

*Min Shen*

## "Quite a Moon!": The Archetypal Feminine in *Our Town*

Near the end of Act I in *Our Town*, Wilder enumerates different characters' casual reactions to the moon or moonlight,<sup>1</sup> establishing "a mood or feeling which the audience is nearly powerless to resist" (Haberman 71). The same irresistibility characterizes the entire play, which, despite its apparent simplicity, encompasses a great ineffable force centered around the moon. To achieve a better understanding of this mysterious power, we may explore the playwright's thoughts on playwriting.

Thornton Wilder believes that "the theater is an art addressed to a group-mind," which "imposes upon [...] [the dramatist] the necessity of treating material understandable by the large number" (*Intent* 90-92). The meaning of this "group-mind" idea is twofold: one, it aims at the collective experience of the audience as a whole, and two, it requires a special way of presenting the play so that it will bring about a common response in the collective mind of the audience. A striking parallel exists between Wilder's "group-mind" idea and Jung's theory of collective unconscious, which is "of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature" and is "identical in all individuals" (Jung 43). The collective unconscious consists of archetypes generally represented in symbolic patterns or images, among which the moon stands out significantly in *Our Town*.

The archetypal moon has a long association with feminine modality.<sup>2</sup> It was viewed as male, female or hermaphrodite in ancient mythology, folklore, and rituals around the world,<sup>3</sup> but in his essay "The Moon and Matriarchal Consciousness," Erich Neumann states that "in every case it belongs among the central symbols of the feminine" (*Feminine* 71-72). The positive qualities of the feminine—or the Great Mother—archetype according to Jung, include "maternal solicitude and sympathy; [...] the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; [...] [and] all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility" (82). The feminine thus described is very much moon-attuned, with "one of the typical equations" resting on the moon's "character of swelling up and of shrinking connected with fertility" (Neumann, *Feminine* 70). Apart from the cyclic phases associated with menstruation, life, and rebirth, the moon's trek across the night sky also promises creative inspiration and qualitative timing, which lead to feminine wisdom. The archetypal feminine principle as manifested by the moon finds its rich embodiment in *Our Town*, imbuing the play with harmonious beauty. The feminine archetype—specifically fertility and feminine wisdom—points directly to the audience's "group-mind" and contributes to the play's universal appeal.

The structure of *Our Town* forms a clearly visible cycle. It begins with the act entitled "Daily Life," where the first conversation tells of "some twins born over in Polish Town" (8). The birth motif having been emphasized five times (7, 8, 9, 10, 15), the play then proceeds to show the daily life of the town, represented by the Gibbs and the Webbs: children getting up, having breakfast, going to school, returning home, and doing homework while parents guide and provide for their natural growth. With its serene mood, Act I sets the tone of praising life for the entire play. In the second act, "Love and Marriage," the stage manager takes some time commenting on the passing of time and on nature's "pushing and contriving" (30), while the audience is also presented with characters as they grow up and fall in love, fol-

lowed by a ritualistic wedding ceremony. Here we see life prospering in love and marriage, but more notably, in growth. In Act III, Emily dies giving birth to her second child and subsequently relives her twelfth birthday. Her firstborn son, however, lives and he loves "spending the day" at Mr. and Mrs. Carter's (56), which signifies the continuity of life and the growth nurtured by the community in the town. Wilder does not explicitly tell us the name of this act. However, it might be appropriately called "Death and Rebirth." After she dies, Emily is physically born to life again on her twelfth birthday; and in death, Emily realizes the value of life, achieving spiritual rebirth both for herself and for the group-mind of the audience.

This birth-growth-death-rebirth cycle corresponds to the moon's phases of waxing and waning, which could be viewed as one of the most immediate experiences of fertility because of the moon's ability to reproduce and sustain life. In *Our Town*, the acts and scenes devised by Wilder as "moments of eternity singled out for our attention and played against the panorama of infinity" (Goldstein 102) suggest a similar feminine modality. This cycle appears more remarkable in the film version of the play where scenes of the graveyard and return to the twelfth birthday are pictured as a near-death hallucination. Confronted with death, Emily is given a chance to reflect and to attain her epiphany, after which she is born to a new realization and lives on with transformed mentality and vigor. Acknowledging this as a greater dramatization of death and rebirth, Wilder agreed to let Emily live in the film version:

Emily should live. I've always thought so. In a movie you see the people *so close to* that a distant relation is established. In the theater they are halfway abstractions in an allegory; in the movie they are very concrete. So insofar as the play is a generalized allegory she dies—we die—they die; insofar as it's a Concrete Happening it's not important that she die; it's even disproportionately cruel that she die. Let her live—the idea will have been

imparted anyway. (Harrison 203)

Live or die, the idea is imparted and rebirth is achieved. The fact that the play starts before dawn and ends at eleven o'clock at night indicates a temporal cycle, further reinforcing the reference to this feminine principle.

