

# Marriage, Money, and The Meaning of Life in Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker*

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## Abstract

*The Matchmaker* is a romantic comedy which aims to seek human warmth in all human relationships. The play discusses the themes of marriage and money which are universal subjects that "repeat in the lives of millions." The characters in this play recognize the meaning of life through love, compassion and participation in life. The play also shows how one's wrong beliefs in the affairs of marriage and getting money, or one's pride and self-righteousness, sometimes, stand as an obstacle against one's happiness.

This paper aims to shed the light on Wilder's view about marriage and money and how these two important subjects draw the individual's life. The paper contains three points: point one gives a brief summary about the author. Point two deals with some facts about the play. The third point discusses the subjects of marriage and money in the play.

The conclusion sums up the findings of the study.

## ملخص البحث

يعتبر ثورنتون وايلدر واحداً من أهم كتاب المسرح في أمريكا . كان وايلدر مهتماً بالعمل على ترسيخ القيم الإنسانية. وأن طريقته الإنسانية في الكتابة قد تخللت جميع أعماله والتي عرفت بأسلوبها المفعم بالحياة وصدق العاطفة وقوة المشاعر.

مسرحية "الخاطبة" هي كوميديا رومانسية والتي تبحث عن الدفء الإنساني في كل العلاقات الإنسانية. تناقش المسرحية مواضيع الزواج والمال والتي تعتبر مواضيع عالمية تتكرر في حياة الملايين.

أدركت شخصيات هذه المسرحية معنى الحياة من خلال الحب والعاطفة والمشاركة بالحياة. تبين المسرحية أيضاً كيف ان بعض وجهات النظر الخاطئة لبعض الأفراد فيما يتعلق بالزواج والمال، او كيف ان الغرور والاعتداد بالنفس للفرد يقف كعقبة في طريق سعادته. يعمل هذا البحث على تسليط الضوء على أفكار ورؤى الكاتب حول هذين الموضوعين في المسرحية. يحتوي البحث على ثلاث نقاط: تعطي النقطة الأولى مختصراً عن شخصية الكاتب فيما تهتم النقطة الثانية بإعطاء بعض الحقائق عن المسرحية بينما تناقش الأخيرة مواضيع الزواج والمال في المسرحية. تلخص الخاتمة أهم نتائج الدراسة.

## 1-1-Thornton Wilder (1897-1975)

Thornton Wilder is one of the most well-known American writers of the twentieth century, three times winner of the Pulitzer Prize and an outstanding figure in American literature as both novelist and playwright. Wilder was born in Madison, on April 17, 1897.<sup>1</sup>

Wilder's place in American literature is secure because he is the only writer to have won the Pulitzer Prizes for both, his fiction of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and drama for both, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Overall, his reputation as a dramatist has held up better than that as a novelist. As a dramatist, Wilder's reputation rests on three full-length plays: *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth* and *The Matchmaker*.<sup>2</sup>

Wilder is associated with the brilliant American playwrights Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, as one of the "big four".<sup>3</sup> Wilder believes that the ability of the theatre to present the universal and eternal subjects made it "the greatest of all art forms."<sup>4</sup> Wilder's innovative theatrical forms, humanistic thoughts, his hold on the unending family subjects and his artistic achievements influenced many American writers. Lyndon B. Johnson praised Wilder's contributions saying:

**You have made the commonplace of living yield the gaiety, the wonder, and the vault of the human adventure**

**....you have written with an understanding affectionate rapport with your subject which to me is the hallmark of genuine literature.....<sup>5</sup>**

Wilder was concerned with the affirmation of human values, his works endeavor to emphasize the true value of life. The focus is on life, and the action is limited to the unadorned, unsung, trivial pleasures of the everyday life.<sup>6</sup> And concerning his familiar themes and subjects, Wilder says:

**I am not interested in the ephemeral...such subjects as**

**The adulteries of dentists. I am interested in those things that repeat and repeat and repeat in the lives of millions.**

## **1-2-The Matchmaker: Facts**

*The Matchmaker* is a slightly modified version of an earlier play *The Merchant of Yonkers* written by Wilder in 1939. Set in Yonkers and New York, it is altogether different in style from his earlier play *Our Town*. Employing "the sparkle of comedy of Manners<sup>8</sup> along with the rough house of farce,<sup>9</sup> "<sup>10</sup> it offers a brilliant assessment of life and manners in a capitalist society.<sup>11</sup> It is acknowledged to be an adaptation of an Austrian play by Johan Nestory, which was based upon an English stock types and situations.<sup>13</sup> In a farce, the audience's attention is concentrated more on the fun and laughter. But in this play, the characters are endowed with a two-dimensional appeal. On one hand they represent the old-fashioned farce as characters are hidden under tables, men disguised as women, a complex conspiracy to bring young lovers together, and a happy ending. On the other hand they enliven the situations with their witty comments, they share certain common views. They frequently step out of their world of the theatre to share their opinion with people.<sup>14</sup>

