

Our Town by Thornton Wilder

An Educational Resource Prepared for Richmond Civic Theatre

By the Education and Outreach Committee



Our Town

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By Thornton Wilder

By permission of Samuel French

Directed by Cindy Perez

RICHMOND
CIVIC
THEATRE

Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama presents life in Grover's Corners. As you join the small town's residents, you begin to realize that life is made up of mundane, challenging but also sweet moments. Our time is fleeting and the test is to appreciate and understand the importance of the journey.

THE PLAY

Our Town is a 1938 three-act play by American playwright Thornton Wilder. It tells the story of the fictional American small town of Grover's Corners between 1901 and 1913 through the everyday lives of its citizens.

Throughout Wilder uses metatheatrical devices setting the play in the actual theatre where it is being performed. The main character is the stage manager of the theatre who directly addresses the audience, brings in guests lecturers, fields questions from the audience, and fills in playing some of the roles. The play is performed without a set and the actors mime their actions without the use of props.

Our Town was first performed at McCarter Theater in Princeton, New Jersey in 1938. It later went on to success on Broadway and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It remains popular today and revivals are frequent. *-Wikipedia*

SETTING

The play is set in the actual theatre where the play is being performed, but the year is always 1938. The stage manager of the 1933 production introduces the play-within-the-play which is set in the fictional community of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. The Stage Manager gives the coordinates of Grover's Corners as 42°40' north latitude and 70°37' west longitude (those coordinates are actually in Massachusetts, about a thousand feet off the coast of Rockport). *-Wikipedia*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

- **Stage Manager** – a narrator, commentator, and guide through Grover's Corners
- **Emily Webb** – one of the main characters
- **George Gibbs** – the other main character; the boy next door
- **Frank Gibbs** – George's father, the town doctor
- **Julia (Hersey) Gibbs** – George's mother
- **Charles Webb** – Emily's father, editor of the *Grover's Corners Sentinel*
- **Myrtle Webb** – Emily's mother

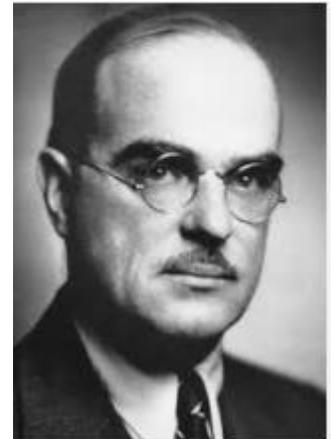
Secondary characters

- **Joe and Si Crowell** – local paperboys
- **Simon Stimson** – the choir director and church organist
- **Howie Newsome** – the milkman
- **Rebecca Gibbs** – George's younger sister
- **Wally Webb** – Emily's younger brother
- **Professor Willard** – a rather long-winded lecturer
- **Woman in Auditorium** – concerned with temperance
- **Man in Auditorium** – concerned with social justice
- **Another Woman in Auditorium** – concerned with culture and beauty
- **Mrs. Louella Soames** – a gossipy townswoman and member of the choir
- **Constable Bill Warren** – the policeman
- **Joe Stoddard** – the undertaker
- **Sam Craig** – a nephew of Mrs. Gibbs
- **Dead Man**
- **Dead Woman**
- **Mr. Carter**
- **Farmer McCarty**
- **Bessie** – Howie Newsome's horse (visible to the characters, but not the audience)

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Thornton Niven Wilder (April 17, 1897 – December 7, 1975) was an American playwright and novelist. He won three Pulitzer Prizes—for the novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and for the two plays *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Wilder was dissatisfied with the theatre of his time: "I felt that something had gone wrong....I began to feel that the theatre was not only inadequate, it was evasive."^[3] His response was to use a metatheatrical style. *Our Town's* narrator, the Stage Manager, is completely aware of his relationship with the audience, leaving him free to break the fourth wall and address them directly. According to the script, the play is to be performed with little scenery, no set and minimal props. The characters mime the objects with which they interact. Their surroundings are created only with chairs, tables, staircases, and ladders. Wilder once said: "Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind – not in things, not in 'scenery.'" ^[4]



Wilder called *Our Town* his favorite out of all his works, but complained that it was rarely done right, insisting that it "should be performed without sentimentality or ponderousness--simply, dryly, and sincerely." –*Wikipedia*

Links of Interest

<http://www.thorntonwilder.com/>

<http://www.twildersociety.org/>

"It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another.... Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? --every, every minute."

For Teachers:

Discussion Questions

Before Viewing

1. Imagine a small New Hampshire town around the turn of the 20th century. What do you think daily life was like? Who might have lived there? What were their values and customs? (Consider topics such as climate, transportation, school, church, occupations, population, stores, etc.)
2. Think about your own hometown. Is it small, medium, or large? Is it urban, suburban, rural? What are its other characteristics? What do you like best about their hometown? What do you like least? Do you think you will remain in your hometown after you graduate from high school and/or college? Why or why not?
3. Our Town is considered a “timeless” play, despite the fact that it takes place at the turn of the 20th century. What are some other plays or films that you consider “timeless”? Why? What makes a play or film “timeless”?

