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THE DUALITY OF HOPE AND DESPAIR: THORNTON WILDER'S APOCALYPTIC VISION IN *THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH*¹

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Abstract

Thornton Wilder's The Skin of Our Teeth is one of the earliest precursors of apocalyptic themes in modern American drama. The play, written in 1942 when America was plunging into the enormity of World War II, criticizes the progress of humanity, life struggle, unity of American family, rise of technology and war using apocalypse as a metaphor. The focus of the play is on the Antrobuses—a typical American family with two children and a maid who have to survive apocalypses such as the glacier, the deluge and the war respectively in three acts. The recurrent image of apocalypse reveals a sense of both an ending—despair and a new beginning—hope. This study examines Wilder's apocalyptic vision in The Skin of Our Teeth by comparing it to the traditional form of apocalypse which contains the duality of hope and despair.

Key Words: Thornton Wilder, The Skin Of Our Teeth, Apocalypse, Apocalyptic Literature.

UMUT VE UMUTSUZLUK İKİLEMİ: THORNTON WILDER'IN RAMAK KALDI'DAKİ KIYAMET İMGELEMİ

Özet

Thornton Wilder'in Ramak Kaldı adlı eseri modern Amerikan tiyatrosunda kıyamet temalarının en erken öncülerinden biridir. 1942 yılında Amerika İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nın büyüklüğünün içine dalarken yazılan oyun, kıyameti bir benzetme olarak kullanarak, insanlığın gelişmesini, yaşam mücadelesini, Amerikan ailesinin bütünlüğünü, teknolojinin yükselişini ve savaşı eleştirir. Oyunun odak noktası üç perdede sırasıyla buzul, tufan ve savaş gibi kıyametlerden sonra hayatta kalmak zorunda olan, iki çocuk ve bir hizmetçiden oluşan tipik bir Amerikan ailesi Antrobus'lardır. Tekrarlanan kıyamet imgesi hem bir sonu—umutsuzluğu hem de yeni bir başlangıcı—umudu açığa vurur. Bu çalışma,

¹ This is a revised and expanded version of the poster presented at a symposium entitled “8th International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium” May 14-16, 2008 in İzmir hosted by İzmir University of Economics. Also, *The Skin of Our Teeth* is among the plays analyzed in my PhD dissertation entitled “The Stages / Spaces of Apocalypse: The Representation of “The End” in the Contemporary American Drama”.

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Wilder'ın Ramak Kaldı oyunundaki kıyamet imgelemine, umut ve umutsuzluk ikilemini kapsayan geleneksel kıyamet yapısı ile karşılaştırarak incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Thornton Wilder, Ramak Kaldı, Kıyamet, Kıyamet Edebiyatı.

“There is no better metaphor to express this duality of fear and hope than that of apocalypse” (Lewicki, 1984: xii).

Thornton Wilder, one of the most popular and brilliant American playwrights, wrote his play *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1942 right after America's involvement in World War II. The play which won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1943 illustrates war as one of the apocalyptic cataclysms. Wilder's three-act-comedy presents the life of the Antrobuses—a typical American family with two children and a maid. Represented by the Antrobus, the play is indeed the story of mankind's struggle to fight against the catastrophic forces threatening humanity. The first act takes the audience to prehistoric times, to an impending Ice Age, in the second act Mr. Antrobuses has to save his family once more from deluge, and the third act takes place in modern times at the end of a long war. Thus, the Antrobuses have to survive an apocalypse in each act: the glacier in the first act, the deluge in the second act and finally the war in the third act. Since after each apocalyptic catastrophe, the Antrobuses have to make a beginning, the recurrent image of apocalypse in the play reveals a sense of both an ending—despair and a new beginning—hope. This study compares the duality of hope and despair which is inherent in the traditional apocalyptic imagery to Wilder's apocalyptic vision in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. For this reason, this study primarily examines the combination of hope and despair in the apocalyptic imagination and then provides an analysis of Wilder's representation of this apocalyptic duality which is evident in his juxtapositions of endings and beginnings.

