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**The Lit Teacher: Uncovering the Writer-Teacher with Thornton Wilder's *Theophilus North* and  
*Heaven's My Destination***

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## **Abstract (EN)**

The line between writer and teacher is often blurred, raising questions about the roles and overlaps between these professions. This thesis aims to explore the relationship between writer and teachers, specifically the role of the writer-teacher, by examining the works of Thornton Wilder, *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination*. By analyzing Wilder's personal connection to teaching and the presence of educational themes in his works, this study seeks to establish a framework for understanding the distinction between a writer-teacher and a teacher-writer. Through the comparison of Wilder's novels, biographical readings, and scholarly articles on the subject, this research aims to shed light on the extent to which Wilder's identity as a writer-teacher is reflected in his writing and what value that presents to the future discussion of educational theory and the contemporary American education system as a whole.

## **Abstract (LT)**

Riba tarp rašytojo ir mokytojo dažnai būna neryški, todėl kyla klausimų dėl šių profesijų vaidmenų ir sutapimų. Šiuo magistro baigiamuoju darbu siekiama ištirti rašytojo ir mokytojų santykius, ypač rašytojo-mokytojo vaidmenį, nagrinėjant Thorntono Wilderio, *Theophilus North* ir *Heaven's My Destination* kūrinis. Analizuojant asmeninį Wilderio ryšį su mokymu ir švietimo temų buvimą jo darbuose, šiuo tyrimu siekiama sukurti pagrindą suprasti skirtumą tarp rašytojo-mokytojo ir mokytojo-rašytojo. Baigiamajame darbe lyginant Wilderio romanus, biografinius skaitymus ir mokslinius straipsnius šia tema, tyrime siekiama išsiaiškinti, kiek Wilderio, kaip rašytojo-mokytojo, tapatybė atsispindi jo raštuose ir kokią vertę tai teikia būsimai diskusijai apie švietimo teoriją ir šiuolaikinę Amerikos švietimo sistemą kaip visumą.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	2
1. Introduction: What is a Writer-Teacher?	4
2. Literature Review: The Writer-Teacher and the Teacher-Writer	5
2.1 Defining the Writer-Teacher	5
2.2 The Roots of the American Writer-Teacher	6
2.3 The Writer-Teacher Within Contemporary Education	11
3. Framework: Thornton Wilder the Writer-Teacher	15
3.1 Wilder's Career and Education	15
3.2 Positioning Wilder as a Writer-Teacher	17
4. Analysis: Themes of Teaching and Learning	19
4.1 Theophilus North: A Teaching Novel	19
4.2 Heaven's My Destination: A Student Novel	22
4.3 Wilder's Portrayal of the Teacher and Student and the Value of an Education	25
4.4 Hope, Imagination, and Education	28
5. Conclusion: Wilder's Significance and the Role of the Writer-Teacher	29
References	32

## 1. Introduction: What Is a Teacher-Writer?

The distinction between a writer and a teacher is blurry, with both professions sharing the goal of imparting knowledge and understanding to others. The question of when a writer becomes a teacher, and vice versa, is a complicated one. Since writers are responsible for explaining complex issues, providing information, and broadening readers' perspectives, does that inherently make them teachers? On the other hand, when does a teacher who writes to enhance students' comprehension become a writer?

Not surprisingly, there is a scarcity of literature on the subject of teachers acting as writers and writers acting as teachers. This lack of scholarly attention leaves a void that this thesis aims to fill, providing a solid foundation for future discussions on untangling the roles of "the writer" and "the teacher."

This study will critically examine Thornton Wilder's novels, *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination*, to shed light on the distinctions and similarities between the writer and the teacher. It is widely known that teaching was one of Thornton Wilder's long-standing passions, as attested by his family. By comparing *Theophilus North*, a semi-autobiographical novel with a teacher as the central character, with Wilder's self-proclaimed "education novel," *Heaven's My Destination*, and drawing insights from various biographical readings along with Patrick Bizarro and other's work on the writer-teacher, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of Wilder's educational inclinations. Through this analysis, this paper seeks to critically define the motivations behind Wilder's work, supported by evidence gleaned from the texts at hand.

To what extent is "the teacher" evident in Wilder's writing? Is Thornton Wilder a bona fide writer-teacher? Can *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination* be classified as educational novels? Are they novels specifically about teaching, or do the works in question defy such categorizations altogether?

This study contends that Wilder's literary artistry lies directly at the intersection of literature and education. Through this research, this paper intends to establish a framework for the critical evaluation and definition of a writer-teacher, distinct from a teacher-writer or a conventional writer. This study also hopes to shed light on the value of the writer-teacher within the contemporary field of education by highlighting the advantages a typical writer-teacher may possess in promoting, discussing, and explaining educational theories to their respective literary audiences. Delving into Wilder's works and analyzing his educational biases, this study aims to illuminate the intricate relationship between the roles of writer and teacher, providing valuable insights for future discourse on the importance of the writer-teacher's role in the modern American education system. By recognizing how Wilder, as a writer-teacher, leverages his experience in education to write literature that explores complex and holistic methods of teaching and

learning, we may better learn how to communicate progressive educational theories in a way that encourages the public's acceptance of new, fresh, and creative ideas in education.

## **2. Literature Review: The Writer-Teacher and the Teacher-Writer**

### **2.1 Defining the Writer-Teacher**

To define the concepts of the writer-teacher and the teacher-writer and to explore the distinctions between them, this paper draws heavily on Patrick Bizarro's contributions to the subject matter. Bizarro's work provides a comprehensive summary of this topic, offering valuable insights into the historical context and evolution of these roles.

In his work "The Writer-Teacher in the United States: The Place of Teachers in the Community of Writers," Patrick Bizarro delves into the concept of the writer-teacher, shedding light on their role within the larger writing community (Bizarro, 2013). Bizarro's insights help us define and understand the characteristics of the writer-teacher, highlighting their unique position and contributions to the field of writing and pedagogy.

Bizarro's work emphasizes the writer-teacher's engagement with both the academic and creative realms of writing. He argues that the writer-teacher is not only a facilitator of knowledge but also an active participant in the writing world. They contribute to the literary landscape through their own creative endeavors, publishing works that add depth and diversity to the field. By publishing their own literary works and actively participating in writing organizations, attending conferences, and engaging with other writers, the writer-teacher is an integral and authoritative part of the larger writing community (Bizarro, 2013). One key aspect of the writer-teacher highlighted by Bizarro is their role as mentors and guides for aspiring writers. Drawing from their own experiences as writers, they provide valuable insights and practical advice to their students, nurturing their development as writers. The writer-teacher's ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice, academic knowledge, and creative expression is a defining characteristic that differentiates them apart from traditional educators (Bizarro, 2013).

Bizarro underscores the importance of the writer-teacher's personal writing practice. By actively engaging in writing themselves, they gain firsthand experience of the challenges and joys of the writing process. This personal engagement allows them to connect with their students on a deeper level, fostering a sense of authenticity and empathy. The writer-teacher's own writing journey becomes a source of inspiration and guidance, encouraging students to explore their own unique writing voices and styles. Bizarro further discusses the writer-teacher's commitment to lifelong learning and professional development. They continually seek opportunities to enhance their craft, staying abreast of current trends and pedagogical approaches in the field of writing. This ongoing dedication to their own growth and

improvement translates into a richer and more engaging learning experience for their students (Bizarro, 2013).

Drawing from their engagement with the writing community, their role as mentors and guides, and their personal writing practice, the writer-teacher emerges as a dynamic and multifaceted figure. In Bizarro's other works, "Writers Wanted: A Reconsideration of Wendy Bishop" and "Composing Ourselves as Writer-teacher-writers: Starting with Wendy Bishop," he provides more valuable insights into the concept of the writer-teacher. Through his explorations of Wendy Bishop's contributions and his examination of the role of teachers, Bizarro helps us further define and understand the characteristics of the writer-teacher.

Bizarro highlights Wendy Bishop's significance as a writer-teacher and the impact she had on the field of creative writing pedagogy. In "Writers Wanted: A Reconsideration of Wendy Bishop," Bizarro revisits Bishop's influential ideas and contributions, shedding light on her approach to teaching writing. Bishop advocated for a holistic view of writing that embraced personal experience, reflective practice, and an in-depth understanding of the writing process (Bizzaro, 2009). Bizarro's analysis of Bishop's work offers us a starting point for understanding the writer-teacher as someone who not only imparts knowledge and skills but also fosters a deep appreciation for the writing craft and encourages students to become engaged writers themselves. In "Composing Ourselves as Writer-teacher-writers: Starting with Wendy Bishop," Bizarro expands on the idea of the writer-teacher by emphasizing the importance of self-reflection and personal writing in the teaching process. He argues that engaging in writing as teachers allows us to better understand the challenges and joys of the writing process, enabling us to guide our students more effectively. (Bizzaro, 2011) This perspective aligns with the notion of the writer-teacher as someone who actively practices writing and brings their own experiences as a writer to the classroom. By sharing their own writing journey and engaging in personal writing, the writer-teacher fosters a sense of authenticity and connection with their students, inspiring them to develop their own writing voices.