The correlation between the moon and fertility is by no means restricted to the cyclic structure alone. Both the moon and the womb (also a feminine archetype, obviously) experience periodicity every twenty-eight days, and "the connection between the onset of menstruation and the possibility of fertilization [...] is self-evident to the primitive mentality" (Neumann, *Feminine* 75). The moon is thus believed to be "giver of life and of all that promotes fertility and productiveness" (Harding 111), yet another important aspect of the feminine principle as nurturer and protector of life and growth. In water life begins and prospers. Consequently, due attention should be given to the symbol of water. Neumann says that "the moon is the archetypal lord of water, moisture and vegetation" and waters of all forms coming from all places are "subject to it" (73). Human beings have at all times treasured and deified the precious gift of water, be it rain, river, or milk,<sup>4</sup> in that "life as food and fertility" has always been the "central concern" (Neumann 73).

In *Our Town*, where life is epitomized in its ritualistic scenes, Wilder presents to us a world of the archetypal feminine represented by images of rain, milk, and garden as well as by the community's role as nurturer. Each act of *Our Town* shows Howie Newsome delivering milk as one of the first events to begin a day's activities (9-10, 31-3, 59-60). Milk is the food of the newborn, so it is only fitting for Howie as the milkman to comment on the birth of the twins in the first act: "This town's gettin' bigger every year" (9). Time passes, and when Emily and George are about to get married in the second act, the townsfolk's best wishes are again expressed by the milkman Howie: "We hope they'll be very happy [...] know they *will*" (33). One is naturally reminded of the important role milk plays in the growth of human

beings to maturity. On the wedding day, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb both ask Howie for more than the usual amount of milk because they are having "a houseful of relations" (32). Of course, a wedding implies sexual union that promises reproduction, so the abundance of milk goes along with the abundance of life. The significance of the milk symbol is further enhanced in the third act, where the stage manager thus describes the dead: "They get weaned away from earth—that's the way I put it—weaned away" (52). As has been pointed out by Lincoln Konkle, "in the metaphor 'weaned,' life itself is the mother's milk from which death takes them, but that makes death equal growth, maturation, progress in the vehicle of the metaphor" (145). Correspondingly in the next scene, when Emily experiences her "rebirth" after death and relives her twelfth birthday, she delights in seeing Howie Newsome. The sight evokes happy and nostalgic feelings of her childhood and, more importantly, of everyday life (59). Throughout the play, milk, which is associated with the moon in its relation to water, birth, and the life cycle, exactly manifests the archetypal feminine principle with regard to fertility.

To this context also belongs the symbol of rain, which creates a fertile atmosphere for the entire play. In the first act, the townspeople are wondering whether it will rain (8, 9), and in the second act it has been "raining" and "pouring" (31). With the blessing of the rain water, Mrs. Gibbs's and Mrs. Webb's gardens enjoy prosperous growth of corn, peas, beans, hollyhocks, burdock, and sunflowers (6). The heliotrope in Mrs. Gibbs's garden gives off a pleasant smell to which Emily calls the attention of her papa (28) as Mrs. Gibbs does to Dr. Gibbs in the moonlight (25). One recalls, too, Mrs. Gibbs's comment on the moon in the play: "Look at that moon [...] potato weather, for sure" (24). Even in Act III, which is dominated by death, the cemetery is shown dotted with "mountain laurel and li-lacks" (51) where Emily, greeting the dead, notices "it's raining" (55). The funeral "under umbrellas" (54) being over, Emily relives her twelfth birthday on

February 11, 1899, when it "had been snowing for several days" (58). Coupled with vegetation, these images of water, in the form of rain and snow, serve as direct interpretation of the moon's relation to fertility.