During Viewing

Tell students that Our Town features some dramatic elements that were considered unorthodox in 1938, when the play was written, such as using a character called the Stage Manager, who speaks directly to the audience. Ask students to look for other features that they think might have been unusual at that time.

As they watch, have students take notes about the Stage Manager: What is his role in the film? What tone does he set? You may want to extend this activity by asking students to choose one of the six other main characters (Dr. Gibbs, Mrs. Gibbs, Mr. Webb, Mrs. Webb, George, Emily) and follow their progress as they watch the play. What happens to each of these characters during the film?

After Viewing

1. Would you like to live in Grover’s Corners? Why or why not?
2. Why do they think Wilder set his play in this particular town? Would the play work as well in a big city or a suburb? Why or why not?
3. Compare your town or neighborhood to Grover’s Corners. How are the two alike or different? How the small-town setting important to the work?
4. Mrs. Gibbs laments never having been to Paris; the Stage Manager regrets Joe Crowell’s death in World War I (“All that education for nothing”); Simon Stimson is an unhappy alcoholic. Why did Wilder include these sentiments? Does it make the play realistic or just gloomy?
5. What’s the purpose of 3 questions asked by “audience” members about drinking, social injustice, and culture? Do they add or detract from the play? If you were updating the play, would these questions change? If so, how?
6. What did you observe about the Stage Manager? Sometimes he’s in charge of the action, telling the other characters what to do. But often he reacts to events like they do and is seemingly not in control. Who do you think the Stage Manager is? Is he realistic? Human? Divine?
7. Emily’s lament in Act III is often quoted as symbolizing the meaning of the play: “It goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another....Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? -- every, every minute.” What do you think Emily means? Does she capture the essence of the play? If not, what is the play’s message?

8. When *Our Town* was revived in 2002, Donald H. Wolfe wrote in *The New York Times*, “Thornton Wilder’s play [*Our Town*] may have more to say to a contemporary audience than it did when it opened in 1938.” What do you think he meant? In the same article, Paul Newman commented that the play was “appropriate in these times.” Considering recent world events, do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/ourtown/tg_questions.html

Questions from the director:

- In the world of theater, what is the stage manager’s job? Why did the author make the narrator of the story a stage manager?
- In the show “*Our Town*”, what is the relationship of the stage manager to the other characters? Do they live in the same time period?
- Who is the protagonist? Antagonist?
- Why is the show played with minimal scenery? How does that effect how the audience perceives the show?
- The cast of *Our Town* at Richmond Civic Theater has chosen “*Carpe Diem*” as their theme. Why do you think this was their choice? Can you find quotes from the play that validate this theme?
- If Emily, Mrs. Gibbs, Wally and the others in the cemetery knew in Act 1 what they know in Act 3, would that have changed the way they lived their lives? How does this help us to see our own lives? What would you do if you knew you could not fail?
- How was everyday life different in the early 1900’s than it is today? What parts of everyday life are the same?
- Who do you most identify with in the play and why? Do the other characters in the play remind you of people that you know and why?
- Sometimes in life things don’t go as we have planned. Can you name places in the play where this is illustrated?

Class Activity: 15-Minute *Our Town*

Divide the class into three groups, and have each group take one act of the play.

Group Task: Create a five-minute version of your act, using only Wilder’s words. Choose carefully the lines from your act that carry the most important information and advance the story.

When each group is done, you will have a 15 minute version of *Our Town* which you can perform for the class.

Afterwards, discuss both the process of adaptation and how your “abridgement” compared to the full-length performance.

Study Guides Available Online

<http://www.gradesaver.com/our-town>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/ourtown/tguide.html>

http://www.theatrejax.com/web_studyguides/OurTown_StudyGuide_v1.pdf

<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/OurTown.html>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/ourtown/>

Indiana Academic Standards Related to the Study of Our Town

RL.2: KEY IDEAS AND TEXTUAL SUPPORT				
Build comprehension and appreciation of literature by analyzing, inferring, and drawing conclusions about literary elements, themes, and central ideas				
GRADE 6	GRADE 7	GRADE 8	GRADES 9-10	GRADES 11-12
6.RL.2.1: Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what a text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	7.RL.2.1: Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what a text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	8.RL.2.1: Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what a text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	9-10.RL.2.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what a text says explicitly as well as inferences and interpretations drawn from the text.	11-12.RL.2.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what a text says explicitly as well as inferences and interpretations drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
6.RL.2.2: Determine how a theme or central idea of a work of literature is conveyed through particular details; provide a detailed, objective summary of the text.	7.RL.2.2: Analyze the development of a theme or central idea over the course of a work of literature; provide a detailed summary that supports the analysis.	8.RL.2.2: Analyze the development of a theme or central idea over the course of a work of literature, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide a detailed summary that supports the analysis.	9-10.RL.2.2: Analyze in detail the development of two or more themes or central ideas over the course of a work of literature, including how they emerge and are shaped and refined by specific details.	11-12.RL.2.2: Compare and contrast the development of similar themes or central ideas across two or more works of literature and analyze how they emerge and are shaped and refined by specific details.
6.RL.2.3: Explain how a plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the narrative advances and moves toward a resolution.	7.RL.2.3: Analyze the interaction of elements in a work of literature (e.g., <i>how setting shapes the characters or plot</i>).	8.RL.2.3: Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a work of literature propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.	9-10.RL.2.3: Analyze how dynamic characters (e.g., <i>those with multiple or conflicting motivations</i>) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.	11-12.RL.2.3: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., <i>where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed</i>).

