

Our Town Study Guide

Our Town by Thornton Wilder

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Contents

Our Town Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Act I, Part I.....	4
Act I, Part II.....	7
Act II, Part I.....	10
Act II, Part II.....	13
Act III.....	15
Characters.....	18
Symbols and Symbolism.....	20
Settings.....	21
Themes and Motifs.....	22
Styles.....	24
Quotes.....	25



Plot Summary

Our Town is a play by Thornton Wilder that revolves around life in the small town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. It is considered one of the greatest American plays. Specifically, the play focuses around the lives of George and Emily as they come together, only to be separated in the end.

When the play begins, George and Emily are teenaged neighbors and good friends, as are their parents. Over time, a romance is kindled between them, which culminates in marriage. As this happens, the Stage Manager narrates, explains things to the audience, and comments on things as they occur, so the audience will have a better context of the times and ways of the Corners. The audience is able to see a young, vibrant, and hardworking lower-middle class America that is honorable, moral, and unfailingly kind. Much of the play thus is familiar to modern Americans, but so much of it is lost as well. Ultimately, George and Emily have children, but Emily dies giving birth to her second. Emily then comes and stands among the spirits in the cemetery. She realizes just how precious and valuable life truly is and how the living do not understand it.



Act I, Part I

Summary

Act I, Part 1

When the audience arrives, the stage is empty, and the Stage Manager begins to arrange tables and chairs. When the audience is quiet and seated, the Stage Manager explains that the play is called *Our Town* and takes place in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. It is May 7, 1901. The Stage Manager gestures this way and that, pointing out where the churches are, as well as the town hall and post office combined, from which William Jennings Bryan once made a speech. He points out that the first automobile will arrive in five years, thanks to the richest resident, Banker Cartwright. The Stage Manager points out the grocery store, Morgan's drugstore, public school, high school, Doctor Frank Gibbs's house, and the house of Mr. and Mrs. Webb. Mr. Webb is the editor of the twice-weekly newspaper *Sentinel*. The Stage Manager speaks about the earliest graves in town being from the 1670s and 1680s, belonging to Grovers, Cartwrights, Gibbs, and Herseys—whose descendants still live in the Corners to that day. Dawn is approaching, with lights in the farmhouses already on and people already up. The people in town are just now getting up.

Doc Gibbs comes home, and the Stage Manager explains he passes away in 1930, but his wife passes away of pneumonia years before, while visiting her daughter Rebecca and her family in Canton, Ohio. Mrs. Gibbs is buried in the town cemetery. Eleven-year-old Joe Crowell delivers the newspapers. Joe asks why Doc Gibbs is out so early, and he explains that twins were born over in Polish Town. Doc Gibbs takes his paper and asks if there's any news; Joe explains his teacher, Miss Foster, is getting married to a man in Concord. Doc Gibbs inquires about Joe's knee, and he says it is fine. It always lets him know when it will rain. As Joe exits, the Stage Manager explains that Joe is a bright and brilliant boy who wins a scholarship to Massachusetts Tech—only to die in France in World War I.

Howie Newsome comes along, delivering the milk. Howie says good morning to the doctor. Doc Gibbs explains that Mrs. Goruslawski has had twins. Howie explains to Mrs. Gibbs he is running late because he had some trouble with the separator. Mrs. Gibbs then wakes the children, George and Rebecca, sixteen and eleven, calling up to them. Doc Gibbs will get about three hours of sleep before Mrs. Wentworth comes over. Mrs. Gibbs believes her husband needs a good rest. Mrs. Webb then calls up to her two children, Emily and Wally, sixteen and eleven. A factory whistle blows, and the Stage Manager explains it is the blanket factory, owned and run by the Cartwrights. Rebecca complains about her dress; George complains that twenty-five cents a week is not enough allowance. Rebecca is saving up her money, saying she loves nothing as much as money. The children are all sent off to school.



