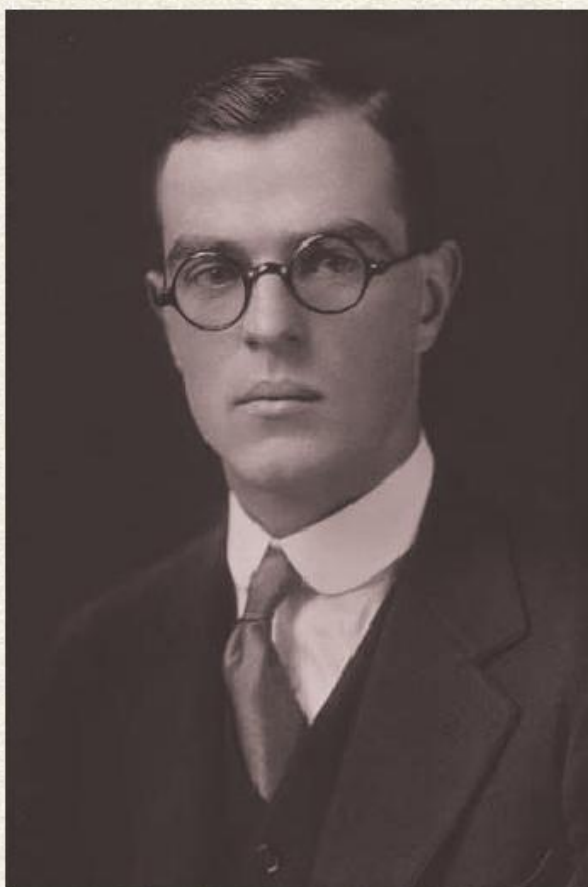
Wilder was born into a talented and artistic family. His father was a newspaper editor and a diplomat; his mother wrote poetry; his siblings were accomplished poets and authors. Using a slightly different set of talents, one sister went on to become a zoologist.

Wilder served in World War I. Upon returning, he received a bachelor of arts from Yale, pursued archeology and Italian in Rome, and subsequently received a master's of arts in French literature from Princeton. Wilder later found himself in New Jersey teaching French literature at Lawrenceville School. After winning the Pulitzer Prize for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilder resigned from Lawrenceville.

No matter what, Wilder believed himself to be a teacher first, a writer second. Years later he taught at the University of Chicago, where he wrote *Our Town*. During World War II, he again served, becoming a lieutenant colonel. After the war he was invited to be a visiting professor at Harvard University.



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Wilder surrounded himself with accomplished individuals: Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Montgomery Clift, Russel Wright, and Willa Cather. He even wrote a screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock. Proficient in German, Spanish, French, English, and a smattering of other languages, Wilder translated several novels. He became a 3-time Pulitzer Prize winning playwright and author for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *Our Town*, and *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

In 1930, Wilder used his earnings from his first prize-winning book to build a house for his family in Hamden, Connecticut. He traveled extensively, never married, and eventually died due to heart failure on December 7, 1975.

"Seek the lofty by reading, hearing and seeing great work at some moment every day."
-Thornton Wilder