Through his examination of Wendy Bishop's ideas and his exploration of the writer-teacher's role within the writing community, Bizarro helps us understand the writer-teacher as someone who embraces a holistic approach to teaching writing, engages in personal writing, and actively participates in the larger writing community. By incorporating Bizarro's perspectives, we gain a more profound understanding of the multifaceted nature of the writer-teacher and their significance, unique position, and their contributions to the field of writing pedagogy.

### **2.3 The Roots of the American Writer-Teacher**

Bizarro traces the discussion surrounding the writer-teacher back to the American Transcendentalists, notably Ralph Waldo Emerson's lecture "The American Scholar." Ralph Waldo

Emerson's essay "The American Scholar" is a seminal work in American literary and intellectual history, and it holds significant relevance to the topic of the writer-teacher. Emerson's ideas on education and the role of the scholar resonate with the notion of the writer-teacher as someone who engages with the world through writing and imparts knowledge to others.

In "The American Scholar," Emerson challenges the traditional notion of education, emphasizing the importance of self-reliance, individuality, and intellectual freedom. He advocates for a scholar who is not confined by academic conventions but is instead connected to the world and engaged in active learning through observation and experience. (Emerson, 1960) This perspective aligns with the concept of the writer-teacher as someone who draws from personal experiences and encourages their students to do the same. Emerson's lecture emphasizes the transformative power of language and literature. He argues that books are not meant to be passive sources of information but should instead inspire readers to think critically and develop their own ideas (Emerson, 1960). This notion is particularly relevant to the writer-teacher, who seeks to instill a love for literature and writing in their students, while also encouraging them to become independent thinkers and creators.

Emerson's exploration of the role of the scholar as a "Man Thinking" rather than a mere recipient of knowledge aligns with the writer-teacher's approach to education. The writer-teacher, like the scholar described by Emerson, is someone who actively engages with ideas, questions established norms, and encourages their students to do the same. They recognize that education is not just about transmitting information but fostering a sense of curiosity, intellectual exploration, and critical thinking. Emerson's ideas on the scholar's connection to nature also resonate with the writer-teacher's approach. He emphasizes the importance of observing and understanding the natural world as a direct source of inspiration and knowledge (Emerson, 1960). The writer-teacher, similarly, encourages their students to engage with the world around them, to draw from personal experiences, and to find inspiration in the everyday.

"The American Scholar" offers valuable insights into the concept of the writer-teacher. His ideas on self-reliance, individuality, intellectual freedom, and the transformative power of language align with the characteristics and aspirations of the writer-teacher. Emerson's emphasis on active learning, critical thinking, and the scholar's connection to nature provides a framework that resonates with the writer-teacher's approach to education. By incorporating Emerson's ideas into the discussion, we gain a deeper understanding of the broader context in which the concept of the writer-teacher operates and the philosophical underpinnings that inform their practice.

This idea is further developed by American pragmatists who believe that the new world requires individuals to theorize their own paths through the wilderness, as old-world methods are no longer applicable. Walt Whitman, for instance, emphasizes the importance of firsthand experience by stating,

"You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books, You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self." (Whitman, 1892, sec. 2)

Learning in the new world takes place through action and experience, which then becomes generalized knowledge passed on to others traversing similar terrain. Pragmatists such as John Dewey and William James (James, 1907) assert that education should be based on experience and that learning can occur outside the confines of formal schooling. Dewey argues explicitly for a curriculum rooted in the experiences deemed valuable by elders and emphasizes the democratic process of education. Knowledge is shared from those who have acted, experienced, and reflected upon the subject matter to those who are learning (Dewey, 1944). This principle is especially relevant when it comes to writing, as only experienced writers can effectively teach the craft based on their own ventures into the "writing wilderness" and subsequent reflections,

One clear perspective on the relationship between education and experience is presented in John Dewey's seminal work, "Experience and Education." Dewey's ideas have had a profound impact on educational philosophy, particularly in emphasizing the importance of experiential learning and the integration of theory and practice. Dewey argues that education should be rooted in meaningful experiences, as he believes that learning is most effective when it occurs within the context of practical situations. In his view, education should not be confined to the classroom but should extend into the world where individuals can engage with real-life problems and challenges (Dewey, 1963). Dewey writes, "Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, and habits" (Dewey, 1963, p. 25). He advocates for a student-centered approach that considers the individual learner's interests, experiences, and prior knowledge.

According to Dewey, education is a continuous process of growth and development. He contends that learners should actively participate in their own education, constructing knowledge through hands-on experiences and reflective thinking (Dewey, 1963). In this way, education becomes a dynamic and interactive process that fosters the integration of theory and practice. Dewey states, "All education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race" (Dewey, 1963, p. 87). This means that education is not solely about the acquisition of knowledge but also involves the cultivation of social and ethical values. Dewey's ideas align with the notion that learning should be situated within authentic contexts and that the experiences and insights of those who have acted, experienced, and reflected upon a subject matter should be shared with learners. This supports the notion that in the realm of writing, for example, experienced writers are best positioned to teach writing based on their own encounters with the challenges and intricacies of the writing process.



Moreover, Dewey emphasizes the democratic nature of education, advocating for a curriculum that reflects the diverse needs and interests of students. He argues that education should prepare individuals to be active and engaged members of society, capable of critically analyzing and contributing to the world around them. (Dewey, 1944) This aligns with the concept that knowledge is not something to be passively received but instead actively constructed through engagement with the social and cultural contexts in which learning takes place.

John Dewey's work provides valuable insights into the relationship between education and experience. His ideas emphasize the importance of experiential learning, the integration of theory and practice, and the active participation of learners in their own education. Dewey's views support the notion that education should be situated within meaningful contexts and that knowledge is best acquired through active engagement with the world. By incorporating Dewey's ideas into the exploration of the writer-teacher and the teacher-writer, we can further understand the role of experience in shaping both the teaching and writing processes. This all boils down to learning from those who have acted on, experienced, or done the subject matter. For example, to learn writing practices and skills, one would be required to communicate with an experienced writer. Only a writer can teach writing, as no one has ventured into the writing wilderness, survived, and then reflected upon that experience.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the emergence of a new era in writing education with the rise of composition and creative writing programs. During this time, the figure of the writer-teacher or teacher-writer began to take shape. Wendy Bishop, a prominent scholar, argued that teacher-writers have important insights to offer writing pedagogies, suggesting that their experiences and self-reports should form the foundation for teaching writing. Bishop differentiates between the two terms, with the writer-teacher advocating for teachers to write with and for their students and colleagues, while the teacher-writer focuses on writing as an integral part of their teaching practice (Bishop, 1999).

Wendy Bishop is an influential figure in the field of writing studies, particularly in the area of creative writing pedagogy. Her works have contributed significantly to our understanding of the writer-teacher and the dynamic relationship between writing and teaching. In her seminal book, "Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition," Bishop explores the role of the writer-teacher in composition classrooms. Bishop argues that a writer-teacher is not simply someone who teaches writing but rather an individual who actively engages in writing themselves (Bishop, 1999). According to Bishop, the writer-teacher brings their own experiences as a writer into the classroom, creating a space for authentic writing instruction and fostering a sense of community among students. By sharing their own writing process, struggles, and successes, writer-teachers provide students with valuable insights and inspire them to develop their own writing voice (Bishop, 1999).

One of Bishop's key contributions is her emphasis on the reflective practice of the writer-teacher. She advocates for ongoing self-reflection and professional development, encouraging writer-teachers to continually examine their own writing processes, teaching methods, and beliefs about writing. By engaging in reflective practices, writer-teachers can enhance their own writing skills and become more effective in supporting their students' writing development (Bishop, 1999). In addition to her book, Bishop's scholarly articles have further explored the intersections of writing and teaching. In her article "Composing Ourselves as Writer-teacher-writers: Starting with Wendy Bishop," co-authored with Peter Bizzaro, Amy Culhane, and Diane Cook, she delves into the personal and professional growth of writer-teachers. The authors highlight the transformative power of writing for teacher development and the importance of creating supportive writing communities among educators.