Mrs. Gibbs feeds her chickens and discovers one that does not belong to her. She sees Mrs. Webb sitting on the bench by her trellis and asks how her cold is doing. Mrs. Webb says she is mostly doing better, but she still has a tickle in her throat. As she is resting herself, she is stringing some beans. Mrs. Gibbs crosses the yard to help Mrs. Webb. Mrs. Webb wants to put up forty quarts for the winter. Mrs. Gibbs says she has something to tell Mrs. Webb or she'll burst. She explains a second-hand furniture man from Boston called on Mrs. Gibbs and offered her \$350 for Grandma Wentworth's highboy. Mrs. Webb encourages Mrs. Gibbs to make the sale, but Mrs. Gibbs does not want to sell unless Doc Gibbs will use the money for a family vacation –such as in Paris. She explains that her husband is satisfied with Civil War battlefields, and not Europe. Mrs. Webb commends Doc Gibbs on being an historian of the Civil War. She says her own husband would move on from Napoleon to the Civil War if Doc Gibbs didn't know so much. Mrs. Gibbs says her husband is thrilled when he is at Gettysburg and Antietam. Mrs. Webb encourages Mrs. Gibbs to sell the highboy.

As they exit, the Stage Manager brings on Professor Willard of the State University to say a few words about Grover's Corners. Professor Willard explains the town lies in the old Pleistocene granite of the Appalachians. Some amazing fossils have been found in Silas Peckham's cow pasture. The Stage Manager asks about the population of the town and within the town limits, Willard explains the population is 2,640. With the two new babies, the population is 2,642. However, there are 507 more in the postal district, making the total population of 3,149. He exits.

Analysis

Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* opens in the spring of 1901. As the play begins, the stage is literally put together right in front of the audience, as if it is an assemblage of memories and a reconstruction of a time long past. It is Americana, and Grover's Corners could be any town anywhere in America. Though there is a strong familiarity about the setting to modern audiences, much of this seemingly simpler, idyllic time has been lost to present readers and viewers. Not everything changes, but not everything stays the same.

Indeed, everything that the audience sees so far is mostly familiar: Although the art of canning vegetables for the winter might be lost to most audience members, the friendship and companionship between Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb is all too familiar. There is a sense of belonging to the reader and the audience member, even though the reader or audience member is not of that time. The fathers of the household, like the fathers of today, love to visit Civil War battlefields and study up on history. Raising animals and growing one's own vegetables, though not universal anymore, is still very common among many Americans. Saving money and earning money –though the value of the dollar has dramatically lessened in the past century –is still a household cause. Indeed, today, there are still small towns with populations of a few thousand, or less. The Stage Manager acts both as narrator and guide throughout the play, bringing context to bear on the audience where needed.



Discussion Question 1

What so far in the play strikes you as similar, or identical, to contemporary American life? What differences are there?

Discussion Question 2

What role does the Stage Manager have so far in the play? Why does this matter?

Discussion Question 3

What concerns do Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs have at present? Why?

Vocabulary

Proscenium, imaginary, fatigue, phosphates, dreamily, chattering, unobtrusively, savant.



Act I, Part II

Summary

Act I, Part II

The Stage Manager then calls on Editor Webb for a political and economic report. Mr. Webb explains that 86% of the town is Republican, 6% Democrat, 4% socialist, and the rest indifferent. They are a lower-middle class town with a mix of professionals and ten percent illiterate laborers. Religiously, they are 85% Protestant, 12% Catholic, and the rest, indifferent. The Stage Manager opens up to the audience for questions. Ninety per cent of high school graduates, even with college, settle down in Grover's Corners. A Woman in the Balcony asks if there is much drinking in Grover's Corners. Mr. Webb explains they have one or two town drunks, and some men get together to have a drink on Saturday nights at Ellery Greenough's stable, but mostly, alcohol can only be found in the medicine cabinet. A Belligerent Man in the audience asks if anyone in the town is aware of social injustice and industrial inequality. Mr. Webb explains that yes, everyone is aware of it, and they mostly working hard to overcome it as individuals, and helping those in need, while letting the lazy and quarrelsome sink under their own weight. A Lady in a Box calls out, asking if there is culture or love of beauty in the Corners. Most people in the town have a respect and love of beauty, says Mr. Webb, but as far as culture goes, beyond the Bible, some classic works of literature, and a little music, there isn't much culture. Mr. Webb exits.