RL.4: SYNTHESIS AND CONNECTION OF IDEAS				
Build comprehension and appreciation of literature by connecting various literary works and analyzing how medium and interpretation impact meaning				
GRADE 6	GRADE 7	GRADE 8	GRADES 9-10	GRADES 11-12
6.RL.4.1: Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, play, or poem with listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they "see" and "hear" when reading the text with what they perceive when they listen or watch.	7.RL.4.1: Compare and contrast a written story, play or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium (e.g., <i>lighting, sound, color, or camera focus and angles in a film</i>).	8.RL.4.1: Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or play stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.	9-10.RL.4.1: Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, play, or poem, evaluating how each version interprets the source text.	11-12.RL.4.1: Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, play, or poem, evaluating how each version interprets the source text and the impact of the interpretations on the audience.
6.RL.4.2: Compare and contrast works of literature in different forms or genres (e.g., <i>stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories</i>) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.	7.RL.4.2: Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.	8.RL.4.2: Analyze how works of literature draw on and transform earlier texts.	9-10.RL.4.2: Analyze and evaluate how works of literary or cultural significance (American, English, or world) draw on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works, including describing how the material is rendered new.	11-12.RL.4.2: Analyze and evaluate works of literary or cultural significance in history (American, English, or world) and the way in which these works have used archetypes drawn from myths, traditional stories, or religious works, as well as how two or more of the works treat similar themes, conflicts, issues, or topics.

There are several interesting characters in *Our Town*. List at least 1 character trait for each of these characters and tell something the character said or did that shows this trait.

Who?	Character Trait(s)?	Evidence? What did they do or say?
I know . . .	Is . . .	Because in the show . . .
Doc Gibbs		
Mr. Webb		
Simon Stimson		
Professor Willard		
Mrs. Soames		

Why do you think the playwright chose to include these characters in *Our Town*?

PLAY OR MOVIE – DO THEY COMPARE?

Name: _____

Now that you've seen the play *Our Town*, watch one of the film adaptations and compare the two. Fill in the following chart comparing and contrasting them. (IAS RL.4.1)

	Play Only	Both	Movie Only
Characters			
Setting			
Plot			

Would you say that the MOVIE was faithful to the original PLAY text written by Thornton Wilder? Explain your answer, citing specific examples from the play.

Does each version have the same impact on the audience? Explain your answer.

Now, review the book and play.

<p>★★★★★ 5 Stars: Extraordinary</p> <p>★★★★☆ 4 Stars: Excellent</p> <p>★★★☆☆ 3 Stars: Very Good</p> <p>★★☆☆☆ 2 Stars: Good</p> <p>★☆☆☆☆ 1 Star: Fair</p> <p>☆☆☆☆☆ 0 Stars: Poor</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The Book</p> <p style="text-align: center;">★ ★ ★ ★ ★</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The Play</p> <p style="text-align: center;">★ ★ ★ ★ ★</p>
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Which did you rate higher? Why?



WHO SAID THAT? Name: _____

Match the spoken line to the character who speaks it. Two of the characters listed do not speak any of the quotes listed below.

- | | | |
|-----------|---|----------------------|
| _____ 1. | “Gee, I wish a person could get married without all that marching up and down.” | A. The Stage Manager |
| _____ 2. | “Only 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.” | B. Mr. Webb |
| _____ 3. | “Oh, Ma! By ten o’clock I got to know all about Canada.” | C. Mrs. Webb |
| _____ 4. | “Mama, do you know what I love most in the world, do you? Money.” | D. Emily Webb |
| _____ 5. | “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it – every, every minute?” | E. Wally Webb |
| _____ 6. | “Yes. Now you know. Now you know: that’s what it was to be alive.” | F. Doc Gibbs |
| _____ 7. | “Everybody’s resting in Grover’s Corners. Tomorrow’s going to be another day. You get a good rest too. Good night,” | G. Mrs. Gibbs |
| _____ 8. | “I was the scardest young fella in the state of New Hampshire. I thought I’d made a mistake for sure.” | H. George Gibbs |
| _____ 9. | “Come on, Bessie!” | I. Rebecca Gibbs |
| _____ 10. | “A man looks pretty small at a wedding, George. All those good women standing shoulder to shoulder, making sure that the knot’s tied in a mighty public way.” | J. Simon Stimson |
| _____ 11. | “Chew that bacon good an’ slow. It’ll help keep you warm on a cold day.” | K. Howie Newsome |
| _____ 12. | “Perfectly lovely wedding! Loveliest wedding I ever saw. Oh, I do love a good wedding, don’t you?” | L. Professor Willard |
| | | M. Mrs. Soames |
| | | N. Constable Warren |



15-Minute Our Town!