Bishop's work has had a profound impact on the field, inspiring numerous teachers and scholars to adopt a writer-teacher approach in their classrooms. Her insights and recommendations continue to inform creative writing pedagogy and shape the understanding of the writer-teacher's role in education. Wendy Bishop's work provides a valuable perspective into the practice of the writer-teacher and highlights the importance of integrating personal writing experiences into the teaching of writing. Her emphasis on reflection, community-building, and ongoing professional development serves as a foundation for fostering a vibrant and engaging writing environment in educational settings (Bizzaro, 2009) The ideas and principles put forth by Bishop contribute to a deeper understanding of the writer-teacher's role and its significance in empowering students as writers. Bishop further explores the dynamics within the academy, where the position of a writer or author carries authority, while the role of a composition instructor often does not. Owning writing, according to Bishop, can be seen as reducing risks and creating hierarchies, with established genres treated as sacred artifacts and aspiring creative writers and certain teachers of writing deemed unfit for higher positions (Bishop, 1999).

Drawing the works of Michel Foucault, a prominent philosopher and social theorist, sheds light on the concept of the writer-teacher within the broader framework of discourse. Foucault's insights into the nature of discourse provide a deeper understanding of how knowledge is constructed, circulated, and controlled within society. By examining the historical and cultural significance of discourse, as well as its transformation into a commodity, we can better grasp the role of the writer-teacher and the dynamics of knowledge production. Foucault, reminiscent of the pragmatists, also argues that discourse extends beyond the realm of books and written texts. It encompasses a range of practices, theories, traditions, and disciplines that shape the field of knowledge within a particular historical and cultural context. Discourse is not static but rather evolves and changes over time, reflecting shifts in power relations, social norms, and intellectual paradigms. It is through discourse that knowledge is generated, disseminated, and legitimized within society (Foucault, 1972).

In the early stages of civilization, discourse was tightly intertwined with the sacred and the profane. It was embedded within religious institutions, where certain individuals held authority over the interpretation and dissemination of knowledge. This sacred aspect of discourse involved risks, as those who challenged or deviated from established norms could face severe consequences (Foucault, 1980; 2001). The ownership of discourse was often monopolized by religious institutions or ruling elites, who wielded power over what could be said, written, and transmitted (Foucault, 1972). However, as societies evolved and modernized, discourse underwent a transformation. It became commodified and subject to the circuits of intellectual property. The emergence of print capitalism and the development of the publishing industry facilitated the dissemination of knowledge on a larger scale, but it also introduced mechanisms of control and ownership. Discourse, once a collective endeavor, was now subject to market forces, copyrights, and intellectual property laws (Foucault, 1972; 2001). The writer-teacher, operating within this commodified landscape, had to navigate the constraints and power dynamics inherent in the production and distribution of knowledge .

This Foucauldian perspective on discourse and the commodification of knowledge has implications for understanding the role of the writer-teacher. The writer-teacher operates within a system where knowledge is not simply a neutral entity but is embedded within power relations, historical contingencies, and social contexts. They engage with and contribute to the discursive practices and traditions of their field while also being aware of the ways in which discourse is shaped, controlled, and subject to ownership. The writer-teacher, in this sense, becomes a mediator between the broader discursive field and their students. They not only transmit knowledge but also critically engage with the discourses they teach, encouraging students to question, challenge, and contribute to the ongoing production of knowledge. The writer-teacher recognizes the historical and cultural dimensions of discourse and fosters a critical awareness of the power dynamics and ideological underpinnings that shape it.

In the wide-ranging implications of Foucault and his examination of discourse, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the writer-teacher's role within the broader landscape of knowledge production. They navigate the complexities of discourse, drawing from various sources, traditions, and disciplines while also grappling with the commodification and control of knowledge within contemporary society. The writer-teacher's task is not only to transmit knowledge but to foster critical thinking, empower students to participate in the discursive field and navigate the complexities of discourse in an ever-changing world.

By examining Bizarro's work alongside the insights of Emerson, Dewey, Bishop, Foucault, and Halpin, this literature review establishes the foundation for understanding the nuances between the

writer-teacher and the teacher-writer. The historical and theoretical perspectives presented shed light on the evolving roles of writers and teachers and their impact on the field of education.

### **2.3 The Writer-Teacher Within Contemporary Education**

A more contemporary work in the field of education is David Halpin's *Hope and Education*. Halpin's book, published in 2003, explores the essential role of hope in the educational process and its impact on student motivation, engagement, and overall well-being. In *Hope and Education*, Halpin argues that hope is not merely an abstract concept but a vital component of effective teaching and learning. He emphasizes that fostering hope in educational settings is crucial for students to develop a sense of agency, resilience, and a positive outlook on their future (Halpin, 2003). Halpin asserts that hope is not passive wishful thinking but an active orientation towards the future. It involves setting goals, formulating strategies, and taking action to overcome obstacles and achieve desired outcomes. According to Halpin, hope enables students to envision possibilities, persevere in the face of challenges, and maintain a sense of purpose and optimism in their educational journey (Halpin, 2003).

One key aspect of Halpin's work is the notion of "hopeful classrooms" or educational environments that cultivate hope among students. These classrooms prioritize nurturing students' aspirations, creating a supportive and inclusive community, and promoting a growth mindset. While it is said teachers play a critical role in fostering hope by providing guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for students to develop their skills, pursue their interests, and experience success (Halpin, 2003). Writers, too, have the ability to inspire and generate hope as well. Halpin also highlights the significance of the curriculum in promoting hope. A curriculum that is relevant, meaningful, and connected to students' lives can inspire hope by fostering curiosity, engagement, and a sense of purpose (Halpin, 2003). Teacher-writers' have a unique skill set that can be leveraged to incorporate real-world examples, experiential learning, and opportunities for self-expression; the curriculum can empower students and ignite their passion for learning. Furthermore, Halpin emphasizes the role of hope in addressing educational inequities and promoting social justice. He argues that education should be a transformative force that enables students to envision and work towards a better future for themselves, their loved ones, and their communities (Halpin, 2003). By fostering hope, educators can empower students to challenge societal barriers and advocate for positive change.

By integrating Halpin's theories into educational practice, the writer-teacher embraces the role of a facilitator of hope. They go beyond imparting knowledge and skills, recognizing that education is a holistic process that encompasses emotional, social, and personal growth. The writer-teacher's approach is grounded in the belief that education should not only equip students with academic competencies but also nurture their sense of hope, purpose, and resilience. Halpin's work on hope in education resonates with the

ideals of the writer-teacher. By recognizing the transformative power of hope, the writer-teacher can create a dynamic and inspiring learning environment that supports students' growth, engagement, and well-being. The integration of hope into educational practice aligns with the writer-teacher's commitment to inspiring and empowering students through storytelling, personal reflection, and the cultivation of a hopeful classroom community.

In conjunction with the significance of education in expanding the imagination and fostering hope, Marc McGurl's book *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* provides valuable insights into the relationship between education and the development of writers' imaginations. In *The Program Era*, McGurl explores the rise of creative writing programs in postwar America and their impact on literature. He argues that these programs, through their emphasis on workshops and the cultivation of writing skills, played a crucial role in shaping the imaginations of aspiring writers (McGurl, 2011). McGurl suggests that the workshop environment, with its focus on feedback and critique, enables writers to expand their imaginative capacities and refine their storytelling techniques (McGurl, 2011).

This aligns with the notion presented by Halpin (and Wilder) that education, through the accumulation of memories and the nurturing of imagination, is essential in the creative process. McGurl's insights shed light on the role of education in fostering the growth of writers' imaginations, thereby providing further support to the idea that education and the expansion of imagination are interconnected. McGurl's exploration of the relationship between education and the literary landscape underscores the transformative power of education and its ability to create change. By examining the rise of creative writing programs, which are inherently educational in nature, McGurl highlights how education shapes and influences the literary world. This resonates with the themes of hope and positive change discussed later in relation to Wilder's works.

The evidence presented in McGurl's *The Program Era* offers a valuable perspective on the role of education in relation to the writer-teacher, further reinforcing the argument regarding the importance of education in fostering imagination, cultivating memories, and inspiring hope and change within the literary realm.

McGurl's work explores the impact of creative writing programs on American literature and highlights the role of education in shaping the imaginations of writers. It delves into the ways in which the academic environment and the structured programs influence the literary production of writers. By examining the historical and cultural context of creative writing education, McGurl sheds light on how educational institutions and workshops have become instrumental in shaping literary movements and nurturing the creativity of aspiring writers. The writer-teacher partially aligns with McGurl's exploration of the "Program Era," which emphasizes the significance of education in the development of writers' imaginations. As writer-teachers engage in the process of teaching and mentoring, they not only pass on

their knowledge and expertise but also contribute to the cultivation of imaginative thinking in their students. By sharing their experiences, techniques, and literary insights, writer-teachers inspire and challenge students to explore their creative potential and expand their imaginative horizons.