The word *apocalyptic*, is originated from the “Greek word *apokalypsis* meaning an unyielding, an uncovering, or a revealing of truths” (Zimbaro, 1996: xi). However, for a long time, apocalyptic has been used as a term describing “movements or ideological perspectives focusing on eschatological or end-time conditions” (Zimbaro, 1996: 20). While the apocalyptic literature is “believed to be originated with Zoroastrianism, the sixteenth century B.C. Iranian religion,” “the symbols of the apocalyptic literature appear throughout early Judaic and Christian literature” (Zimbaro, 1996: 20). One of the recent and popular definitions of the term “apocalypse” is made by John J. Collins and other members of Apocalypse Group of Society of Biblical Literature: “Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world (Collins, 1979: 9).

This definition which evaluates apocalypse as a revelatory literature with its temporal and spatial dimensions, according to Hellholm, “brings to one’s mind the question: why were Apocalypses ever written?” (1986: 26). Believing in the necessity to emphasize the function of apocalypse, Hellholm suggests that the definition should also include the following addition “*intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority*” (1986: 27). Therefore, apocalypse is not only a revelatory literature but also a crisis literature. Reddish explains the function of apocalypse as “giv[ing] comfort and hope to people who were overwhelmed, confused, frightened, and beleaguered” (2001: 4).

“The purpose of apocalyptic literature was to provide an alternative way of understanding the world, a different worldview. Apocalyptic writings assured their readers that indeed God was ultimately in control of history and the universe, in spite of current appearances. Eventually God would intervene to defeat the wicked and reward the righteous” (Reddish, 2001: 4-5).

The function of apocalypse to provide hope to the believers who are facing a crisis is significant since it denotes the duality of hope and despair inherent in the religious apocalyptic imagination. The apocalyptic tradition is based on a hopeful attitude in which the righteous are rewarded and the destruction of the cosmos through a series of calamities is followed by the creation of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21.1, Isa. 65.17). From this viewpoint, Enzensberger associates apocalypse with utopia and states that “[t]he idea of apocalypse has accompanied utopian thought since its first beginnings, pursuing it like a shadow, like a reverse side that cannot be left behind: without catastrophe no millennium, without apocalypse no paradise” (1982: 233).

This traditional religious apocalyptic form which contains the dual link between hope and despair has been a source of inspiration for various fields such as politics, literature and art. The apocalyptic imagination has been that widespread and popular since, as Reddish claims, it is “timeless” (1995: 37). According to Reddish, “[r]ooted in the ancient past and addressed to ancient problems,” the apocalyptic literature “continues to speak to new generations with its message of hope and comfort” (1995: 37). The apocalyptic images “continue to be reapplied in new situations whenever the forces of evil seem overwhelming and hope recedes into the distance” (Reddish, 1995: 37).

Although the traditional apocalypse as a religious term has been a powerful inspiration source, this religious concept has not remained completely the same. Just as the world itself, the apocalypse as a religious concept has been secularized and has taken secular forms in literature, as well. May comments that “[w]ith the blight of secularization already attacking the roots of religious faith, it is not surprising that the literary imagination developed its own everyday analogue for

the images of classical apocalypse” (1972: 227). As a result of this secularization process, one of the significant changes is the tendency to disregard the hopeful attitude in the apocalyptic imagination and to put the emphasis on despair. Lewicki comments that “rebirth, or the appearance of the new heaven and earth, is the core of the religious apocalypse, but is not always present in works of fictions” (1984: xvi). The absence of rebirth, for Lewicki, “indicates a fundamental change that occurred when the concept of apocalypse was adopted by secular literature, where it was increasingly understood to denote destruction rather than rebirth” (1984: xvi). Furthermore, May who in *Towards a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel* provides a typology of apocalypse, analyzes the secular apocalypse type in two different categories as “apocalypse of despair” and “humorous apocalypse”: *Apocalypse of despair concentrates on ‘the perennial degenerative tendencies of human nature and ... metaphors to gauge their enormity. It took finally the overall sense of loss of world of contemporary America to provoke a new apocalyptic imagination that recreates man’s capacity to look with hope upon his history of mistakes. Humorous apocalypse, adopting the secular analogue of the traditional sequence, asks man to take such a close look at catastrophe that only laughter will relieve the tension. Yet the laughter is itself at least a passage to the future* (May, 1972: 227-228).