It is now early afternoon. Mr. Webb begins mowing his lawn. The children come home from school. Emily walks home like an elegant lady, and Mr. Webb tells her to walk simply. Emily says that one minute her father tells her to stand up straight, and the next he criticizes her. She kisses him hello and Mr. Webb exits. George comes by, chasing a baseball, and compliments Emily on her speech on the Louisiana Purchase in class. George comments that he can always see her working on homework in the evening through her window. Emily says she doesn't mind homework because it passes the time. Emily agrees to help George with his algebra. George explains he wants to be a farmer, and his uncle will bring him on to work, and if he is any good, George will end up owning the farm. As Mrs. Webb enters, George heads off to the baseball field. Emily tells her mother how well her speech on the Louisiana Purchase went, and she says she will make speeches all her life. She asks her mother if she is pretty. Mrs. Webb tells her that yes, she is pretty. Emily asks if she is pretty enough to get anybody, or people in general, interested in her. Mrs. Webb tells her she is pretty enough for all normal purposes. They exit.

The Stage Manager cuts in to tell the audience that Grover's Corners is host to a new bank, being built by the Cartwright interests. They have put in a time capsule in the cornerstone, with copies of the Grover's Corners Sentinel, the New York Times, the Bible, a copy of the United States Constitution, and Shakespeare's plays. But the Stage



Manager also wants to put a copy of “Our Town” in the cornerstone, so people a thousand years from now will know what normal, average, everyday people were like.

As the evening comes on, the Congregational Church’s choir practice occurs. Simon Stimson directs them. George and Emily call to one another from their windows, as George asks for help with homework. They say goodnight. Simon asks how many people will be available to sing at Fred Hersey’s wedding, and discovers there will be enough. Meanwhile, Dr. Gibbs and George talk. Dr. Gibbs asks George about what he’ll do after school. George, almost seventeen, says he wants to be a farmer on Uncle Luke’s farm. Dr. Gibbs says he will raise George’s allowance because he is getting older –by twenty-five cents. Meanwhile, Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Soames all walk back from choir practice. Mrs. Soames cannot believe that Simon Stimson was drunk at choir practice. She calls it the worst scandal the town has ever seen, for the church organist to be drunk year after year. Mrs. Gibbs says that Simon must be forgiven, for he has been through a lot. They part ways. When Mrs. Gibbs gets home, she asks her husband to take a stroll in the yard in the moonlight, and she asks him what will become of Simon, because Dr. Ferguson can’t keep forgiving him forever. Dr. Gibbs says some people aren’t cut out for small town life, and that he doesn’t know how things will end. Mrs. Gibbs says she is worried about her husband. Dr. Gibbs doesn’t want to talk about rest. Mrs. Gibbs comments that more and more people are locking their doors at night, and Dr. Gibbs explains they are just being citified, because they don’t have anything worth stealing. They go in. George and Rebecca look out at the moon.

Mr. Webb heads home after putting his newspaper to bed for the night, and Constable Bill Warren checks that doors are locked on Main Street’s stores. They see Simon staggering through town, headed home. His wife is looking for him. Constable Warren kindly looks the other way. Mr. Webb tells Warren that if Warren sees Webb’s son smoking cigarettes, to have a word with him. Warren says he doubts Webb’s son smokes more than two or three cigarettes a year. At home, Emily is sitting up to look at the moon, and she says hello to her father, who tells her not to let her mother catch her up. Rebecca tells George that a letter was delivered to Grover’s Corners, to Jane Crofut that reads, “Jane Crofut; the Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God.” The Stage Manager announces the end of Act I.