Moreover, McGurl's analysis of the "Program Era" highlights the role of education in cultivating memories and personal narratives within the literary field. Creative writing programs provide a platform for writers to delve into their own experiences, memories, and identities, ultimately shaping their unique voices and perspectives (McGurl, 2011). This aspect resonates with the writer-teacher's approach, which encourages students to tap into their personal stories and draw inspiration from their own lives to create meaningful and authentic narratives.

The connection between education, imagination, and hope is also evident in McGurl's work. *The Program Era* recognizes that education acts as a catalyst for social and cultural change, empowering writers to envision alternative realities, challenge existing norms, and inspire hope through their literary works (McGurl, 2011). Writer-teachers, through their educational role, play a vital part in fostering this sense of hope and possibility by encouraging students to explore new ideas, question conventions, and use their creative voices as agents of change. By integrating McGurl's insights into the discussion, the argument regarding the writer-teacher gains further support and depth. It acknowledges the broader impact of education on the literary landscape, emphasizing its role in nurturing imagination, cultivating memories, and inspiring hope and change within the realm of literature.

In "The Writer As Teacher: Reflections From the Margins," K.M. McDermott provides valuable personal experience gained through time served as a writer-teacher and offers a unique perspective on their practical role and significance within the educational landscape. McDermott's work centered on his personal accounts of a contemporary writer-teacher in action further expands our understanding and support for the idea of the writer-teacher, highlighting the transformative power they hold in the classroom and beyond.

One key aspect emphasized by McDermott is the writer-teacher's ability to serve as a bridge between the worlds of writing and teaching. Drawing from their own experiences as writers, they bring a rich and authentic understanding of the writing process into the classroom. McDermott suggests that the writer-teacher's unique perspective enables them to offer valuable insights, practical advice, and creative approaches to teaching writing that go beyond conventional pedagogical methods (McDermott, 2019). This blending of their roles as writers and teachers allows them to connect with students on a deeper level, fostering a sense of shared passion and mutual learning.

McDermott boasts the transformative potential of the writer-teacher's presence in the classroom. By embodying the qualities of a writer and modeling the writing process, they inspire and empower their students to explore their own creative voices. McDermott argues that the writer-teacher's authenticity and

vulnerability in sharing their own writing journeys create a safe and supportive space for students to take risks and express themselves. This approach not only cultivates a love for writing but also enhances students' confidence, self-expression, and critical thinking skills (McDermott, 2019).

McDermott then discusses the writer-teacher's ability to challenge traditional notions of authority in the classroom. By embracing a collaborative and inclusive teaching approach, they create an environment that values diverse perspectives and encourages active participation. McDermott argues that the writer-teacher's open-mindedness and willingness to learn from their students disrupt hierarchical power structures and promotes a more democratic and inclusive learning environment. This approach fosters a sense of agency and ownership in students, empowering them to become active participants in their own learning journey (McDermott, 2019).

McDermott explores the transformative impact of the writer-teacher beyond the confines of the classroom. He attests that the writer-teacher's engagement in the larger writing community, participation in writing workshops and conferences, and publication of their own works contribute to the advancement of the field of writing pedagogy . The writer-teacher's active involvement in the writing community allows them to bring the latest trends, ideas, and insights into their teaching practice, ensuring their students receive a well-rounded and up-to-date education (McDermott, 2019). McDermott's reflections on the writer-teacher's role as a bridge between writing and teaching, their transformative presence in the classroom, their challenge to traditional authority, and their contributions to the larger writing community illustrate the unique value and impact of the writer-teacher in the modern-day.

### **3. Framework: Thornton Wilder the Writer-Teacher**

#### **3.1 Wilder's Career and Education**

Thornton Wilder, a highly respected figure in American literature of the twentieth century, was born Midwestern on April 17, 1897, in Madison, Wisconsin (Niven, 2013). Throughout his life until his death in 1975, Wilder made significant contributions to the literary world and left an indelible mark on the American canon. His achievements include being the only writer to have been awarded Pulitzer Prizes in both fiction and drama. Notably, he received the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1927, as well as for his plays *Our Town* in 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1942 (Konkle, 2006).

Wilder's exceptional talent and dedication to his craft garnered him numerous honors and accolades. In addition to the Pulitzer Prizes, he was recognized with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Book Committee's Medal for Literature, and Germany's Goethe-Plakette Award (Niven, 2013).

Wilder's versatility as a writer is evident in the breadth of his works, which spanned various genres and forms. In addition to his well-known novels such as *The Ides of March*, *The Cabala*, *The Woman of Andros*, *Heaven's My Destination*, *The Eighth Day*, and *Theophilus North*, he made significant contributions to the theater with plays like *The Matchmaker* (adapted as the musical *Hello, Dolly!*), *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, *The Alcestiad*, *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, and *The Long Christmas Dinner* (Konkle, 2006).

However, Wilder's literary prowess extended beyond fiction and drama. He excelled as an essayist, translator, research scholar, teacher, lecturer, librettist, and screenwriter (Niven, 2013). His diverse talents allowed him to collaborate with renowned filmmakers, including his partnership with Alfred Hitchcock on the classic psycho-thriller *Shadow of a Doubt* in 1942. Moreover, Wilder demonstrated his linguistic abilities by translating and adapting plays by prominent playwrights such as Ibsen, Sartre, and Obey. His scholarly pursuits included substantial research on literary figures like James Joyce and Lope de Vega (Niven, 2013).

Apart from his literary achievements, Wilder's involvement in the arts extended to the realms of acting and music. He actively participated in summer theater productions, assuming major roles in his own plays (Niven, 2013). Additionally, his deep love for music led him to write librettos for two operas based on his works. Notably, Paul Hindemith composed the opera based on *The Long Christmas Dinner*, while Louis Talma created the adaptation of *The Alcestiad*. Furthermore, Wilder's remarkable life journey encompassed experiences beyond the realm of writing and the arts. During World War II, he served admirably in the Army Air Force Intelligence, and his dedication and service were recognized with prestigious awards such as the Legion d'honneur, the Legion of Merit Bronze Star, and the Order of the British Empire among others (Niven, 2013; Wilder, 2019, Afterword).

While Wilder's accomplishments and contributions to literature and the arts are undeniably impressive, his interest in education and teaching stands out as an essential aspect of his multifaceted career. Despite achieving great success as a writer, teaching, and education remained significant to him, permeating his diverse body of work. Wilder's passion for teaching manifested early on when he started his teaching career in 1921 as a French instructor at The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. He continued to impart knowledge and engage with students during the 1930s, teaching Classics courses in Translation and Composition at the University of Chicago. Notably, in 1950 and 1951, he held the prestigious position of Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University (Wilder, 2019, Afterword).

Wilder's affinity for education may be attributed, in part, to his own educational background. While he spent some of his boyhood in China attending international private schools, his formal education primarily took place in California. He graduated from Berkeley High School in 1915 and subsequently



enrolled at Oberlin College, where he spent two years before transferring to Yale University, where he earned his Bachelor's degree in 1920. His educational pursuits extended to post-graduate studies, including a year at Rome's American Academy from 1920 to 1921, where he studied archaeology and Italian. He later pursued further graduate work in French at Princeton, earning his Master's degree in 1926 (Niven, 2013).

Throughout his lengthy career, Thornton Wilder consistently demonstrated a profound commitment to fostering intellectual growth, promoting empathy, and encouraging individuals to engage with the complexities of the world. His belief in the transformative power of education, evident in both his writings and actions, continues to resonate and inspire readers to this day.

### **3.2 Positioning Wilder as a Writer-Teacher**

Establishing Thornton Wilder as a writer-teacher requires a nuanced examination of his literary works and his approach to education. While it may be challenging to label a writer who delved into multiple genres and writing modes, positioning Wilder as a writer-teacher provides a fresh perspective that deepens our understanding of his works and their connection to the field of education. By exploring the novels *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination*, we can discern elements of educational design and commentary embedded within Wilder's storytelling. These works can be viewed as the creative endeavors of a writer-teacher, someone who has achieved success in published storytelling and utilizes their experiences in the literary field to impart valuable lessons to subsequent generations of students. Also, with a further close examination of these novels, we may uncover more nuanced and thought-provoking views on education that diverge from the prevalent practical-minded and pedagogical approaches dominating the contemporary "Program Era," often characterized by teacher-writers and standardized creative writing programs.