The element which distinguishes the two categories of secular apocalypse in May’s typology is whether the emphasis is on the desperation of humanity or on the hope evoked by the humorous attitude. Therefore, the duality of hope and despair which is one of the most significant elements of the traditional apocalypse has been diverged from each other in the secular literature and form two different subtypes.

Having examined the significance of the duality of hope and despair in the traditional apocalypse and its transformation and adaptation into a secular literature, the apocalyptic imagination in Wilder’s three-act-comedy would be much more definite. In order to compare Wilder’s apocalyptic vision to the traditional idea of apocalypse which includes both despair and hope, it would be wise to analyze the apocalyptic motifs of ending and beginning in each act of the play.

The first act takes place in the home of the Antrobuses in Excelsior, New Jersey. George Antrobus is “the inventor of the wheel and lever” (Wilder, 1967: 98) and a “veteran of foreign wars” (Wilder, 1967: 98), Maggie Antrobus is the “President of Excelsior Mothers’ Club” (Wilder, 1967: 98) an “excellent needlewoman” (Wilder, 1967: 98) who “invented apron” (Wilder, 1967: 98) and this couple has a son named Henry, a daughter named Gladys and a maid named Sabina. The catastrophic event—approaching glacier—is introduced in the very beginning of the first act, when The Announcer states that The Society for Affirming the End of the World “went into a special session” (Wilder, 1967: 97)

due to “unprecedented cold weather of [that] summer” (Wilder, 1967: 97) and then when the maid Sabina reveals that “it is the middle of the august and the coldest day of the year” (Wilder, 1967: 99). In this act, the glacier is the catastrophic force that threatens humanity. However, the lines in which Mrs. Antrobus wants her husband to “remember all the other times” such as “[w]hen the volcanoes came right up in the front yard”, “the time the grasshoppers ate every single leaf and blade of grass, and all the grain and spinach” and “the summer there were earthquakes every night” (Wilder, 1967: 124) indicate that this family or the whole humanity has survived from many apocalypses before.

Towards the end of the first act, the image of ending represented by the catastrophic glacier is juxtaposed with the story of the beginning represented by a reference to the book of Genesis. Mr. Antrobus asks Mrs. Antrobus to teach Gladys the beginning of the Bible. Meanwhile, in order to survive in that cold weather, Mr. Antrobus wants his wife to burn everything to keep the fire going in the house. Moreover, Sabina wants the audience to involve in the action and help the actors and the actresses to save the human race: MRS ANTROBUS ‘In the Beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was waste and void, and the darkness was upon the face of the deep-’

[...Sabina has returned with wood.]

SABINA: [after placing wood on the fireplace comes down to the footlights and addresses the audience] Will you please start handing up your chairs? We will need everything for the fire. Save the human race...

GLADYS: ‘And God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night.’

SABINA: Pass up your chairs everybody. Save the human race (Wilder, 1967: 126).

As the above dialogue shows, at the end of the first act Wilder juxtaposes the humanity’s struggle (the audience are welcome to involve in the representation of this struggle) against catastrophic ending with the biblical account of the beginning. The reference to the book of Genesis points out that the humanity is preparing to make a new beginning after that danger of ending. Wilder’s juxtaposition of ending and beginning brings to mind the similarity of the biblical accounts of beginning and ending in both of which God creates a cosmos. Genesis, the first book of the Bible, presents God’s creation of cosmos out of nothing whereas Revelation, the last book of the Bible, depicts God’s re-creation of the cosmos out of the old one. Moltmann suggests that the line in the book of Revelation “Behold, I make all things new” (21.5) means that nothing passes away or is lost, but that everything is brought back again in new form” (1996: 265). Thus, “[t]he *creatio ex nihilo*, the creation out of nothing, is completed in the eschatological *creatio ex vetere*, the creation out of the old (Moltmann, 1996: 265).

The above scene makes use of this biblical link between God's creation and re-creation of cosmos and combines them. The allusion to this biblical link indicates that the humanity has to survive the apocalyptic end and make a new beginning by means of re-creating the world out of the old.

