

OUR TOWN

by Thornton Wilder



THE AUTHOR

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was born in Madison, Wisconsin, the son of a newspaper editor. When his father was appointed Consul General in Hong Kong, the family moved there, and Wilder spent the rest of his life moving from one place to another. He obtained his education at Oberlin College and Yale University, where he received his degree in 1920. After a year in Rome studying archaeology, he taught French at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, where he did his first serious writing. He turned his attention first to novels, publishing *The Cabala* (1926) and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), for which he won the first of his three Pulitzer Prizes. The fame and wealth these books provided allowed him to quit teaching and give his full time to writing, which he did for the rest of his life. In his heyday, he kept company with the leading writers of the era, including Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Willa Cather, along with popular Broadway actors and actresses. Criticism of his later novels caused him to turn to writing for the stage. In the process, he produced his other two Pulitzer Prize-winning efforts, *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). He spent several years in the service as a member of the Air Force Intelligence unit, was decorated by both the Americans and the British, then returned to writing after the war was over, but his later works never achieved the positive acclaim or recognition of his earlier efforts with the exception of *The Matchmaker* (1954), a play that became the basis for the hit Broadway musical *Hello, Dolly!* A later novel, *The Eighth Day* (1967), won a National Book Award. He never married, and died in Connecticut in 1975, the only man ever to win Pulitzers for both fiction and drama.

Our Town may well be the most-performed play of the twentieth century. The simplicity of the staging and the universal power of its characters and events has made it popular with amateur and professional theatrical groups alike. The play is overtly theatrical, with its Stage Manager-narrator and bare-bones scenery, yet the universal experience portrayed on stage draws the audience in as few realistic dramas have been able to do. Avoiding both sentimentality and cynicism, the play presents the events of everyday life in a way that underscores their value and their importance (Wilder's work in archaeology was a revelation to him - he realized that most of what archaeologists dug up involved the remains of everyday life rather than earthshaking events). Yet the play raises questions as well, particularly the potent final act. What was Wilder's view

of the ultimate place of man in the universe? He seemed to believe that the dead were waiting for something, but had no real knowledge of what it was. The major incidents that mean so much in the long run mean little or nothing, while the daily routines that are often ignored have more meaning than we imagine. So was Wilder an optimist or a pessimist, a believer or a skeptic? *Our Town* raises these questions but never really answers them.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Stage Manager - He serves as the narrator of the story.
- Frank Gibbs - The town doctor in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire; he has made himself an expert on the Civil War.
- Julia Gibbs - His wife, she longs to travel abroad, but can't convince her husband to do it.
- George Gibbs - Their son, he is sixteen when the story begins. He loves baseball and Emily Webb, whom he eventually marries.
- Rebecca Gibbs - Their daughter, she is eleven when the story begins.
- Charles Webb - The editor of the town newspaper.
- Myrtle Webb - His wife.
- Emily Webb - Their daughter, she is sixteen when the story begins. She is the brightest girl in her class. She eventually marries George Gibbs, but dies in childbirth.
- Wally Webb - Their son, he is eleven when the story begins; he later dies of a ruptured appendix.
- Joe Crowell - Eleven years old, he delivers the morning paper.
- Howie Newsome - Age thirty, he is the town milkman.
- Professor Willard - A professor at the State University, he gives historical information about Grover's Corners.
- Simon Stimson - The choir director and organist at the Congregational Church, he has a drinking problem. Eventually he hanged himself.
- Louella Soames - The town gossip.
- Bill Warren - An elderly policeman, he is the town constable.

- Joe Stoddard - The town undertaker.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“As for me, I’d rather have my children healthy than bright.” (Mrs. Webb, Act I, p.15)

“It seems to me that once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don’t talk in English and don’t even want to.” (Mrs. Gibbs, Act I, p.21)

“All males vote at the age of twenty-one. Women vote indirect.” (Mr. Webb, Act I, p.24)

“I guess we’re all hunting like everybody else for a way the diligent and sensible can rise to the top and the lazy and quarrelsome can sink to the bottom. But it ain’t easy to find. Meanwhile, we do all we can to help those that can’t help themselves and those that can we leave alone.” (Mr. Webb, Act I, p.25-26)

“Mama, am I good looking?” (Emily, Act I, p.31)

“I’m going to have a copy of this play put in the cornerstone and people a thousand years from now’ll know a few simple facts about us - more than the Treaty of Versailles and the Lindbergh flight.” (Stage Manager, Act I, p.33)