The case for positioning Wilder as a writer-teacher, as opposed to a teacher-writer, is compelling. While Wilder undoubtedly made his name as a writer of fiction and drama, garnering considerable recognition and accolades for his artistic contributions, it is crucial to recognize his self-proclaimed identity as a teacher. This distinction allows us to merge the terms together, identifying Wilder as a writer-teacher—a figure whose worth in the classroom derived not solely from occasional teaching positions to sustain himself financially but from the wealth of experiences and insights he gained from his extensive involvement in the literary field. Significantly, Wilder's effectiveness as a writer-teacher stemmed from the profound influence that his experiences as a writer had on his teaching approach. His unique perspective, shaped by his achievements as a successful writer, allowed him to bring invaluable insights into the creative writing process to his students. Beyond his personal writing journey, Wilder's teaching methods were informed by his tutelage under renowned literary figures such as Gertrude Stein

and James Joyce (Brown, 1998). Consequently, his pedagogical approach extended beyond mere technical aspects of craft, embracing the broader philosophical and cultural dimensions of storytelling.

Wilder firmly believed in the transformative power of storytelling as a fundamental form of human communication that could shape society. He stressed the significance of understanding the historical and cultural contexts within which stories are written, encouraging his students to explore their own experiences and perspectives in their writing. Moreover, Wilder's novels, including but not limited to *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination*, can be seen as manifestations of his commitment to educating readers on the importance of storytelling and the profound impact of literature. In *Theophilus North*, for instance, Wilder employs the character of a young teacher embarking on a journey to Newport, Rhode Island, to impart valuable lessons on the value of curiosity and the essentiality of embracing life's diverse experiences.

Wilder's unique approach to teaching writing is also evident in his famous and most celebrated book, "The Bridge of San Luis Rey." Although not explicitly a work on pedagogy, the novel showcases Wilder's deep understanding of storytelling and its power to engage readers on multiple levels. Through intricate character development, thought-provoking themes, and rich narrative structure, Wilder demonstrates his mastery as a writer and his ability to impart profound insights about the human condition. The novel serves as a testament to Wilder's skill as a storyteller and his potential as a teacher, as it exemplifies the kind of storytelling he aimed to instill in his students.

Thornton Wilder's contributions to both literature and education underscore the unique insights that emerge when a writer of significant reputation also assumes the role or job of a teacher. By positioning Wilder as a writer-teacher, we deepen our comprehension of the intricate connections between his writing and his pedagogy, as well as the profound influence his experiences as a writer had on his educational philosophy. Through his rich body of work, Wilder offers a compelling example of how the fusion of writing and teaching can yield a transformative approach to education that transcends conventional boundaries.

Thornton Wilder's role as a writer-teacher can be further supported by examining additional evidence from his life and works. By delving into his literary accomplishments and educational activities, we can substantiate the claim that Wilder was not merely a writer who dabbled in teaching but a true writer-teacher who integrated his literary expertise into his educational endeavors.

Firstly, it is essential to highlight Wilder's own words, in which he openly identified himself as a teacher. In his autobiographical writings and letters, he consistently emphasized his passion for teaching and the value he attributed to his role as an educator. For instance, in a letter to his friend Gertrude Stein, Wilder wrote, "I have been having a delightful time teaching playwriting. I have twenty-five lovely students" (Wilder, Wilder, & Bryer, 2010). This statement reveals Wilder's active engagement with

teaching, not as a secondary pursuit but as an integral part of his creative and intellectual life. Secondly, Wilder's commitment to education extended beyond his formal teaching engagements. He frequently participated in workshops, seminars, and literary conferences, where he shared his insights and mentored aspiring writers. His interactions with emerging writers and his involvement in the literary community exemplify his dedication to nurturing the next generation of storytellers. Wilder's active participation in the educational landscape underscores his commitment to being a writer-teacher, as he consistently sought opportunities to inspire and guide others in their creative pursuits.

Wilder's impact as a writer-teacher can also be seen in the enduring legacy of his students. Many of his former students went on to achieve significant success in their own writing careers, attributing their growth and development to Wilder's guidance. One notable example is the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Edward Albee, who credited Wilder as his most influential teacher and acknowledged the profound impact Wilder had on his artistic journey. (Wilder, Wilder, & Bryer, 2010) The success of Wilder's students not only validates his effectiveness as a teacher but also attests to his ability to foster a creative and nurturing environment in which writers could thrive.

The above evidence, along with the following analysis of his two education-themed novels, supports the notion that Thornton Wilder was, in fact, a writer-teacher. His own statements, active involvement in teaching and mentoring, and the impact he had on his students all underscore his commitment to both writing and education. By recognizing Wilder as a writer-teacher, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between his literary works and his educational philosophy. His multifaceted contributions to both realms highlight the potential for writers to inspire and educate and the enduring legacy of a writer-teacher who leaves a profound impact on the literary landscape and future generations of storytellers.

#### **4. Analysis: Themes of Teaching and Learning**

##### **4.1 Theophilus North: A Teaching Novel**

Theophilus North was published in October 1973 and was the last of Wilder's novels to be published while he was still alive. The book was popular at the time of release and could be considered a commercial success, being placed on the New York Times bestseller list for twenty-six weeks (Wilder, 2019, p. 381).

When commenting on his final novel, Wilder admitted it was a "semi-autobiographical collection of chapters—semi-fictional—dipping into stages of life" (Wilder, 2019, p. 380). He goes on to say Theophilus North is "largely autobiographical" and in writing it "will require my revisiting the places

where I lived and worked. These travels are devoted to documentation, research, interviews, and supervising photography" (Wilder, 2019, p. 381).

Though indeed a novel, the work could be better considered a collection of episodic short stories, taking place over the course of the 1926 summer season in Newport, Rhode Island. While this novel fits Wilder's self-proclaimed underlying theme present in all of his previous novels, that being the exploration of the questions "What's the worst thing the world can do to, and what are the last resources one has to oppose it?" I am not alone in believing this novel to have an educational current running strongly through it, cover to cover. Thornton Wilder's nephew, literary executor, and biographer, Tappan Wilder, seems to (for all intents and purposes) agree with me. "The education and expansion of the intellect, major tributaries to the fashioning of a rich imagination and memory, is another key theme of the novel" (Wilder, 2019, p. 383).

Theophilus North exhibits the full breadth of Wilder's formal classical education, including allusions and blatant references to "Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Goethe, Goldsmith, Milton, Poe, Freud, Jane Austen, the Brontës, Byron, Darwin, Defoe (Robinson Crusoe), six famous actors, seven Shakespeare dramas, fifteen major American authors, ten composers and musicians, five scientists and philosophers, and a bookshelf of references to biblical and classical sources" (Wilder, 2019, p. 382).

The novel is dedicated to Wilder's Oberlin and Yale undergraduate classmate, Robert Maynard Hutchins. On its own, this dedication decision could be seen as a simple way to honor an old friend, but attached to the subject matter of Theophilus North, it's telling. Hutchins served as the president and chancellor of the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1951 and was responsible for hiring (and convincing) Wilder to teach part-time starting in 1930. Hutchins and a hand in many other of Wilder's forays into education helped the author to found the Aspen Institute in 1949 and helped him to reestablish ties to postwar Germany's higher education system.

The episodes or adventures of Theophilus North center on Theophilus North, of course, a teacher at a New Jersey boys' preparatory academy. Theophilus escapes to Newport to refresh himself and once again enjoy its beauty, as he was stationed there during the war, and becomes a children's tennis coach and personal tutor to make ends meet. Though a teacher by trade (and a multilingual Yale man), the protagonist has nine life ambitions outside of the education profession. These nine professions, or "life careers," are saint, anthropologist, archaeologist, detective, actor, magician, lover, and free man. Why so many different interests? Theophilus is happiest when he is inventing, engaging the full might of his wildly active imagination.

"It was not clear to me what I wanted to do in life. I did not want to teach, though I knew I had a talent for it; the teaching profession is often a safety net for just such indeterminate natures. I did not want to be a writer in the sense of one who earns his living by his pen; I wanted to be far more immersed in life

than that. If I were to do any so-called 'writing,' it would not be before I reached the age of fifty. If I were destined to die before that, I wanted to be sure that I had encompassed as varied a range of experience as I could—that I had not narrowed my focus to that noble but largely sedentary pursuit that is covered by the word 'art'" (Wilder, 2019, p. 75).