Concerning the connection between the beginning and ending, there is another significant point in the first act which is the identification of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus with Adam and Eve. This identification is hinted in the beginning of the play when the announcer says in the X theater "among the objects found today was a wedding ring, inscribed: To Eva from Adam Genesis II: 18" (Wilder, 1967: 97). Moreover, Mr. Antrobus sends a telegraph to Mrs. Antrobus to celebrate their wedding anniversary and the Telegraph Boy says "happy w'dding ann'-vers'ry, dear Eva" (Wilder, 1967: 108). The link between the Antrobuses and Adam and Eve is reinforced also by the fact that the Antrobus' son Henry is identified with Cain –the son of Adam and Eve and the murderer of his brother Abel. The identification of Henry and Cain is first revealed by Sabina as "when he has a stone in his hand, has a perfect aim; he can hit anything from a bird to an older brother" (Wilder, 1967: 100). Besides, this identification becomes more apparent when Henry complains to his mother about his teachers as "today at school two teachers forgot and called me by my old name...Right out in class they called me: Cain" (Wilder, 1967: 111). Furthermore, through the end of the first act, Henry throws stone to the boy living next door and when he comes back home, the stage directions state that "*we see on Henry's forehead a large ochre and scarlet scar in the shape of a C*" (Wilder, 1967: 122). This shape of C on Henry's forehead is an explicit reference to the initial letter of Cain. Also at one point in the first act, Mrs. Antrobus laments for her lost child as "Abel, my son" (122). Consequently, the story of the Antrobuses is associated with the story of Adam, Eve and even their son Cain. The allegorical use of Adam and Eve serves two significant points in the play. On the one hand, since Adam and Eve are the first man and woman according to not only the Judeo-Christian tradition but also to the holy scriptures of various religions, The Antrobuses are not only the typical American family; the image of Adam and Eve gives them a universal quality and thus they represent the whole human race. On the other hand, the allegory of Adam and Eve gives Wilder the chance to juxtapose the concept of ending to the concept of beginning; the story of a family on the verge of an ending is connected to the story of the beginning of life for humanity.

The sense of an ending is predominant also in the second act in which Mr. Antrobus, as the president of the great fraternal order—the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Humans, announces that the ice has retreated. The second act takes place in Atlantic City Boardwalk where six hundred thousandth Annual Convention of the great fraternal order is being held. In the convention, Mr. Antrobus is introduced as the president who is appraised for his "useful enterprises

including the introduction of the lever of the wheel and the brewing of the beer” (Wilder, 1967: 127) while Mrs. Antrobus is introduced as the “president of Women’s Auxiliary Bed and Board Society” (Wilder, 1967: 128) who is given credit for her practical suggestions including the hem, the gore and the gusset and ... frying in oil” (127). In addition to Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, there is another significant character in this act; the Fortune Teller who prophesizes about the deluge as “[y]ou know as well as I what’s coming. Rain. Rain. Rain. In floods. The deluge. But first you’ll see shameful things ... again there’ll be the narrow escape. The survival of a handful. From destruction—total destruction ... Even of the animals, a few will be saved: two of a kind, male and female” (Wilder, 1967: 135). As revealed by the Fortune Teller, the catastrophic event in the second act is the deluge which, in Fortune Teller’s lines, is a clear reference to the story of Noah. This reference to Noah is reinforced when the Fortune Teller leads Mr. Antrobus to take the human fellows and two of every kind of animals and wants him to “start a new world. Begin again” (Wilder, 1967: 153).

The third act which takes place in a modern time in the home of the Antrobuses in Excelsior; New Jersey, the same as the first act, presents the war as the apocalyptic calamity. In the beginning of the act, Sabina states that “the war’s over” (Wilder, 1967: 156). There is a change in the pattern of the play in the third act; since unlike the first two acts, “the end of the world is not about to happen but, rather has just been averted” (Wertheim, 2004: 77). Hence, the third act is based not on the survival of humanity from apocalypses by the skin of its teeth but the hardness of beginning or building a society after an end.