Analysis

As Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town* continues, the modern American viewer discovers many more similarities –and some striking differences –between the past and the present. A scandal, for example, is not now what it was then. In 1901, a scandal was a drunken choirmaster and organist. Now, scandals have to do mainly with adultery, sex, and serious crimes. Today, whereas police will rightly buckle down on miscreant youths, in the days of the play, the guiding force of parents and societal expectations helped to keep youths in check, allowing police more leniency and discretion in their handling of



their offices. New England in the early 1900s was overwhelmingly Republican; today, it is overwhelmingly Democrat.

However, there are timeless occurrences and situations that have not changed at all – such as love. Already the reader can see there is a growing attraction between George and Emily, who are, after all, teenagers. At sixteen, Emily begins to wonder whether she is pretty enough to be noticed or pretty enough to matter, and her mother assures her that she is. George is into sports and getting through school as best he can –and so he asks Emily for help. Emily quintessentially becomes the girl next door, while George becomes the All-American boy. Every generation knows such individuals.

The Stage Manager wants to put a copy of *Our Town* in the new bank's cornerstone so that people can see a thousand or two thousand years from now what average American life was like. The point hits home hard. How many audience members or readers have ever reflected on the lives of ordinary ancient Egyptians, early Christians, or even early American settlers or Indians? Big names and big events are remembered, but not the day-to-day struggles of living and loving.. It is ironic because it is that simple, day-to-day existence that is common to all.

Discussion Question 1

What are some interesting or surprising differences between 1901's America and today's America? Choose three such examples and explain why they are so interesting or surprising to you.

Discussion Question 2

Why is the Stage Manager's consideration of putting *Our Town* into the bank's cornerstone significant? Is there any truth to this? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mrs. Soames call Simon's being drunk a scandal? Why does Mrs. Gibbs disagree? How does Constable Warren handle the situation?

Vocabulary

Injustice, inequality, belligerent, diligent, sensible, elegance, languid.



Act II, Part I

Summary

Act II, Part I

The Stage Manager explains that three years have passed. The first act, the Stage Manager reveals, is “Daily Life.” The second is “Love and Marriage.” The Stage Manager allows people to guess at the third act. It is July 7, 1904, just after high school commencement. This is when people usually get married –especially young people. It is raining. Howie Newsome and Si Cromwell, younger brother of Joe, deliver the milk and papers. Si says Grover’s Corners will be losing the best baseball pitcher the town has ever had –George Gibbs. Si doesn’t know why George would give that up to get married. Constable Warren says good morning. He explains he is out and about early because the river is rising. Warren says the best player the town ever had was Hank Todd, back in 1884, who went to Maine to become a parson. It is no longer raining, but it looks as if it might again.

Mrs. Gibbs says good morning to Howie. Mrs. Gibbs asks for three containers of milk and two of cream, for they are expecting company. Howie says his wife asked him to tell Mrs. Gibbs that she knows those that are to be wed will be very happy. Mrs. Gibbs sends her thanks and tells Howie that she hopes his wife can get to the wedding. Mrs. Webb asks Howie for four quarts of milk and two of cream. Howie delivers the same well wishes to Mrs. Webb as Mrs. Gibbs. Howie exits, and Dr. Gibbs comes downstairs. Mrs. Gibbs is sad and happy that her son is getting married. Mrs. Gibbs is worried Emily and George are too young and that Emily won’t look after George properly, especially when it gets cold. Dr. Gibbs says he was terrified the morning of his own wedding. Mrs. Gibbs makes Dr. Gibbs French toast, and Mrs. Gibbs confesses to sleeping poorly. She says that life isn’t meant to be spent alone, but to be gone through, two by two.

Dr. Gibbs tells his wife that he was worried that they wouldn’t have material for conversation to last more than a few weeks. However, they have been happily conversing for twenty years. Both laugh and enjoy the moment. Dr. Gibbs believes Rebecca is locked away in her room, crying. George comes downstairs to go across to see his girl, but Mrs. Gibbs demands he put shoes on. Dr. Gibbs tells George to listen to his mother, and he does. Mrs. Gibbs explains that tomorrow and on, he can do as he pleases, but while he lives in her house, he will live wisely.