In addition to references to plant life, descriptions of animals also abound in *Our Town*, illustrating the aspect of fertility in the feminine principle. Animals are such an important part in the townsfolk's lives that they appear naturally in their language: "easy as kittens" (10), "dressed like a sick turkey" (11), "gobbling like wolves" (11), "blind as a bat" (46), and so on. Furthermore, one actually hears the rooster crow at dawn (5) and there are "a hundred and twenty-five horses" in the town before automobiles are introduced (42). Howie's 17-year-old horse Bessie serves as a reliable and understanding companion, besides driving the milk wagon (9). Chickens are well fed in the town (12), so much so that even Editor Webb is interested in raising chickens, and he talks with some enthusiasm about the incubator with George just before his wedding (38). The hatching of eggs, along with feeding and relating with animals, parallels the fertility motif<sup>5</sup> that typifies the archetypal feminine.

Amidst the harmoniously flourishing natural environment, the people of *Our Town* live and thrive. In them we can see the dominant feminine principle, as shown in their giving of life, nourishment, warmth, and protection. "Most people," says the stage manager, "set out to live two-by-two" (45), and both Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb, representative of all mothers, "cooked three meals a day" for twenty or forty years with "no summer vacation" (31). They brought up children, "washed, cleaned the house—and never a nervous breakdown" (31). Their husbands fulfill the role of loving fathers in the same unquestioning manner. Dr. Gibbs does so by giving his son a piece of his mind, redirecting his growth (23-4), and Editor Webb provides supportive care (28) and reassurance (47-8) for his daughter on her journey to womanhood. Such feminine qualities as found in every household are embraced by the entire community. Neighbors in the town

show compassion and concern for each other. Mrs. Gibbs offers to help Mrs. Webb with stringing beans (12), and Emily gives George hints about schoolwork (22). Emily's son loves to spend the day at Mr. and Mrs. Carter's (56), while father and the constable work together to see to it that boys in the town form good habits (28). The constable also protects the town from possible flooding (32) and rescues "a Polish fella" from freezing to death on a snowy night (59). Hence mothers and fathers, editor and doctor, milkman, newspaperman and constable work together to maintain the healthy growth of the town. To this group should be added the stage manager, whose speech on something eternal (52) could also be perceived as an act of feminine nurturing. Though not literally playing the minister in Act III as he does in Act II, the stage manager nevertheless ministers to the audience, urging us to not despair about death. Providing spiritual comfort and care in times of duress, the stage manager enacts the feminine principle as well.

Throughout *Our Town* one finds examples of the moon as giver and nurturer of life, controller of milk and rain, indispensable for the growth of vegetation, animals, and human beings alike. This feminine principle is embodied in other symbols of the play as well, of which the morning star is so relevant that it must be noted. The play begins "just before dawn" as the stage manager stares at the morning star for a moment and remarks that it "always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go" (6). The morning star, also known as Venus, has always suggested the feminine principle because of its association with the goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite in the Greek pantheon of gods and goddesses. She represents, among other things, passionate sexuality which is linked with fertility. In *Our Town*, stars function as more than "mighty good company" (63). At the end of the play, the weather clears up and the stars are seen "doing their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky" (64) where it takes "millions of years for that speck of light to git to the earth" (63). By this Wilder is saying humankind prevails in the eternal life cycle of

the universe, despite transitory darkness and death. As Hewitt points out, Thornton Wilder "says 'yes' to human life" in a "strong, affirmative voice" (76). *Our Town* is a hymn to life in its fertility and eternity represented by the central symbol of the archetypal moon, accompanied by stars in the night sky.

The relationship of the moon and the feminine, however, goes beyond the fertility aspect. Neumann notes that "the moon guides primitive humankind's orientation in time; for all of humanity, calculating the moons, months, and lunar year derives from the moon" (84). This moon-time is "qualitative" instead of "quantitative" in that "it undergoes changes and in changing assumes various qualities" (84). Moon-time thus described is "rhythmical and periodic, waxing and waning," and it "rules the Earth, living things, and the feminine" (84). The feminine sense of time, with its emphasis on the moment, constitutes and inspires the ultimate feminine wisdom—the "highest expression of the feminine modality of being" (Ulanov 190).