“And you eat her meals, and put on the clothes she keeps nice for you, and you run off and play baseball - like she’s some hired girl we keep around the house but that we don’t like very much.” (Dr. Gibbs, Act I, p.37)

“Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; 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.” (Rebecca Gibbs, Act I, p.46)

“Almost everybody in the world gets married - you know what I mean? In our town there aren’t hardly any exceptions. Most everybody in the world climbs into their graves married.” (Stage Manager, Act II, p.48)

“They’ll have a lot of troubles, I suppose, but that’s none of our business. Everybody has a right to their own troubles.” (Dr. Gibbs, Act II, p.54)

“So I took the opposite of my father’s advice and I’ve been happy ever since. And let that be a lesson to you, George, never to ask advice on personal matters.” (Mr. Webb, Act II, p.60)

“I always expect a man to be perfect and I think he should be.” (Emily, Act II, p.66)

“Men aren’t naturally good, but girls are.” (George, Act II, p.66)

“If anything like that can happen I don’t want to go away. I guess new people aren’t any better than old ones. I’ll bet they almost never are. Emily . . . I feel that you’re as good a friend as I’ve got. I don’t need to go and meet the people in other towns.” (George, Act II, p.70)

“Every child born into the world is nature’s attempt to make a perfect human being.” (Stage Manager, Act II, p.75)

“Don’t forget all the other witnesses at this wedding - the ancestors. Millions of them. Most of them set out to live two-by-two also. Millions of them.” (Stage Manager, Act II, p.75)

“We all know that *something* is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars . . . everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the grandest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you’d be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being.” (Stage Manager, Act III, p.87-88)

“Oh, Mother Gibbs, I never realized before how troubled and how . . . how in the dark live persons are.” (Emily, Act III, p.97)

“Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?” (Emily, Act III, p.108)

“That’s what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those . . . of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another. Now you know - that’s the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness.” (Mr. Stimson, Act III, p.109)

NOTES

Act I - “Daily Life”

The play begins with an empty stage, and the Stage Manager introduces the play, naming the director, producer, some of the leading actors, and then describing Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, the site of the play, in 1901. He introduces the two central families, Dr. Gibbs, the town doctor, and Mr. Webb, the newspaper editor, and their wives and children. He tells us that Act I pictures one day in the life of Grover’s Corners.

Gibbs has just returned from delivering a set of twins in the middle of the night. Eleven-year-old Joe Crowell is delivering papers, and the Stage Manager tells us in an aside that this bright young boy graduates first in his class, both from high school and from college, then is killed in World War I. Then Howie Newsome, the milkman, comes through on his daily rounds. The Gibbs and Webb children come downstairs for breakfast before they go to school, with the usual good-natured complaining and bickering. After the children go to school, the mothers chat and help one another with chores.

The Stage Manager then introduces Professor Willard, a professor at the State University, who gives some background information on Grover's Corners. He then brings in Charles Webb, the editor and publisher of the Grover's Corners *Sentinel*, who shares some information about political and social conditions in the town with the audience, then opens the floor for questions, asked by cast members planted in the auditorium.

When the children return from school, George Gibbs and Emily Webb talk shyly, but the scene makes it clear that they really like one another. He goes off to baseball practice and she helps her mother with dinner, meanwhile plying her with questions about whether or not she is pretty. After they leave, the Stage Manager talks about what is really important - that everyday life has more value than the major events historians remember and archaeologists dig up.

That evening, the choir at the Congregational Church is practicing and George and Emily are doing their homework. Their houses are close enough that they can talk to one another from their bedroom windows, and George asks Emily to give him a hint about a math problem. Dr. Gibbs then calls George downstairs and tells him that he ought to be chopping firewood for his mother rather than making her do it herself; he then raises George's allowance. As the women come home from choir practice, they gossip about the drinking problem of Simon Stimson, the organist. Julia Gibbs tells Frank that she wants him to take a real vacation if she can get her "legacy" (she intends to sell an old piece of furniture to a dealer for \$350; they never make the trip, and the money is left to George and Emily after Julia dies). As the scene ends, Emily and George (and George's sister Rebecca) are sitting by their windows enjoying the moonlight.