These nine ambitions foreshadow the subsequent nine adventures, each with its own cast of characters with their own crisis in progress. Nine is the magic number in *Theophilus North*, as the novel also revolves around the protagonist's theory of the nine cities of Newport, simply explained as the nine separate cultural eras that have come and gone since Newport's founding. These nine cities are inspired by Heinrich Schliemann's thoughts on the fabled Troy's nine cities. Just as Troy was a collection of different cities and time periods piled on top of each other, the former ones leaving their mark on the latter, so was Newport. Theophilus's nine ambitions and the nine cities of Newport weave in and out the nine adventures. Interestingly enough, Theophilus is able to live out all of his ambitions and visit all nine of the cities of Newport (in some form or another) by quintessentially being a teacher and leveraging his education in whatever manner the character sees fit.

These episodes all vary greatly from one another, as does Theophilus' involvement, though they all involve life within high society. Theophilus inspires, motivates, and manipulates his way through Newport's high society to the bane of some and the celebration of others. In particular order, Theophilus quietly ends an elopement between an heiress and a divorced gym teacher. He dispels the rumors of ghosts from an architecturally magnificent but haunted mansion. He cures a retired diplomat from a false disease invented by his greedy children. He reasserts the masculinity of a decorated war veteran turned whipping boy. He uncovers and scatters a gang of counterfeiters, freeing a "sensitive" and Poe-like hostage in the process. He convinces an adolescent boy to outgrow the rudeness of puberty through the use of foul language. He repairs a marriage with nothing more than classic literary works and a performance (or two) of Shakespeare. He teaches an Italian-American genius with a disability how to get girls. He fathers a child for a desperate married woman. He heals a seventeen-year-old girl and kills an ailing German countess with his "electric hands." He unveils the truth behind a widow's disgrace and arranges a happy marriage. Yes, that's ten, but the second and tenth are closely related.

Throughout the novel, the author has no problem making observations on the teaching profession. Theophilus comments on teaching from the point of view of authority within the teaching field. One instance is: "Yes. Teachers are like birds. The moment comes when they must push the young out of the nest. Now you must give your time to American history and physics, which I can't teach you" (Wilder, 2019, p. 189). Another poignant example: "The reader may think this reprehensible on my part, but one of the rewards of being a teacher is watching a brilliant student display his knowledge. It is like putting a promising young racehorse through his paces" (Wilder, 2019, p. 232).

Theophilus also pokes fun at the teaching profession and himself, playing with the public's general perception of teachers as boring and out-of-touch who do nothing but force students to sit through long-winded lectures or uninteresting subject matters. "But when she was a young girl she had an accident. Fell off a horse. She missed some years of schooling. School teachers came to her house and taught her—terrible bores; you know what school teachers are like.—Where was I?" (Wilder, 2019, p. 190).

Theophilus also offers several insights into the process of learning, or his opinions of it, proclaiming, "I never take a student unless there is some assurance that the student wants to work with me. I can't get anywhere with an indifferent or an antagonistic student. Do you think she'll resent me as she does the bridge teacher?" (Wilder 2019, p. 211). Other characters in the novel also get in the action. Edweena makes a candid point after an explosive series of events on a shipline where she says to a younger Theophilus that "The mistakes we make don't really hurt us, Corporal, when we understand every inch of the ground" (Wilder, 2019, p. 352).

He also speaks to the value of education and rebukes those who choose to go without, saying, "In the twentieth century, it is not possible to advance far as an autodidact in the vast fields of his interests. I had already known such solitary men—and in later years discovered others—who, having repudiated formal education, were writing a History of the Human Intelligence or the Sources of Moral Values" (Wilder, 2019, p. 239). When asked about the importance of higher education by the brilliant young Miro, Theophilus makes his feelings about universities clear. "'Professore, will you tell me what a college education gives a man?' I spoke of the value of being required to devote yourself to subjects that at first seem foreign to your interests; of the value of being thrown among young men and young women of your own age, many of whom are eager as you are to get the best of it; of the possibility—it's only luck—of being brought into contact with born teachers, even great teachers. I reminded him of Dante's request to his guide Virgil. 'Give me the food for which you have already given me the appetite'" (Wilder, 2019, p. 243).

*Theophilus North* is also dotted with several other mentions of school life and odd generalizations relating to education. One is, "The Scots love learning" (Wilder, 2019, p. 241), which may or may not be valid. Only a Scot would know. Another is when Theophilus somehow finds himself telling stories to his tennis students, naturally falling into a more formal teaching role. The club director helped facilitate Theophilus' pop-up classroom and provided a sitting area as "He would spread out sailcloth about the 'teacher's chair'" (Wilder, 2019, p. 279).

Lastly, Theophilus engages in educational philosophy with the reader when reflecting on the reaction of one of his young pupils when he finally reaches a moment of understanding (or small enlightenment). "He looked up at me with awe and wonder. What did that Frenchman say? 'The basis of education of the very young is the expansion of the sense of wonder.'" (Wilder, 2019, p. 351).

#### 4.2 Heaven's My Destination: A Student Novel

If *Theophilus North* is to be considered Wilder's teacher novel, *Heaven's My Destination* would consequently serve as his student novel. Wilder himself said that he meant Brush, the subject character of *Heaven's My Destination*, "to be seen as learning in episode after episode better how to render his instinctive goodness and unworldliness effective. It's an Education Novel" (Gottlieb, 2012).

You don't need to read deeply to discover the themes of learning and education present in *Heaven's My Destination*. Two epigraphs, introducing and summarizing the events of the chapter, mention education outright. Chapter 7's being "Three adventures of varying educational importance: the evangelist; the medium; first steps in ahimsa" (Wilder, 2020, p. 90), and Chapter 10's being "Ozarksville, Missouri. George Brush meets a great man and learns something of importance about himself" (Wilder, 2020, p. 148). Wilder clearly had education on his mind during the construction of the novel.

*Heaven's My Destination* is Wilder's American Don Quixote, likely written in response to a scathing review by an overzealous critic, claiming Wilder could not write about the real America. "His education, or development from a Dakota 'bible-belt' mind to a modern grosstadt tolerance in three years; i.e., the very journey the American mind has made in fifty years" (Wilder, 2020, Afterword, p. 194). It was written over a period of time while he was lecturing on Cervantes at the University of Chicago. The lectures were so successful that in the spring of 1933, he offered a five-part lecture series titled "Cervantes and Don Quixote" at the Art Institute of Chicago, which sold out (Wilder, 2020, Afterword, p. 194). During this time, Wilder also traveled the country on a formal lecture tour managed by the Lee Kendrick Agency. It's apparent education, traveling, and *Don Quixote* was at the forefront of his attention during the writing process. Though less autobiographical than *Theophilus North*, Wilder eventually admitted to a reporter in 1953, "George Brush, that's me!" (Wilder, 2020, p. 196).

*Heaven's My Destination* is a shorter novel that follows George Marvin Brush, who "travels in school books" (Wilder, 2020, p. 3) as a textbook salesman for the Caulkins Educational Press. The book explores the question of what society is to do with the truly good man, whom it can neither stomach nor ignore. Brush is a truly good man, or at least he would think so, and his actions (for the most part) are honorable and calculated. As prescriptive as the schoolbooks he hocks, Brush is steadfast in his young beliefs, preaching salvation and unorthodox ideas based solely on logic with no grounding in practical reality.

While on the road and rails during the onset of the Great Depression, Brush finds himself in messy scenes in smoking cars, hotel lobbies, summer camps, brothels, Midwestern barns, boarding houses, hospitals, jail cells, corner stores, and courtrooms. Brush believes in a perfect world, which he does not find while traversing the American South. While successful in selling books with plenty of money in his pocket, his odd ideas and rigid stances on social issues, like women should not smoke and

the theory that you should voluntarily give burglars money, earn him the despise of most people. Though lucky and capable, Brush can't seem to get out of the way and takes stands that end in less-than-great outcomes.

Brush is, above all else, a logical man with many grand theories and ideas he puts to the test over the course of his many adventures. "Many unusual adventures befell him during these weeks. Of the great number we select three that illustrate certain stages in his education" (Wilder, 2020, p. 91). These theories, such as ahimsa and pacifism, conflict with the real, broken-in world he explores. His motivation in testing his ideas is simple. "'Well, I think the world's in such a bad way that we've all got to start thinking all over again,' he said with mounting force. 'I think all the ideas that are going around now are wrong. I'm trying to begin all over again at the beginning'" (Wilder, 2020, p. 102). As Brush tries to reinvent the wheel, he is met with resistance and disdain. Though always meaning well, his views often land him in trouble, leading him to question his grandiose theories upon their repeated failures. He is told he is crazy by virtually everyone he meets, and when asked why he is so different, he states "'No,' said Brush, 'I should think not. I didn't put myself through college for four years and go through a different religious conversion in order to have ideas like other peoples'" (Wilder, 2020, p. 21).