At the Webbs, Mrs. Webb invites George in, but won’t let him see the bride. Mr. Webb tells George there is a lot of common sense in superstition. George asks how Emily is, and the Webbs say she is still sleeping, because they were up late sewing and packing. Mr. Webb asks how George is doing, and George just wants to be married without the pomp and ceremony. Mr. Webb blames it on the women. However, marriage is a wonderful thing, he says. George asks Mr. Webb how old he was when he was married,



and he explains that he went to college, came back, and took a while to get settled, but Mrs. Webb was Emily's age. Mr. Webb says his own father gave him some advice on the day he got married –to give orders to his wife soon, so she learns to obey, to leave the house if his wife irritates him, and to never speak to her about money or tell her how much he has. Mr. Webb says he did the opposite, and he's been very happy ever since. Mr. Webb asks if George will raise chickens on his farm, and George says he doesn't know. Mr. Webb is considering raising chickens in his own backyard and wants George to read up on the Philo System of raising chickens. Mrs. Webb then sends George out so Emily can come downstairs. Everyone exits.

Analysis

In a few moments, a few years have passed. The three years that go by between Act I and Act II is not an accident, not purely advantageous for the advancing of the plot –but is a deliberate thing that is done. Wilder skips three years not only so that George and Emily may be of age to marry, but to demonstrate just how quickly time passes. The casual reader or viewer will not pick up on the symbolic importance of three years suddenly flashing by –and neither are the characters themselves. They are always looking to the future and paying little, if any, attention to the present.

Indeed, the passage of time haunts all aspects of the first part of Act II –all without the characters themselves actually realizing it. Very simple changes –such as Si Crowell replacing his older brother, Joe, on the newspaper route –seem inconsequential, but are momentous to the passage of time. Indeed, if three years isn't bad enough, Constable Warren reflects on his own childhood in 1884 –twenty years ago. Both Mr. and Mrs. Webb reflect on their marriage, while the Gibbs reflect on how fast both George and Emily have grown up. It is a heartbreaking moment for both families, as the past eighteen years have flown by. While time is unfolding it is never noticed, but when it is gone, its absence is strongly felt. Time cannot be reclaimed.

This brings the reader back to the Stage Manager's consideration of adding the play to the bank's cornerstone. Yet, as time goes on, Mrs. Gibbs makes a profound and utterly true remark –that life is not meant to be lived alone. The passage of time is to be marked by twos, not ones. The timeless idea of love outdoes concern for time itself.

Discussion Question 1

Do you agree or disagree with Mrs. Webb's assertion that life is not meant to be lived alone? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What advice does Mr. Webb give to George? Is it sound advice? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

Give some examples of times changing as of 1904. How do the characters respond to these changes? Why?

Vocabulary

Farce, meditatively, torrents, reluctantly, pantomimes, superstition, custom.



Act II, Part II

Summary

Act II, Part II

The Stage Manager wants to show the audience how the wedding began, years before. George has been elected President of the Junior Class, and will be President of the Senior Class next year. Emily is elected Secretary and Treasurer. They leave school and head down Main Street, toward Morgan's Drug Store. Emily says goodbye to her friends, and George catches up. He asks to carry her books. George tells his friends to start practice without him. George asks Emily why she has been mad at him recently, and she says she will tell him the truth. She says George has changed a lot over the past year. He is obsessed with baseball and stuck-up because of his skills. George thanks her for her honesty. Emily expects men to be perfect. George doesn't think it is possible. Emily says her father and George's father are perfect, so George should be, too. George says men aren't naturally good like girls. Emily says girls aren't perfect either because it is hard to be. They are so nervous all the time. Emily apologizes for what she has said about George, and he buys her an ice cream soda.