Act II - "Love and Marriage"

The Stage Manager informs the audience that three years have now passed - more than a thousand days - and tells them that the theme of Act II is "Love and Marriage." It's July 7, 1904, and the day starts with the women making breakfast and the paperboy and milkman making their deliveries. They discuss the sad truth that George Gibbs is giving up baseball to get married to Emily Webb; in fact, this is their wedding day. Frank and Julia Gibbs reminisce about their wedding day and how nervous they were. George comes bounding downstairs and goes over to see Emily, but Mrs. Webb won't let him see her before the wedding ceremony. He has breakfast with Mr. Webb, who refuses to give him any advice whatsoever.

The Stage Manager then introduces a flashback. The scene moves to a year earlier, near the end of George and Emily's junior year. He has been elected Class President, and she is Secretary/Treasurer. The two meet in Mr. Morgan's drugstore, where he buys her an ice cream soda. Emily tells George that she is worried about him because he is getting so conceited about his success on the baseball diamond. He promises to change, and asks if she will write to him when he goes off to college. He then tells her he might not even go to college, but start working on his uncle's farm right away (his Uncle Luke promised that he could take over the farm when he died). They confess that they've been paying special attention to one another, and George awkwardly asks Emily to be his girl. The wedding scene follows, and, after brief wedding-day jitters, the two are united as man and wife.

Act III - "Death"

The Stage Manager tells the audience that nine years have passed - it's now 1913. Part of the stage is now taken up with the graveyard on the hill over the town. Occupying the chairs representing the graveyard are Mrs. Gibbs, Mr. Stimson, Mrs. Soames, and Wally Webb, whose appendix burst while on a Boy Scout trip. Joe Stoddard, the undertaker, is preparing a new grave for someone who has just died. The newly-dead woman is Emily Gibbs, who died giving birth to her second child. Much of the scene is taken up with conversations among the dead. They are gradually losing their memories of life on earth, and pity those who are still alive because of their constant troubles. Emily asks if she can go back among the living again, and the others tell her she can, but advise against it. She decides to choose a happy day - the day she and George first knew they loved one another. The others warn her to choose an unimportant day instead, because the reliving will be too painful, knowing how everything turned out. She chooses her twelfth birthday, February 11, 1899. It turns out to be unbearably painful - seeing her parents when they were younger, seeing again those who have died, including her brother Wally, but, worst of all, seeing how little people actually *notice* one another and enjoy the happiness that they sadly take for granted. In agony, she asks to return to the graveyard. Meanwhile, in Grover's Corners, life goes on as usual.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, the Stage Manager argues that everyday life has more value than the major events historians remember and archaeologists dig up. Do you agree? Why or why not? Support your answer with specifics from the play and from broader experience.
2. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, at the end of Act I, Rebecca Gibbs tells George about a letter sent by a minister with a very peculiar address. What is the significance of this exchange? In what ways does it help to develop the main themes of the play? Be specific.
3. Compare and contrast the dramatic techniques used by the playwrights in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Give special attention to the roles of the Stage Manager and the Common Man. What common purposes do they serve in the plays? How do the differences in their characters contribute to the key themes of the stories?
4. The Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is clearly intended to exist in two worlds, the world of Grover's Corners and the world of the audience. He thus becomes a mediator, bridging the gap between the audience and the action of the play. Why is the playwright so careful to keep the audience at arms' length instead of trying to create "the willing suspension of disbelief" that is so essential in drawing the audience into most theatrical performances?