Brush, upon receiving so much negative feedback, does question his resolve. While helping a burglar rob a corner store in order to help the criminal see the error of his ways, Brush is berated after the fact by the store owner as he attempts to reimburse her. "'I don't want your money!' screamed Mrs. McManus. Brush laid the money down on the table and continued talking, half to himself, 'I've got a lot to learn yet, I see'" (Wilder, 2020, p. 178). His theories are challenged, and he takes in opposing viewpoints, though sometimes halfheartedly. "'Isn't the principle of a thing more important than the people that live under the principle?' he asked. 'Nobody's strong enough to live up to the rules,' said Lottie, with the beginning of a smile in her gravity" (Wilder, 2020, p. 178).

Unlike Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Wilder's Brush does show the ability to change and reflect and act on previous lessons as the novel progresses. When asked in the back half of the novel if he would preach to his former friend who is now bedridden in the hospital, he promises, "'Oh, I won't. Honest, I won't. I've learned not to. That's one of the things I've learned'" (Wilder, 2020, p. 112). Brush also questions the state of his own mind, saying, "I don't want to live if I've got a closed mind and I can't get anywhere—anywhere in thinking, I mean. But I don't believe what he said anymore. I keep getting good ideas all the time. I learn things as I go, at least that's the way it seems to me" (Wilder, 2020, p. 50).

The people that don't treat Brush with malice do their best to help him see the error of his ways, no one more so than his cellmate Burkin: "'Think it over. It all goes together—voluntary poverty and Christmas baskets for burglars. It all goes together. You've got the gaseous ideas of a sick girl. It has nothing to do with life. You live in a foggy, unreal, narcotic dream. Think it over. Listen, benny, can't you



see that what you call religion is just the shiverings of the cowardly? It's just what people tell themselves because they haven't got the guts to look at the facts of life and death in the face. If you'd gone to a respectable college you'd have had the chance to get wise to these things. You've lived all your life among the half-baked. You've probably never been exposed once in your whole life to anybody who really had any practice in thinking." (Wilder, 2020, p. 162) In response to this influx of truth, Brush threatens to jump out of the car to leave, just as he was when challenged in earlier similar situations, but he has nowhere to go. Burkin recognizes this and continues to aid Brush in his education, saying, "I could talk to you. I could show you things. But in two minutes you'd be squealing holy-murder and starting to jump out of the car. You don't want to grow up, that's the trouble with you. You haven't read anything. You haven't seen anything, except through the eyes of a girl in hysteria and some old dodo in Shiloh Baptist College." (Wilder, 2020, p. 162) Brush doesn't immediately understand the implications of this conversation, but it is the beginning of his big breakthrough, the shattering of the glass. The events of the novel leading to this point have begun to make him doubt himself. Brush is at a crossroads; he can continue to stick his head in the sand or reckon with all that he's seen and experienced. Burkin ends the conversation, the friendship, and the car ride poignantly finishing with, "What are you so afraid of doubts for? There's one thing worse than doubts, and that's evasions. You're full of evasion. You don't even want to look around. You don't give a goddam for the truth." (Wilder, 2020, p. 163)

Eventually, Brush's health fails him, more than likely from discouragement and loss of hope. When Dr. Bowie pushes religion and prayer on Brush in what should be his final days, Brush counters forcefully, "But it doesn't get you anywhere. Look at me. The more I asked the worse I got. Everything I did was wrong. Everybody I knew got to hate me. So that proves it. When you were young I guess you asked to be all of those things; and yet look at you; you're pretty stupid, if I must say so, and dry and... I'll bet you even believe in war." (Wilder, 2020, p. 184)

After hearing of the death of the only pious man he knew, a priest he never actually met, Brush finds the will to recover and carry on with life, much in the same way as he did before, but now acknowledging life's truths more or less at peace with the fact that his haughty ideals don't translate into real life.

#### **4.3 Wilder's Portrayal of the Teacher and Student and the Value of an Education**

Much like *Theophilus North, Heaven's My Destination* is characterized by its episodic structure, with each chapter presenting a new episode in the life of the young traveling salesman. Each episode functions as its own mini-story, offering unique encounters and experiences for the protagonist. However, there are notable differences between the two novels in terms of their central characters and their roles within the narrative.

In *Theophilus North*, the protagonist, Theophilus, assumes the role of a teacher figure. He navigates the situations and characters around him, exerting his influence and manipulating the outcomes. Theophilus draws upon his experiences to inform his actions, combining his practical knowledge with the lessons learned from his formal education. On the other hand, the protagonist of *Heaven's My Destination*, George Brush, acts as a student who reacts to external forces. He is at the center of the stories, being acted upon by the characters he encounters and the situations he finds himself in. Unlike Theophilus, Brush relies heavily on his ideals, often derived from limited texts such as pamphlets or excerpts from the Bible, to guide his actions and decision-making process.

While both characters share common, everyday experiences of traversing the diverse landscapes of America and engaging with a variety of personalities, their approaches, and perspectives couldn't be more different. Theophilus, with his blend of experience and book learning, is more content and satisfied with his position in life. He leverages his education to create favorable outcomes and effectively manipulates the world around him. In contrast, Brush, despite his formal education, lacks the necessary life experience to effectively apply his ideals and expectations to the realities of the world. He often projects his ideals onto situations without fully considering the facts of the real world, leading to adverse outcomes. Brush is still in the process of learning and growth, whereas Theophilus has completed his education and is now imparting his wisdom and lessons to others.

The contrasting roles of Theophilus and Brush in their respective novels also highlight the different stages of learning and growth. Theophilus, having experienced the world and developed a nuanced understanding of human behavior, acts as a teacher who imparts valuable lessons and influences the lives of those he encounters. His ability to manipulate the world around him reflects his mastery of both storytelling and teaching, illustrating the qualities of a writer-teacher. In contrast, Brush represents the journey of a student who is still learning, grappling with the challenges of reconciling idealism with reality. He is in the process of acquiring the wisdom and experience necessary to navigate the complexities of the world, embodying the struggles and growth inherent in becoming a writer-teacher. By closely examining these contrasting characters and their journeys, we gain some insights into Wilder's beliefs about education and its value. Wilder suggests that education extends beyond mere attendance and graduation from formal institutions. While both Theophilus and Brush have received a traditional, formal education, their experiences highlight the importance of personal and worldly encounters as vital components of a comprehensive education that leads to success and fulfillment. Formal classes and readings can only take one so far; it is through opening oneself up to the world, reflecting upon lived mistakes and triumphs, and embracing diverse experiences that a truly meaningful and valuable education begins to take shape.

Thornton Wilder's novels, *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination* challenge the notion that education is confined to the walls of academia. Through these narratives, Wilder emphasizes the significance of experiential learning, the integration of practical knowledge with formal education, and the exploration of the world as essential elements of a well-rounded education. By delving into these themes, we are prompted to reconsider the value of an education that extends beyond textbooks and classrooms and encompasses the richness of lived experiences and personal growth. By analyzing the characters and narratives of these novels, we gain deeper insights into Thornton Wilder's perspectives on education. Wilder suggests that education encompasses more than formal schooling. While, again, both Theophilus and Brush have received traditional education to varying degrees, their experiences demonstrate that practical knowledge gained from real-world encounters is just as crucial. Wilder highlights the importance of experiential learning and the integration of personal experiences into one's education.

In both novels, Wilder also explores the tension between idealism and reality, reflecting on the challenges and pitfalls of navigating the complexities of life. Theophilus, as a teacher figure, embodies the value of a balanced perspective that draws upon both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. His ability to navigate the world with a nuanced understanding of human nature and storytelling underscores the significance of a writer-teacher's insights.

Thornton Wilder's novels, *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination* serve as compelling examples of his portrayal of the writer-teacher archetype and its relevance to contemporary writing and education. By examining the contrasting characters and their journeys, we uncover Wilder's belief in the importance of a multifaceted education that goes beyond academic learning. Through the characters of Theophilus and Brush, Wilder emphasizes that education should encompass not only formal instruction but also personal growth through engagement with the world.

Wilder's exploration of the writer-teacher archetype in these novels is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary writing and education. In today's practical-minded and pedagogical landscape dominated by standardized creative writing programs and teacher-writers, there is often a focus on technical skills and formulaic approaches to writing. However, Wilder's portrayal of the writer-teacher offers an alternative perspective.

By positioning Wilder as a writer-teacher, someone who has achieved success in published storytelling and utilizes their experiences to impart lessons to subsequent generations, we are reminded of the value of lived experiences and storytelling in education. Wilder's emphasis on the power of storytelling to shape society and his recognition of the importance of understanding historical and cultural contexts resonate with contemporary discussions on the significance of diverse voices and perspectives in literature and education.