The story of the play is about Horace Vandergelder who refuses to let his niece marry the poor artist she loves although Horace himself plans to remarry. Dolly Levi, the matchmaker of the title, pretends that she is helping Horace find a suitable bride, but she actually schemes to marry him herself, and she works to help the young lovers gain his approval.<sup>15</sup> It is staged in New York in 1955, it was enthusiastically received by most reviewers, and the play became Wilder's longest running success. Robert Coleman of the New York Daily Mirror wrote:

**If you expect to share the slaphappy shenanigans in west 45<sup>th</sup> street, you'd better run, not walk to the box office. Otherwise, you're going to have to wait too long to enjoy this side-splitting made-house of merriment.<sup>16</sup>**

## 1-3-Marriage, Money, and the Meaning of life in *The Matchmaker*.

*The Matchmaker* is Wilder's appeal for a fuller and freer participation in life; it is manifest in each character's yearning for un-lived lives. Urging people to break out of their self-built glass-domes of alienation and complacency. The play shows how the self-righteous attitude of some people becomes the chief impediment to their happiness.<sup>17</sup>

The play opens at the home of Horace Vandergelder, the name (gelder) comes from the German (das Geld) which means "money", a sixty-year-old self-righteous, miserly merchant. The first scene begins with a conversation between Horace Vandergelder and Ambrose Kemper, a thirty-year-old poor artist who wants to marry Horace's niece, Ermengarde.

Horace (loudly): I tell you for the hundredth time you will never marry my niece.

Ambrose: And I tell you for the thousandth time that I will marry your niece; right soon, too. (1-185)

At the first conversation of the play, Wilder gives us the central conflict of the play which is between love and money. Ambrose tries to get Horace's approval to marry Ermengarde, but Horace refuses him because Ambrose is a poor man and does not make a steady income, and the old man is too practical to consider either love or the promise of future earnings as significant reasons to change his mind. Horace regards love, marriage and emotion to be nothing but foolishness. He does not appreciate arts either, and considers art as nonsense. As a miser, Horace believes that the only sense in this world is money. He contrasts man with his profession, he tells Ambrose that:

A living is made, Mr. Kemper, by selling something that everybody needs at least once a year. Yes. Sir! And a million

is made by producing something that everybody needs every day. You artists produce something that nobody needs at any time. (1-186)

Horace spends his life earning and hording money. He claims to believe that love and marriage are for fools, "most of the people of the world are fools." (1-187). Nevertheless, he decides to live amongst the so-called fools; he thinks of marrying. And as a practical businessman, Horace gives some sensible reasons and justifications for his marriage, he cannot admit that he might be lonely, but he claims he needs a woman just to work. He decides to turn the "nonsense" of love and marriage into practical deal that may help him to save money and bring order to his home. Horace states two reasons for his marriage, he says:

**I'm planning to get married again. Well, I've two reasons for it.**

**In the first place, I like my house run with order, comfort, and economy. (1-194)**

Horace contemplates of wives and describes them as working ants:

**Did you ever watch an ant carry a burden twice its size?**

**What excitement! What patience! What will! Well that's what I think of when I see a woman running a house.**

**What giant passions in those little bodies. (1-194)**

The miserly merchant, does not content to exploit his employees, but he schemes to have a wife-employee to exploit her. The exploitation and manipulation of Horace Vandergelder and his type reduce humanity into being a mere "collection of nervous and tired ants."<sup>18</sup>

Horace regards marriage as a risk or as an adventure. As for him to take risk or evolve in adventures is foolishness, but he tries to comfort himself that he has good and sensible justifications to take such a risk, he says:

**There's nothing like mixing with women to bring out**

**all the foolishness in a man of sense. And that's a risk I'm willing to take. I've just turned sixty, and I've just laid side by side the last dollar of my first half million. So if I should lose my head a little, I still have enough money to buy it back. After many years' caution and hard work, I have a right to a little risk and adventure. (1-195)**

Horace discusses the subject of marriage in the sense of money with himself and searches whether this decision of marriage will fulfill his dream of exploitation or not, therefore, he decides to use marriage as a "bribe", the bait that will draw the victim into its own end. In his soliloquy, he thinks:

**I like my house run with order, comfort, and economy. That's a woman's work; but even a woman can't do it well if she's merely being paid for it. In order to run a house well, a woman must have the feeling that she owns it. Marriage is a bribe to make a housekeeper think she's a householder. (1-194)**

Horace speaks to the audience and gives all his thoughts and beliefs about marriage, and now, he is going to quest a help to get a suitable wife. He needs a matchmaker to fulfill this goal; he calls for the help of one of his dead wife's friends, Dolly Levi. Mrs. Levi is a widow, she is a manipulator and schemer, "a woman who arranges things" (1-198), who does not mind making up stories to get the results she wants. Dolly, instead of finding a wife to Horace, she plans to marry him herself, and works to help Ermengarde and Ambrose to marry.