Even though the apocalyptic calamity is obviated, the third act presents the conflict between Henry and Mr. Antrobus as the apocalyptic tension between good and evil. In the third act, the war is actually between Henry who is a representation of the evil force and Mr. Antrobus who desires to re-build the society after the war. In order to understand Henry’s evil side in the third and last act, it is essential to focus on the presentation of this character in each act of the overall play. In the first act, Henry is identified with the jealous murderer Cain. In the second act, Henry becomes “the embodiment of white racism” (Wertheim, 2004: 78) when he hits a Negro chair pusher in the Atlantic City’s boardwalk with a slingshot. Finally in the third act, Henry is clearly the substitute of evil because not only Sabina directly announces that “the enemy is *Henry*; *Henry is the enemy*” (Wilder, 1967: 165) but also the stage directions note that “[t]hroughout the following scene *Henry is played, not as misunderstood or misguided young man, but as a representation of strong unreconciled evil*” (Wilder, 1967: 169). Wertheim asserts that in this act “Wilder pointedly cites the eternal source of the evil in the world, the evil that Americans were fighting in World War II, and locates it in the character of Henry” (2004: 78). Moreover, according to Konkle, Wilder does not ignore the “negative products of the progress of civilization: in each act Cain’s weapons grow more

sophisticated (stones, slingshots, gun)” (2006: 161). Therefore, the character Henry indicates that as civilization progresses in time, the evil’s weapons develop as well.

This struggle between Mr. Antrobus and the enemy Henry is most evident in Mr. Antrobus’ line: “You’re the last person I wanted to see. The sight of you dries up all my plans and hopes. I wish I were back at war still, because it is easier to fight you than to live with you... War’s a pleasure compared to what faces us now: trying to build up a peace-time with you in the middle of it” (Wilder, 1967: 169). The line explicates that the image of evil dries up Mr. Antrobus’ plans to rebuild the society because it is easier to fight the evil than trying to maintain peace in a society with the evil in the middle of it. In his encounter with “evil,” Mr. Antrobus momentarily loses “the most important thing of all: the desire to begin again, to start building” (Wilder, 1967: 173) but recovers soon:

“I’ve never forgotten for long at a time that living is struggle. I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for—whether it’s a field, or a home, or a country. All I ask is the chance to build new worlds and God has always given us that. And has given us [opening the book] voices to guide us; and the memory of our mistakes to warn us. Maggie, you and I will remember in peacetime all the resolves that were so clear to us in the days of war” (Wilder, 1967: 176).

This quotation emphasizes the significance of the apocalyptic chance to construct new worlds. Ketterer argues that “[a]pocalyptic literature is concerned with the creation of other worlds which exist, on the literal level, in a credible relationship ... with the ‘real’ world” (1974: 13). Similarly, the play is reminiscent of the apocalyptic literature in general with its repetitive illustrations of the creation of other worlds. In the first two acts Mr. Antrobus has to save not only his family but the whole human race from apocalyptic ends while in the third act he is the man who has to rebuild the society with the evil in the middle of it. To put it more concisely, in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Mr. Antrobus has to create another world making a new “beginning” after each “end.”

This connection between ending and beginning is once again woven at the end of the third act. The play within a play format is most evident in the third act because besides the members of the Antrobus, there are other characters such as the actors who are rehearsing their play.² These actors are playing the roles of

² *The Skin of Our Teeth* is written in a play within a play format. One of the moments that this format becomes explicit is that when Sabina refuses to speak her lines because the lines can hurt the feelings of a woman in the audience. Besides, one of the characters is Stage Manager who tries to control or lead all the actors and actresses on the stage especially Sabina.

philosophers and each philosopher stand for a specific time in day: 9 o'clock is Spinoza, 10 o'clock is Plato, 11 o'clock is Aristotle and 12 o'clock is Bible. The fact that Bible stands for 12 o'clock is significant in that 12 o'clock signifies both the end of a day and the beginning of a new day. The Bible character is a reminiscent of the constant connection between beginnings and endings since towards the end of the play after Spinoza, Plato and Aristotle speak, Bible takes his turn and says: "[i]n the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was waste and void; and the darkness was upon the face of the deep ... And God said, Let there be light and there was light" (Wilder, 1967: 177). As a matter of fact, this utterance of the Bible character which is a repetition of the reference to the book of Genesis done at the end of the first act emphasizes the sense of beginning in the play once more.