As Ann Belford Ulanov reminds us, one quality of the feminine is "a way of submitting to a process, which is seen as simply happening and is not to be forced or achieved by an effort of the will" (173). This feminine quality is predominant in the life of *Our Town*, as "sowing and reaping, growing and ripening, and beyond that the weal and woe of every undertaking and activity depend upon the constellations of cosmic moon-time" (Neumann, *Feminine* 85). In tune with the rhythm of this moon-time, people of Grover's Corners enjoy harmonious natural growth. They have "a lot of pleasures of a kind," mainly consisting of the observation of birds, sunrises and seasonal changes (17). Recall Emily's appreciation of the moon, when she says the moonlight is "so terrible" (22, 23) that she cannot work and "so *won*-derful" that she "can't sleep" (28). Note that her differing valuation of the moon occurs after her conversation with George from their respective bedroom windows. It could be argued, therefore, that Emily has always felt inside her the feminine influence on her growth, which triggers her awakening sexuality. The moon-time, nevertheless, requires



her to wait patiently while nature takes its course.

The observation and meditation in the process of waiting give rise to the feminine timing. In contrast to the masculine quick-moving and impudent haste, the feminine idea of timing, patient and yet positive waiting, may be exemplified in *Our Town* by women's attempts to realize their dreams. Mrs. Webb succeeded in seeing the Atlantic ocean by "dropping hints from time to time" (14), and Mrs. Gibbs "beat about the bush" (14) telling her husband that she would make him take her somewhere if she got a legacy. It has been her dream to see Paris, and now that the secondhand-furniture man offers her \$350 for the highboy (13), she will have to persuade her husband. So in their first conversation of the play she says, "I do wish I could get you to go away someplace and take a rest" (10), and later, "I think it's my duty to make plans for you to get a real rest and change. And if I get that legacy, well, I'm going to insist on it" (26). Her dream is not realized, though, as she dies early and leaves the legacy to George and Emily, but the patient waiting of feminine wisdom makes her peaceful and harmonious with herself and others.

In the feminine principle, the self, others, and the whole world are regarded as engaged in a dialogue, as harmony is the essence of this principle (Absher 68). Through this dialogue at both the verbal and spiritual level, human beings strengthen their bonds and reach harmony with natural law. In the play, this is reflected when the townspeople take their time talking with each other at home, in the street, and by their doors. They exchange greetings and information because, as Mrs. Gibbs says, "If I don't tell somebody I'll burst" (13). Dr. Gibbs talks his son into helping with chores (23-4), and George and Emily discover their love and establish their relationship after their "important talk" while drinking ice cream sodas (44). When Dr. Gibbs married Mrs. Gibbs, he was scared that they "wouldn't have material for conversation more'n'd last [...] [them] a few weeks" (35). Thus, he is happy that they have "been conversing for twenty years now without any noticeable barren spells" (35). The word "barren" also points to the feminine principle, enhancing the importance of

communication as a way to avoid sterility, as well as a way to achieve harmony with nature where the moon is believed to be "the cause of all growth and increase" (Harding 25).

Neumann notes that it is the moon that "commands the nature- and spirit-forces of the unconscious to rise up when their time has come," thus providing "not only growth and bread, but also prophecy, poetry, and wisdom" (108) to the world of mankind. Attentiveness and contemplation are celebrated in the process of waiting until "the dream-promise is clearly fulfilled and transforming insight has come" (Ulanov 174). Because the feminine way is to "let things happen as they will," this transformation is often "seen as achieved through sufferance, through accord of the self to a greater will, even to the point of death of one's own ego orientation" (Ulanov 183). In *Our Town*, Emily dies in her second childbirth, but "the spiritual aspect of the feminine transformative character [...] leads through suffering and death, sacrifice and annihilation, to renewal, rebirth and immortality" (Neumann, *Great Mother* 291). Through death, Emily achieves her spiritual rebirth in the epiphany of feminine wisdom. From the vantage point of living and watching herself living, Emily realizes the true value of life. The "smallest events in our daily life" (Wilder, *Three Plays* xi) render meaning to life. So before she goes back to her grave, Emily says goodbye to clocks ticking, to food and coffee, to new-ironed dresses and hot baths (62), the routine and trivial things that paradoxically constitute the wonderful earth. This epiphany brings illumination of the feminine to herself, to the play, and to whomever watches it.