Dolly is the matchmaker who is supposed to be finding a suitable wife for Horace, but when she arrives, Horace tells her about his plan to marry Irene Molloy, a young, attractive, businesswoman. Dolly, and because of she has already planned to marry Horace herself, she fabricates a "Miss Simple" for Horace to meet first.

**Dolly: Well-I had found another girl for you.**

**Horace: Another?**

**Dolly: The most wonderful girl, the ideal wife.....but now of course all**

**that's too late. After all you're engaged-you're practically engaged**

**to marry Irene Molloy.**

**Horace: Oh, I ain't engaged to Mrs. Molloy! (1-201)**

Dolly describes to Horace Miss Simple's wonderful qualifications to be his wife, in which she flatters him and extracts money from him.

**Dolly:....if only you were free! I've found this treasure of girl....**

**I told this girl all about you.....the fact is, she has fallen in love**

**With you already. (1-202)**

Horace now is fascinated by this girl, nevertheless, he wants to see Mrs. Molloy first. Mrs. Molloy was an attractive widow, she is like other characters in the play, she declares her own reasons for marriage. In fact, she wants to marry Horace not because she loves him but because she is tired of working and being lonely.

**Minnie (Mrs. Molloy's assistant): ..But do you...do you...?**

**Mrs. Molloy: Minnie, you're a fool. Say it: Do I love him? Of course, I don't love him. But I have two good reasons for marrying him....(2-213)**

Mrs. Molloy is a successful businesswoman, and therefore, she is not considered a proper lady. She spends all her time at work, among her employees."In the first place I shall marry Mr. Vandergelder to get away from the millinery business" (2-213) and if she wants to have some fun, to go to "balls", or "theatre", or "operas", it would damage her business.

Wilder lets his characters express their opinions about money and give their reasons and justifications for marriage. As inexperienced young man, Ambrose gives no attention of money at



all. He feels the same to be with money or without money, and money should not keep one from having his lover. Ermengarde also seems not interested in money, she wants Ambrose, but she also wants to be a "proper" young lady. She does not want to lose her uncle's favor, which is the only security she knows.<sup>19</sup> Dolly aims to help the two lovers to marry, she is a character that gives voice to a more mature perspective on this conflict. She gives her opinion of money when she speaks with Ambrose saying:

**I'm very interested in this household here-in Mr.Vandergelder**

**and all this idle, frozen money of his. I don't like the thought of lying in great piles, useless, motionless, in the bank, Mr. Kemper. Money should circulate like rain water. It should be flowing down among the people, through dressmakers and restaurants and cabmen, setting**

**up a little business here, and furnishing a good time there. (1-199)**

Dolly is not anti-money, but she is anti-greed. Unlike Ambrose and Ermengarde, Dolly is old enough to provide a realistic perspective about the need for money. Dolly expresses her belief that money is a means for people to live a decent life rather than an aim for gaining power. She likens money to "manure" which is worthless if it is not used for its purpose;

**Dolly: .....money, I've always felt, money—pardon my expression—**

**is like manure; it's not work a thing unless it's spread about encouraging young things to grow. (4-278)**

Dolly Levi is determined to marry Horace Vandergelder in order to put his money into "circulation" and thus make the world a pleasanter place for her and lots of other people.<sup>20</sup>

Dolly is Horace's opposite in every way.

**He is stingy; she is extravagant. He is closed in emotionally; she is outgoing, exuberant. He is preternaturally solemn; she sees laughter in everything. He shouts; she wheedles. He worries about the future; she cares only for the present. He regards himself as a cunning, ruthless man of the world; he is putting in her hands.<sup>21</sup>**

These two, are thus propelled towards one another by their yearning for a "fuller, freer participation in life."