The hour/philosopher characters are not only significant in highlighting once again this recurrent connection between beginnings and endings but also in elucidating Mr. Antrobus' hopeful attitude towards an apocalyptic event. Ivy, the actress playing one of the philosophers, tells that her father who has seen a rehearsal of the play comments on the use of clocks/philosophers as: "just like the hours and stars go by over our heads at night, in the same way the ideas and thoughts of the great men are in the air surrounding us all the time..." (Wilder, 1967: 159). The thoughts of these great men in a way help Mr. Antrobus to re-build the society in the hours of a dark night. Konkle comments that "the pageant of the hours of the night—a projection of Antrobus' thoughts as he reads the great thinkers Aristotle, Plato, Spinoza and the author of the Book of Genesis—represents the touchstones of civilization with which Antrobus will begin a new society" (2006: 164). Thus, the philosophers' lines just before the end of the play signify that these ideas of the great thinkers will guide the way for Mr. Antrobus to re-construct his society. Therefore, the use of philosophers in a play within a play format serves to emphasize Mr. Antrobus' efforts to re-create the society after an apocalyptic event.

At the very end of the play, Sabina says that "the end of the play isn't written yet. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus! Their heads are full of plans and they're as confident as the first day they began" (Wilder, 1967: 178). That open-ending suggests that like the Antrobus, the humanity will go on finding ways of surviving or beginning after each end. Wilder's approach to humanity is optimistic in that although people are faced with apocalyptic catastrophes, the human race would find a way to make new beginnings.

Having analyzed the apocalyptic motifs and juxtaposition of endings and beginnings in each act of the play, it would be much easier to compare the Wilder's apocalyptic vision to the traditional apocalyptic idea with a focus on the duality of hope and despair. The play is consistent with the traditional form of apocalypse in which several cataclysms lead to an apocalyptic despair. May states that "[i]n both

Judaism and Christianity, there is the belief that the end of the world will be preceded by a series of cosmic and historical calamities that will act as its announcements—famines, droughts, wars, the appearance of the Antichrist, celestial signs, and so forth” (May, 1972: 13). In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the end is announced through various catastrophes such as glacier, deluge and war. Besides, Mrs. Antrobus refers to some previous apocalyptic calamities including volcanoes, earthquakes and grasshopper attacks. All these cataclysms serve as the elements that result in an apocalyptic despair. However, as the traditional form, the apocalyptic vision of the play reveals a sense of not only despair but also hope since the humanity succeeds to re-create the world after apocalypses. Kumar comments on the apocalyptic ending as “[h]owever frightful the contemplation of the end, there is no need to despair: a new world will be born” (Kumar, 1995: 202). Through this image of re-born or re-made world, the play also reveals hope, thereby providing the duality of hope and despair.

In addition to these common elements, there are two crucial differences between the recreation patterns of the traditional form of apocalypse and that of the play. Now that the humanity survives from the end three times in Wilder’s play, the perception of time is cyclical rather than the linear progression in Judeo-Christian world-view in which “the end will come only once” and “time is linear and irreversible” (May, 1972: 11-12). Wertheim comments that in the play “history is seen in another light, as the playwright ambitiously and often brilliantly uses the entire sweep of human history to place World War II into a larger context” (Wertheim, 2004: 75). Therefore, it is possible to perceive that Wilder’s presentation of a cyclical pattern of time indicates that although war is a big calamity which can lead to despair and fear for the humanity, the human kind will always find ways of survival after that “end.” The cyclical pattern of the play enunciates the war as just another apocalyptic disaster that humanity has to survive.

The other difference rests on the agent or the creator of the new world. In the traditional form of apocalypse God re-creates the universe. For instance, in the book of Isaiah, God in the first person narration utters “behold, I create new heavens and a new earth” (*The Holy Bible: The New King James Version*, Isa. 65.17). The play, on the other hand, focuses on especially the role of humanity in the apocalyptic scenario. As previously cited, Mrs. Antrobus’ reading of the book of Genesis while Sabina invites the audience to save the humanity in the first act is significant since it juxtaposes the divine creation of the cosmos with the human endeavor to save the human race. Thus, the play delineates that the creator of the universe is God whereas the humanity emerges as a more significant agent as the re-creator after the apocalyptic ending. This emphasized role of humanity is also obvious in Mr. Antrobus’ line as “[a]ll I ask is the chance to build new worlds and God has always given us that” (Wilder, 1967: 176). Rather than God, Mr. Antrobus

is the agent to construct a new world. In the play, God gives the chance to the humanity to make a new beginning after the apocalyptic ending.