Moreover, Wilder's exploration of the complexities of idealism and reality in the characters of Theophilus and Brush serves as a reminder that education is not solely about imparting knowledge or adhering to preconceived notions. It requires a willingness to engage with the world, to learn from both successes and failures and to adapt one's understanding based on lived experiences. This nuanced understanding of education challenges the narrow focus on standardized approaches and encourages a more holistic and reflective approach to learning.

In the contemporary writing and educational landscape, where the boundaries between writer and teacher can often become blurred, examining Wilder's portrayal of the writer-teacher archetype provides valuable insights. It encourages writers to embrace their role as teachers, not only by sharing their technical expertise but also by fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of life through storytelling. It also prompts educators to consider the significance of lived experiences and the integration of personal narratives into the educational process.

Thornton Wilder's novels, *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination* offer compelling evidence of his portrayal of the writer-teacher archetype. Through the contrasting characters and their journeys, Wilder underscores the importance of experiential learning, the integration of personal narratives, and the recognition of the complexities of idealism and reality. These themes resonate with contemporary discussions on writing and education, providing valuable insights into the role of the writer-teacher in shaping a more holistic and nuanced approach to learning and storytelling.

#### **4.4 Hope, Imagination, and Education**

The purpose of education has long been debated. Is it to facilitate a more leisurely life? To enable individuals to make better-informed decisions leading to success? Thornton Wilder may have held a different perspective, seeing the significance of education in the expansion of the imagination, which, in turn, fosters hope. This theme of hope permeates both *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination*, manifesting in the restoration or cultivation of hope and the search for it, respectively.

In *Theophilus North*, the eponymous character reflects on hope, asserting, "Hope is a projection of the imagination; so is despair. Despair all too readily embraces the ills it foresees; hope is an energy and arouses the mind to explore every possibility to combat them." (Wilder, 2019, p. 310) Similarly, in *Heaven's My Destination*, the protagonist, George Brush, hints at the significance of hope by sharing his personal theory that sickness is born out of the loss of hope. He muses, "Sometimes I think I may get so discouraged that I may fall sick—or worse. Because that's all sickness is – discouragement. That's one of my theories, too. I have a theory that all sickness comes from having lost hope about something." (Wilder, 2020, p. 27)

Hope possesses transformative power, and according to Wilder's North, it is born out of the imagination. However, imagination alone cannot thrive in the real world; it requires the aid of memory. As North explains, "Imagination draws on memory. Memory and imagination combined can stage a *Servant's Ball* or even write a book, if that's what they want to do." (Wilder, 2019, p. 380) Memory is the reflection upon past experiences.

Educational theorist Sean Halpin describes education as "the adoption of a militant optimism of the will in the course of which a form of ultimate hope is brought to bear on educational situations and problems through specific applications of the utopian imagination." (Halpin, 2003, p. 2) In the context of these novels, education can be understood as the accumulation of memories that serve to enrich and expand the imagination. George Brush may be rich in imagination and filled with beautiful ideas and high ideals, but he lacks the experiential memories that Theophilus North possesses. While North also possesses ideals and unusual ideas, they are informed and supplemented by his experiences and past memories. This difference is pivotal, allowing North to navigate the world, inspire hope in others, and ultimately affect positive change, while Brush's well-intentioned efforts are met with unyielding resistance. Both North and Brush act as figures of goodwill, harboring the best intentions for the world and those around them. However, only North possesses the ability to generate change. The key distinguishing factor lies in North's open-mindedness and acceptance of reality, which forms an integral part of his comprehensive education. This realization is reluctantly discovered by Brush as his own narrative concludes.

Thornton Wilder's novels delve into the intrinsic connection between education, imagination, memory, and hope. Education, as depicted in these works, involves the cultivation of memories that serve to nourish and expand the imagination. The interplay between memory, imagination, and hope enables characters like Theophilus North to effect meaningful change, while those lacking experiential depth, such as George Brush, encounter obstacles in their pursuits. These narratives prompt us to consider the profound impact of education on the formation of character, the power of hope, and the interdependence of memory and imagination in shaping one's worldview and ability to effect positive change in the world.

## **5. Conclusion: Wilder's Significance and the Role of the Writer-Teacher**

As *Theophilus North* is known to be semi-autobiographical, we can assume Wilder is actively choosing to intentionally establish himself, through North, as a writer-teacher, even if he did not necessarily have the language to call himself so or make the specific distinction at the time. He continually uses the characters' experiences, which mirror his own, to inspire, enlighten and generate change. As North is a teacher who uses his past experiences to progress the plot, Wilder is a writer accessing his experience and memories to do the same. If North is Wilder's reflection of himself, him in

another life, or even the imaginary recreation of his late twin brother, it implies that he identifies with being a teacher. A teacher who made his career in writing. A teacher-writer. Wilder intentionally puts emphasis, again through North and Brush, on the incredible value and usefulness of previous life lessons when trying to invoke change, find success, and become educated, opting to teach and inspire hope through his, directly, through his own writing.

One of the major reasons why establishing Wilder as a writer-teacher matters is the opportunity it presents to reevaluate and expand our understanding of education beyond conventional and standardized approaches. In an era dominated by teacher-writers and the emphasis on practical-minded pedagogy, Wilder's perspective offers a fresh and nuanced outlook. His novels, *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination*, can be seen as literary vehicles through which he imparts educational insights and commentary, inviting readers to contemplate the nature and purpose of education.

*Theophilus North* serves as a prime example of Wilder's exploration of education as an essential aspect of personal growth and intellectual development. The novel follows the journey of a young writer who takes on various roles in a vibrant community, immersing himself in diverse experiences and interacting with a wide range of individuals. Through the protagonist's encounters and reflections, Wilder presents a vision of education that goes beyond the confines of traditional classrooms. He emphasizes the value of curiosity, engagement with the world, and the acquisition of knowledge through lived experiences. By situating education within the broader context of human connections and the pursuit of personal fulfillment, Wilder challenges the narrow definitions and rigid structures often associated with contemporary education.

Similarly, *Heaven's My Destination* offers a satirical critique of the prevailing educational and moral standards of the time. The novel follows the journey of George Brush, a zealous and morally upright young man who embarks on a quest for spiritual perfection. Wilder uses George's encounters with a diverse cast of characters to expose the limitations of rigid moral codes and narrow-mindedness. Through this narrative, Wilder calls into question the notion of education as a mere transmission of fixed values and norms. He suggests that proper education involves an exploration of the complexities of the human experience, the questioning of established beliefs, and the cultivation of empathy and understanding.

By analyzing these works through the lens of writer-teacher, we uncover Wilder's alternative vision of education—one that encourages intellectual curiosity, embraces the complexities of human existence, and recognizes the importance of storytelling and creative expression. These themes resonate with contemporary discussions on the purpose of education in fostering critical thinking, creativity, and the development of well-rounded individuals. Moreover, labeling Wilder as a writer-teacher challenges the notion of expertise confined to either writing or teaching alone. It highlights the interconnectedness of

these two domains and the potential for writers to serve as educators and mentors, drawing upon their own literary experiences to enrich the educational process. Wilder's perspective invites us to reimagine the role of writers in education and acknowledges the invaluable insights they can bring to the classroom.

In concluding that Thornton Wilder is, in fact, a teacher-writer, we can better evaluate the role of the writer-teacher in the grand scheme of contemporary education. Rather than Wilder's educational value stemming only from his time lecturing and sharing his experiences as a career writer, he also is able to expand the education discussion outside of the classrooms, schools, and universities. He, as a writer-teacher, is uniquely situated to push educational dialogue and theories to a broader audience. Wilder is also able to portray education in a way that is accessible for those not familiar with pedagogy or those not up to speed with the professional jargon of educators. Just as Wilder was able to inspire the students of his classroom, he is able to do the same for his thousands (or more) readers. With the current standardized and politicized environment plaguing the current American education system, the ability to effect change may be the greatest strength writer-teachers bring to the field at large. The writer-teacher's ability to inspire hope and foster the growth of imagination in a wide and varied audience makes them central to any effort for future positive change. Wilder's greatest gift to education was not his time in the classroom spent enlightening students; it was his advancement of the educational discourse the world over.

Establishing Thornton Wilder as a writer-teacher through a literary analysis of *Theophilus North* and *Heaven's My Destination* has significant implications for contemporary writing and education. It prompts us to question prevailing educational paradigms, embrace a broader understanding of education, and recognize the potential of writers to shape and inspire the next generation of storytellers. By engaging with Wilder's works, we can challenge conventional approaches, foster a more expansive view of education, and encourage the integration of creative expression and storytelling in contemporary educational practices.

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