Horace prides himself on his good sense, in comparison with him, nearly everyone is foolish:

**Horace: ninety-nine per cent of people in the world are fools  
And the rest of us are in great danger of contagion.  
But I wasn't always free of foolishness as I am now.  
I was once young, which was foolish; I fell in love,  
which was foolish; and I got married, which was  
foolish; and for a while I was poor, which was more  
foolish than all the other things put together. (1-194)**

While Horace is proud of being completely free from foolishness, Dolly states her belief in life, she recognizes that the meaning and the value of life is through love and compassion and through sharing all these emotions with other people, when she says:

**Vandergelder's never tired of saying most of the people  
in the world are fools, and in a way he's right, isn't he?...  
but there comes a moment in everybody's life when he  
must decide whether he'll live among human beings or  
not—a fool among fools or a fool alone. (4-277)**

In spite of all his talk about what is sensible and what is fool, Horace gives some insensible reasons for his marriage, such as his

yearning for "a little risk" and "adventure" after many years of caution and hard work. And of course, this is a very foolish reason. This expresses Wilder's philosophy on love and marriage. According to Wilder, marriage is traditional, he represents the feelings of a large population that do not want to live the single life. This philosophy on love and marriage is universal, pertaining to many people. "people were made to live two by two."<sup>22</sup>

Horace is a miser not only because he hoards all his money but also because he keeps under lock and key all human feelings. Wilder shows that this type of people can never enjoy the wonder and the glory of life, they can never appreciate the value and the meaning of life because they spend all their time in collecting money and in planning how they could exploit the other. They are misers not only in money but also in their relationships with people and their household affairs. So Wilder's message here is that man's self-complacent attitude is the chief cause of his sorrow.<sup>23</sup>

Dolly can know the future of such persons. She can tell that an isolated person, a man who is friendless, living with a housekeeper who can prepare his meals for a dollar a day, shall spend his "last days listening at keyholes." (3-259) frightened and worried constantly that someone is cheating him.<sup>24</sup> In spite of this play which is regarded as a farce, it is not empty from psychological analysis, Dolly speaks psychologically, and she succeeds to analyze Horace's psychological state when she predicts his future. Horace is hated by his employees because of his miserliness in both money and morals.

Dolly pretends to arrange a marriage between Horace and a mysterious friend, Miss Simple, because she wants to lay her own trap for him to marry him for his money.<sup>25</sup> Dolly aims to marry Horace to save him from his money, to free him from his greed, to give him some spirit, she decides to teach him what happiness is, to teach him the meaning of life by helping him to send all his money in a good use. And just like Horace, she states her own reasons for marriage; in the first place, she wants to get rid of her isolation and rejoin the society " I decided to rejoin the human race." (4-277) After the death of her husband, Dolly led a life of isolation which

lasted two years, then and as a woman who is the artist of life, she realizes her mistake and recognizes the fact that life means to be lived and not merely to be existed. In the second place, she wants to marry Horace for his money, but her goals are not malicious, she wants to spend his money to make him happy because as she says;" the difference between a little money and no money at all is enormous...and the difference between a little money and an enormous amount of money is very slight." (4-278) that means; one needs enough money to be happy, but too much money does not make one happier. In her soliloquy, Dolly is shown addressing her dead husband, she asks his permission to marry Horace , she says:

**Ephraim Levi, I'm going to get married again.**

**Ephraim, I'm marrying Horace Vandergelder for his money. I'm going to send his money out doing**

**all the things you taught me. Oh, it won't be a marriage in the sense that we had one-but I shall certainly make him happy, and Ephraim—I'm tired. I'm tired of living from hand to mouth, and I'm asking your permission, Ephraim—will you give me a way? (4-277)**

A familiar proverb says " a fool and his money are soon parted." However, Dolly learns, and she teaches Horace that there is no escape from the common human needs for affection, fun and money. Man can either be "fool among fools or a fool alone."(4-277) being a fool among fools involves letting go of one's grip on money.<sup>26</sup>

By her own wittiness, Dolly does not only succeed to marry Horace, but she also succeeds to help the other characters in the play to gain happiness and to help them to participate in life "she is concerned, of course, only with what is usually regarded as ordinary in life: living itself. What she arranges is banal, really-marriage. But it is marriage that brings two people together, brings them to life."<sup>27</sup>

At the end of the play, Horace is shown humble and he makes so much "foolishness", for example, he permits Ambrose and Ermengarde to marry and gives them his blessing, he allows Dolly and Miss Huysen (an old friend of Ermengarde's dead mother) to tell him what is to do, and what is not to do, and finally he wants Dolly to marry him.