The stressed role of the humanity in the re-creation image in comparison with the traditional form of apocalypse is not that surprising when the whole of process of secularization is considered. Despite the effect of secularization, the play emphasizes the role of humanity in the portrayal of rebirth hereby still embodying the duality of hope and despair. Considering these elements, it is possible to put the play in the “secular apocalypse” type in May’s typology for the apocalyptic representations in literature. As mentioned before, May contends that the “secular apocalypse” can be divided into two subtypes such as; “apocalypse of despair” which is “literature ...that omits symbolism of re-creation as an integral part of its aesthetic structure” (May, 1972: 39) and “humorous” which “asks man to take such a look at catastrophe that only laughter will relieve the tension” (May, 1972: 227). In his schema of typology of apocalypse, May explicates the purposes of each category; the purpose of “traditional primitive apocalypse” is “contact with reality,” of “traditional Judeo-Christian” is “genuine hope,” of “antichristian apocalypse” is “hopelessness,” of “secular apocalypse of despair” is “despair,” and finally of “secular humorous apocalypse” is “(psychological) hope” (May, 1972: 229). The fact that the purpose of each type is determined by the release of despair or hope illuminates the significance of the two terms in the general apocalyptic vision in literature. If we are to put *The Skin of Our Teeth* within this typological framework of the apocalyptic literature, it is clear that Wilder’s three-act-comedy belongs to the “humorous secular apocalypse” type which releases hope using laughter in which “the laughter is itself at least a passage to the future” (May, 1972: 228).

According to Lewicki, “[t]here is no better metaphor to express this duality of fear and hope than that of apocalypse” (Lewicki, 1984: xii). In this sense, the tone of apocalyptic literature is not necessarily pessimistic; rather there is a release of hope indicated by a sense of a new beginning as well. May argues that [t]he very medium of Christian faith is hope ... [t]he emphasis in Revelation is on the future, but in such a way that belief in the fulfillment of the promise can enlighten one’s acceptance of the past and strengthen his approach to the present. Hope alone can illuminate the future” (May, 1972: 22-23). Furthermore, according to Shaffer “[t]he true function and operation of apocalyptic is not the unveiling of secrets about God’s plan for the Last Days but the release of hope. The apocalyptic hope ... is as much a hope for continuation as it is for an end” (Shaffer, 1995: 55). The release of hope is especially provided through the images of re-birth or re-creation that delineate a new beginning after apocalypse. As Keller points out “if the term ‘apocalypse’ indulges in the ensuing text a certain looseness of self-reference, it means to connote... always some tense coupling of hope and despair—always an end of some world and a corollary vision” (Keller, 2004: 13). In a similar vein,

Wilder's play makes use of the "apocalypse" in which the cyclical pattern of endings and beginnings serves to maintain a hopeful approach towards the apocalyptic end.

To sum up, *The Skin of Our Teeth* is a projection of humanity's struggle to overcome the apocalyptic calamities. In spite of the long process of secularization, the apocalyptic imagery of the play still embodies the duality of hope and despair which is an essential element of the traditional apocalypse. For this reason, the play inherits the function of the traditional apocalypse providing comfort, hope and even laughter to a group of people who are faced with the crisis of war. Comparing the play to the traditional form of apocalypse makes Wilder's apocalyptic vision more obvious. The image of apocalypse enables Wilder to criticize the progress of civilization from an outlook which is embedded with not only despair but also hope. The repeated combination of a sense of an ending with a sense of a beginning in the play is stressed with the duality of despair and hope present in the apocalyptic tone. Wilder's apocalyptic vision presents the endings and beginnings in a way in which the fear and despair of mankind on the verge of a catastrophic end is associated with a hopeful attitude of mankind to make a new beginning. Even though there are indications of both despair and hope, the emphasis seems to fall on the latter since humanity always finds a way to re-build a new society after an ending.

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