Only through suffering and death, however, does this enlightenment come to Emily. This epiphany is witnessed in her poignant exclamation while revisiting life, which explicitly conveys the central idea of the play. When she goes back to relive her twelfth birthday, she says, "Just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. *Let's look at one another*" and questions, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every moment?" (62). Both of these

statements are relevant to the feminine sense of time. Ulanov says that the feminine time is "of the moment; it is time as *kairos* rather than *chronos*," in which "one feels the authority of the present moment, feels its fullness and its decisiveness, feels freed from anxiety over the past or over future expectations" (177). This way of viewing time focuses on quality instead of quantity, and paradoxically, appreciating the moment as finite is actually the right path to savoring the universal, the eternal. Time flies silently in *Our Town*, as can be seen from the stage manager's comments: "You're twenty one or twenty-two and you make some decisions; then whisssh! You're seventy [...] and that white-haired lady at your side has eaten over fifty thousand meals with you" (38). But Mrs. Webb believes "breakfast is just as good as any other meal" (11) and what is important is that you eat every meal well and enjoy every moment of living. It is no accident that Rebecca, while watching the moon with her brother George, asks whether the moon is shining over other places (27) and later mentions a peculiar letter:

REBECCA: I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

GEORGE: What's funny about that?

REBECCA: But listen, it's not finished: the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that's what it said on the envelope. (28-9)

Grover's Corners is thus construed to be a microcosm of all times and all places, where human beings will be inspired to the feminine wisdom and enlightenment as long as they live in agreement with the moon-time.

*Our Town*, therefore, ingeniously displays the serene and yet powerful feminine force represented by the archetypal moon.

According to Rex Burbank, in *Our Town*, "Wilder accomplished what he and Gertrude Stein conceived to be the main achievement of the literary masterpiece—the use of the materials of human nature to portray the eternal and universal residing in the collective 'human mind'" (83). The materials and devices planned "for the benefit of the 'group mind' have within them the seeds of a larger meaning" (78), which exhibits the archetypal feminine. This idea is epitomized by the central symbol of the moon in such qualities as fertility and feminine wisdom.

In the play, Mr. Webb is aware of the feminine power as he says to the constable, "Quite a moon!" (27). In fact, he has been able to enjoy a happy life just because the feminine is not repressed in his family. He took the opposite of his father's advice—advice that aims at the supremacy of patriarchal power—and has "been happy ever since" (37). Correspondingly the whole town owes its undisturbed harmonious life to the dominant feminine principle. It proceeds slowly and tranquilly, free from masculine aggression, ambition, and haste. True, the serenity of the town is broken at times by the misery of Simon Stimson, who commits suicide, and by the sorrow of those mourning the loss of their loved ones. The townspeople, however, react with empathy and sympathy, while communicating supportive comfort and strength to carry on. These exceptions to the continuity of life are therefore subsumed under the prevailing feminine principle.

Through the exchange between people and nature in *Our Town*, both physical and spiritual growth are realized while the feminine time of "the moment" is lived out fruitfully. All these create a strong resonance in the group-mind of the audience who come together for the celebration of the "value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life" (Wilder, *Three Plays* xi) through archetypes such as the feminine. As Dennis Loyd writes, "No doubt exists concerning Wilder's interest in myth and legend, both folk and literary" (147), which are common experiences in the lives of ancestors and constitute the major channels through which archetypes are expressed. Wilder's employment of these

best communicates his ideas and gives *Our Town* timelessness and universality.

NOTES

1. See Wilder, Thornton. *Three Plays*. (New York: Avon, 1976) 22-28. This edition is used for all quotations from the play *Our Town*.
2. "Feminine" as used in this paper does not equal female. Rather, it refers to "a principle of being," "an inner law" or "a primary source inherent in the nature of things" (Ulanov 154). It resembles the Chinese concept of Yin and functions in both females and males.
3. For a detailed study, see Robert Briffault, *The Mothers*. New York: Macmillan & Co., 1927, or Rush's *Moon, Moon*. 98-217.
4. "Milk, the complete food miraculously produced by women and female animals, was associated with the moon because of her connection with women, birth, life essence and the color white" (Rush 86).
5. See Nor Hall's *The Moon and the Virgin* (47-52) for the connections between eggs, incubating, and the moon.

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