Dolly marries Horace, but she does not deceive him. He knows she is going to spend his precious money, but he wants to marry her anyhow. Thus, Horace only seems to be a symbol for the sensible, humdrum side of life, against which everyone else is rebelling. Underneath his outside shell he longs as much as anybody to break down the shackles of security and good sense. Once the outside shell is cracked, it rapidly dissolves.<sup>28</sup>

Ambrose, Dolly, Mrs. Molloy and other characters in the play do not represent repressed wishes in revolt against the established values of life. Their revolt is not aggressive. They are not really rebelling against anything outside themselves. They are in conflict between the tendency of security and peace and between the tendency of change, adventure and excitement. Aggression in *The Matchmaker* is not directed against family. Indeed, the opposite is true. Aggression, if it can be called that in this play, is directed against ideas and attitudes which discourage marriage. The immediate result of the rebellions is happy marriages which is strengthening the idea of the happiness and the meaning of life.<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusion

Although *The Matchmaker* is labeled as a "farce" which provides lively humor, it does not diminish the power of serious comment. The play opens with the question of which is the more worthy, love or money. Each character in the play talks to the audience and gives its opinion concerning marriage and money, then the play ends in a way suggests that, if one's life includes love, and fun, not just work and money, one will be happier and more acceptable by others, in terms of both money and appreciation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul M. Cubeta, *Modern Drama for Analysis* (New York: Henry Holt and company, Inc., 1955), p.695

<sup>2</sup> "*The Matchmaker*", [database on-line]; accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2014; available from <http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-matchmaker>

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Corrigan, "*Thornton Wilder and Tragic sense of life*", *Critical Essays on Thornton Wilder*, ed., Martin Blank (New York : G.K Hall&CO., 1996), p.77.

<sup>4</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Harold Bloom and Portia Williams Weiskel, ed., *Thornton Wilder* (New York :Chelsea House publisher, 2003), p.24.

<sup>6</sup> Vrinda Mathur, *The plays and Novels of Thornton Wilder: A Critical study* (New Delhi: prestige Books, 1996), P.7.

<sup>7</sup> "*The Matchmaker-Center Stage*" [database on-line]; accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2014; available from [www.centerstage.org/protals/.../pdf/thematchmaker](http://www.centerstage.org/protals/.../pdf/thematchmaker)

<sup>8</sup> "*Comedy of Manners*", [database on-line]; accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2014; available from [www.britannica.com/.../comedyofmanner](http://www.britannica.com/.../comedyofmanner).

Comedy of manners, witty, cerebral form of dramatic comedy that depicts and often satirizes the manners and affectations of a contemporary society. A comedy of manners is concerned with social usage and the question of whether or not characters meet certain social standard is morally trivial but exacting. The plot of such comedy, usually concerned with an illicit love affair or similarly scandalous matter, is subordinate to the play's brittle atmosphere, witty dialogue, and pungent commentary on human foibles.

<sup>9</sup> M.H.Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms.9<sup>th</sup> ed.* (Fort worth: Harcourt Brace College publishers, 2009), P.50.

Farce is a type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to laughter. It commonly employs highly exaggerated types of characters, puts them into improbable situations.

<sup>10</sup> David Castronovo, *Thornton Wilder* ( New York: Ungar, 1986), p.94.

<sup>11</sup> Vrinda Mathur, P.7.

<sup>12</sup> Barnard Hewitt, "*Thornton Wilder Says "yes" "*", *Critical Essays on Thornton Wilder*, ed. Martin Blank (New York : G.K.Hall&CO., 1996), p.72.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Bawer, "*An Impersonal Passion*": *Thornton Wilder, The Hudson Review, Inc., Lxi, no.3(2008)*, [database on-line]; accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2014,

available from <http://www.hudsonreview.com/auo8/auo8bawer> WEB.pdf;  
internet

<sup>14</sup>Vrinda Mathur, p.70.

<sup>15</sup> "*The Matchmaker*"

<sup>16</sup> Martin Blank, ed., *Critical Essays on Thornton Wilder* ( New York:G.K.Hall&Co.,1996), P.9.

<sup>17</sup> VrindaMathur, p.8.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.63.

<sup>19</sup> "*The Matchmaker*"

<sup>20</sup> Barnard Hewitt, P.73.

<sup>21</sup> M.C.Kuner, *Thornton Wilder: The Bright and Dark* (New York: Crowell, 1972), pp.140-41.

<sup>22</sup> "*Our Town by Thornton Wilder*", [database on-line]; accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2014; available from freesays123helpme.com

<sup>23</sup> Vrinda Mathur,p.66.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.67

<sup>25</sup> Malcolm Goldstein, *The Art of Thornton Wilder* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1965), p.133

<sup>26</sup> "*The Matchmaker*"

<sup>27</sup> Donald Haberman, *The Plays of Thornton Wilder: A Critical Study* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University press, 1967),p.20

<sup>28</sup> Barnard Hewitt, p.74.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

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