5. Discuss the hymns incorporated into the script of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Why do you think these particular hymns were chosen? How do they help the playwright communicate the themes he wishes to emphasize? Be sure to look up the words to the hymns and use them in your answer.
6. Discuss the meaning of human life portrayed in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Is Wilder an optimist or a pessimist with regard to the meaning of human existence? Pay special attention to the comments made in Act III of the play.
7. Discuss the view of the afterlife portrayed in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Would you describe the playwright as a believer or a skeptic? If he was a believer, what is the nature of his belief? Evaluate his view of the afterlife in the light of the teachings of Scripture.
8. Discuss the ideas presented in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* with regard to the differences between men and women. Are the gender distinctions he presents biblical, or simply old-fashioned?
9. Some critics argue that Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* elicits nostalgia for a small-town America that never existed. Do you agree or disagree? Use your knowledge of American history and culture and details from the play to support your argument.
10. Many have argued that the greatest appeal of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is its universality. Because it concentrates on the routines of everyday life, love, marriage, and death, it strikes a chord with everyone in the audience. To what extent do you agree with this assessment? Consider especially the consequences of changes in American society since the play was first performed in 1938. Do factors such as multiculturalism, increased mobility, and the loss of a moral consensus detract from the universal appeal of the play today? Why or why not?
11. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, the Stage Manager says, "Almost everybody in the world gets married - you know what I mean? In our town there aren't hardly any exceptions. Most everybody in the world climbs into their graves married." We live in a very different society from the one described in the play. Many never marry, and others marry only temporarily or move from partner to partner. Does that cultural difference lessen the impact of the play, especially Act II? Why or why not?
12. Even in its own day, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* was criticized for the uniformity of the citizens presented in the story - everyone is about the same racially, religiously, and politically. The lack of conflicts in these areas seems today to be unrealistic, even as ignoring the Depression and the growing threat to world peace emerging in Europe seemed unrealistic in 1938. Does the uniform perspective of the characters weaken the power of the drama, or does it suggest that the things that divide us are far less important than the things that unite us? Support your argument with specifics from the play.
13. Would you describe Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* as timeless or dated? Why? Support your assessment with details from the play.

14. Some have argued that one of the central themes of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is *carpe diem* - "seize the day." Do you agree? If indeed Wilder seeks to bring out this idea, how is his treatment of it different from that found in other works that emphasize living for the moment? Be sure to connect your argument to issues such as morality and life after death.
15. What do you consider the greatest impact of the purposeful artificiality of the staging in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*? In what ways does it separate the audience from the actions being portrayed on stage? In what ways does it draw the audience in? In the end, is the audience to conclude that what is being acted out on stage is "real life," or that real life is something very different?
16. The action in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is largely linear, with the exception of two brief flashbacks, one in Act II when Emily and George first realize they are in love, and the brief scene in Act III when Emily goes back to see her twelfth birthday. Yet the Stage Manager disrupts the linear action by providing the audience with information, both about the past, and, most notably, about the future. How does the partial omniscience to which the audience is exposed influence the way the story is perceived? How does it contribute to the themes the playwright is seeking to communicate?
17. In I Peter 1:24-25, Peter quotes the following words from Isaiah: "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." Earlier, Solomon had said, "There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who have yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow" (Ecclesiastes 1:11). Though both passages speak of the brevity of human life, the contexts give a different meaning to the two assertions. Consider the theme of the brevity of human life as it is presented in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. With which passage would the playwright feel more at home? Why? Support your conclusion with an analysis of the passages and specific citations from the play.
18. The medieval morality play *Everyman*, by its very title, clearly intends to communicate to the audience that what is being portrayed is part of the life of every individual rather than being simply the experiences of particular people at a particular time. To what extent does Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* try to do the same thing? Does the playwright intend the audience to see themselves on stage rather than, say, George and Emily? How does he create the desired effect?
19. To what extent is the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* intended to be a God-figure - one who manipulates the action in the lives of the characters and interprets that action for later generations? If this is indeed the case, what would you conclude about Wilder's conception of God? Is it biblical in any sense, or does the vagueness of his conception of deity leave it far short of biblical teaching?

20. In Act III of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, most of the conversation takes place among the dead people in the graveyard. Evaluate the view of life expressed by the dead, recognizing that they are not all in agreement on the subject. What may you conclude about the view being expressed by the playwright? Do any common themes about the nature of life and death emerge? What are they?
21. The most dangerous threat posed to the truth comes not from blatant error, but from what is closest to the truth, therefore easily mistaken for it. To what extent do we find such danger in Act III of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*? Certainly the idea that something in man is more than temporal conforms to biblical teaching, but what about the picture at the end of the play is more likely to lead people astray than to focus their attention on biblical reality?
22. In Act III of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Emily asks a question after a grief-stricken George falls down in front of her grave: "They don't understand, do they?" What don't the living understand? Do the dead understand everything, or do they miss the ultimate point as well? Answer the questions from the perspective of the playwright, then from the point of view of Scripture.
23. Discuss the extent to which Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* stimulates the use of the imagination on the part of the audience. Consider especially the lack of scenery and props and the ways in which these omissions allow the audience to picture their own homes, families, and daily rituals when they see the ones portrayed on stage. Wilder once said, "When you emphasize place in the theater, you drag down and limit and harness time to it." Does this bare-stage approach draw the audience into the action more than a detailed set would do? Why or why not?
24. Compare and contrast the Gibbs and Webb families in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Which do you consider more important to the message of the play, their similarities or their differences? Why? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
25. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, why does Emily's attempt to relive a day of her life on earth make her unhappy? Why would choosing an important day have made things even worse? Relate her experience to the central themes of the play. Would you like to relive a day from your past, knowing what you know now? Why or why not?
26. Thornton Wilder once said, "It is only in appearance that time is a river. It is a vast landscape, and it is the eye of the beholder that moves." Discuss the extent to which this understanding of time is central to his play *Our Town*. How does he communicate his belief that the past, present, and future all exist at once? Use specific quotations from the play to support your answer.
27. Discuss the view of love presented in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. What kinds of love appear in the story? To what extent are these views of love realistic? To what extent are they biblical? What does the playwright believe to be the essence of love?

28. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* has often been criticized for picturing a style of life that is unrealistic because it is too good to be true. Can a play that includes no significant evil or no major conflict be in any way a reflection of real life? Evaluate the picture of good and evil presented in the play and discuss its relationship to real life.
29. Is Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* a religious play? Is it a Christian play? Why or why not? Why is the distinction an important one to make in evaluating the message of this or any other piece of literature?
30. Thornton Wilder was well-educated, widely traveled, and had a reputation as an intellectual, yet his most famous literary effort, *Our Town*, is written entirely in the dialect of small-town New England. Not even the Stage Manager speaks the language of the author. What is the impact of this stylistic choice on the audience? How does it help to communicate the themes of the play?
31. Discuss the structure of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Does the play have a plot, or is it merely a series of disconnected vignettes? Why is the answer to this question important to our understanding of the play?
32. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* have a number of common elements, including being performed on a bare stage and focusing on ideas rather than characters or events. Compare and contrast the ideas expressed in the two plays. Note that the playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd, of which Beckett is an example, often spoke of Wilder's famous play as a formative influence in their approach to drama.
33. Thornton Wilder was greatly influenced by his study of Greek drama. Compare and contrast the role of the Chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* with that of the Stage Manager in Wilder's *Our Town*. Cite specifics from both plays to illustrate both similarities and differences.
34. Critic Francis Fergusson described Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* as an allegory: "This type of allegory is perfectly in accord with the Platonic kind of philosophy which it is designed to teach. The great Ideas are timeless, above the history of the race and the history of actual individuals. Any bit of individual or racial history will do, therefore, to 'illustrate' them; but history and individual lives lack all real being: they are only shadows on the cave wall." Do you agree with this assessment? Was Wilder more a Platonist than a religious man? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
35. Thornton Wilder, in commenting on *Our Town*, said that the play was not intended to be "a speculation about conditions of life after death." In fact, he said that the source of his graveyard scene was Dante's *Purgatory*. Instead, he said that the point of the scene is "to find a value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life." Ought we to conclude, then, that the play intends to say nothing at all about life after death? Why or why not?

36. Critic Donald Haberman wrote concerning Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* that its chief message is that "life must not be lived as though it were a mere passage to something better." Do you agree with his assessment of the point of the play? Why or why not? How would you evaluate his statement biblically?
37. Early in his career, Thornton Wilder wrote a whole series of three-minute plays - complete stories with only three characters that lasted no more than three minutes. How is this writing experience apparent in his most famous work, *Our Town*? What sections of the play could easily have been written as isolated vignettes originally? How does this characteristic help to shape the impact of the play on the audience? How does it contribute to the message of the play?
38. John Donne once wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." To what extent is Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* a meditation on the point Donne was making in his famous sermon? Do you think Wilder agreed with the idea Donne was expressing? Why or why not?
39. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* has been performed on film several times. Do you think the play would have the same impact as a movie that it has in the theater? Why or why not? To what extent does your decision depend on whether the bare-stage format is retained or the story is placed in a more realistic, cinematic setting?
40. At the beginning of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, the Stage Manager locates Grover's Corners geographically by longitude and latitude. The only problem here is that the location given happens to be in the Atlantic Ocean. Wilder obviously did this on purpose. Why do you think he may have made this choice? How is the decision connected to the themes of the play?
41. According to Thornton Wilder, his father was a strict Calvinist. Though he ultimately rejected the faith of his parents, he was nonetheless influenced by the environment in which he was raised. How is that influence visible in his most famous play, *Our Town*? To what extent does it portray what some might refer to as "Calvinist values"? Be sure to use specifics from the play to support your answer.