



Our Town

By Thornton Wilder
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Introduction

It can be argued that the essence of Thornton Wilder's genius can be found in his greatest and most acclaimed work, the American classic *Our Town* (1938). *Our Town* chronicles the lives of the townspeople of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire during three time periods -- 1901, 1904, and 1913, respectively. We meet the omnipresent Stage Manager, who stoically narrates on a nearly bare stage the inevitable and yet unpredictable cycle of life, death, and all of the seemingly mundane things in-between. It is the simplicity of the play and the honesty of the prose that is so riveting and ultimately heartbreaking in its scope. Renowned theater critic Brooks Atkinson's words are just as accurate now as when he first wrote them in his *New York Times* review of February 5, 1938 on the Broadway premiere of *Our Town*. "Mr. Wilder has transmuted the simple events of human life into universal reveries. He has given familiar facts a deeply moving, philosophical perspective. . . . By stripping the play of everything that is not essential, Mr. Wilder has given it a profound, strange, otherworldly

significance. . . . It is a hauntingly, beautiful play."

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the nearly unadorned stage in *Our Town*? How does the stage being devoid of extraneous decoration enhance the inner meaning of the play?
2. "Nice town, y'know what I mean? Nobody very remarkable ever come out of it, s'far as we know" (p. 6) proclaims the Stage Manager rather bluntly about the inhabitants of the small town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. Do you agree with the Stage Manager's opinion that no "remarkable" citizen lived in this town? Does the meaning of "remarkable" go beyond being a famous and noteworthy person?
3. The Stage Manager asserts: "In *Our Town* we like to know the facts about everybody" (p. 7). This statement typifies the negative stereotype of small town residents knowing their neighbor's personal business. Which would you prefer -- living in a small town or a big city? How are people's personalities molded by the rural or urban environment in which they reside?
4. Explain the role of the Stage Manager in *Our Town*. What does he represent and why is he an important figurehead within the framework of the play? How did you first react when he uttered the lines "Doc Gibbs died in 1930" (p. 7) and "Mrs. Gibbs died first - long time ago, in fact" (p. 7). Does his prescient knowledge of people's lives and ultimate deaths unnerve you?
5. How do you interpret the dialogue between Emily Webb and her mother about Emily's attractiveness? Why does Emily's mother not overly praise Emily about her good looks? "You're pretty enough for all normal purposes" (p. 32). Is she being callous by not being enthusiastic about her daughter's beauty?
6. One of the most moving and thought-provoking excerpts in *Our Town* is when Rebecca Gibbs recounts to her brother George a letter that Jane Crofut received from her minister when she was ill. The minister addressed the envelope with grandiose flourish: "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" (p. 46). What do you think Thornton Wilder is proclaiming in this passage about man as an individual in the world?
7. Explain the sentiment expressed in *Our Town* by Mrs. Gibbs that "people are meant to go through life two by two. It ain't natural to be lonesome" (p. 54). Do you agree with this rationale that people are meant to be paired off together and not live their lives alone? Is it this reasoning that has kept marriage alive in the 21st century? Do you believe that George and Emily sincerely wanted to wed, or was it simply expected of them as a defining rite of passage? Why didn't George and Emily's parents stop the wedding from proceeding, even though they clearly saw that their children were experiencing severe doubts up to the last possible minute about their impending nuptials? Were George and Emily's fears on their wedding day a foreshadowing of the tragedy that would come to them nine years later?
8. The third and final act of *Our Town* is heartbreaking in its beauty and poignancy. The dead Emily's cries "It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another" (p. 108) and "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?" (p. 108). These perfectly summarize the ethereal brevity of life. What is Thornton Wilder saying about the cycle of life and the inevitability of death in *Our Town*? Do human beings ever truly understand that life is short and precious, or does that knowledge only come at old age, or not at all?

About the Author

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was an accomplished novelist and playwright whose works explore the connection between the commonplace and the cosmic dimensions of human experience. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928 for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the second of his seven novels, and received the Pulitzer Prize in drama for *Our Town* in 1938, and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1943. Wilder's hit play *The Matchmaker* was adapted as the musical *Hello, Dolly!* His work is widely read and produced around the world to this day, and his screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) remains a classic psycho-thriller. Wilder's many honors include the Gold Medal for Fiction of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.