George tells Emily not to worry about the cost of the ice cream sodas. They are celebrating their elections and George is happy to have an honest friend. George asks Emily to write him if he goes to State Agriculture College, and Emily is worried that his being away will make him uninterested in Grover's Corners. George, however, reveals that other farmers think Agriculture College is a waste of time, and Uncle Lucas is getting older. He is ready for George to do more and more. George decides as of that moment, he is not going. He also thanks Emily again for challenging his character earlier, and George realizes they like each other. He vows to change for Emily. They exit.

The Stage Manager then returns to the present time and the wedding. He plays the minister. The stage becomes the church. Mrs. Webb is crying, and she doesn't understand why. Emily cried over breakfast. She hopes that some of the other girls have talked to Emily about what comes with marriage because she was unable to do so herself. George's teammates, dressed to play baseball, lightly make fun of George in a friendly way, and the Stage Manager quiets them. Mrs. Gibbs talks to George, who looks nervous. He feels as if he is being pushed to be a man, and Mrs. Gibbs tells him that he wanted it himself. George regains himself, and Mrs. Gibbs, feeling much better, is told by George that they will be over for dinner every Thursday night. Meanwhile, Emily is nervous and wants to run away with her father, but Mr. Webb soothes her. He calls for George. George reassures Emily of his love. The wedding is conducted. The Stage Manager, as minister, says he has married over two hundred couples in his life. The Wedding March is heard. George and Emily come down the aisle as man and wife.



Analysis

Since time passes so quickly, the audience had missed out on how the love between George and Emily started and kept going. So, the Stage Manager halts the progression of time to bring the reader back to the past, to see when things between George and Emily really got moving. Both have crushes on one another, but Emily is worried George is becoming too self-absorbed. George has absolutely no idea this is occurring, and rather than try to defend himself, he thanks her for –and praises –her honesty. It is Emily's sincerity and honesty that seem to attract George like nothing else. He is so attracted to her because of this sincerity and honesty that he is willing to do whatever he needs to do to change to be better in her eyes so that she will accept him. Here, the timeless thing known as love is clearly visible. The idea that people make themselves better for one another is resoundingly clear.

Following this excursion to the past, the Stage Manager returns the audience and readers to present time and the church wherein the wedding takes place. The Stage Manager assumes the role of minister, and George and Emily are married. The sobering reality of the day startles Emily and George just before the ceremony; but, under the guidance of their parents and in their love to one another, both are able to reassure the other. As the Stage Manager explains at the beginning of the second act, the first act is about daily life, while the second act is about love and marriage –while the next act will be something no one is quite prepared for, either in the play, or in real life.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that George and Emily get nervous right before the wedding ceremony?

Discussion Question 2

What qualities about Emily does George admire more than any others? Why do you think that these traits matter to him so much?

Discussion Question 3

How do Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs react to the marriage of their children? How do they compare to parents of the present day? Do they differ at all? If so, how? If not, why?

Vocabulary

Affronted, sacrament, exasperation, catcalling, cynicism, radiant, dignified.



Act III

Summary

Act III

The Stage Manager reveals it is 1913 as the stage is set for the audience for the third act. Present on stage are Mrs. Gibbs, Simon Stimson, Mrs. Soames, Wally Webb, and others. Farmers are more often coming into town in Fords, rather than on horses. Though there have been no burglars in town, everyone has heard about them, and everyone locks their doors now. The stage is on a windy hilltop in Grover's Corners, from which most of the town and surrounding lands can be seen. They are in the cemetery, full of the original settlers and Civil War veterans. The people on stage have since passed away. Over time, they let go of the earth because something about them is eternal, and they wait for something coming. Joe Stoddard, the undertaker, is supervising a new grave, while Sam Craig arrives, who has been out west. In Buffalo, Sam learns of his cousin's death, so he has come home. Joe Stoddard is glad to see him again. Joe says it is always sad when a young person is taken.

Sam looks around the cemetery and sees his Aunt Julia Webb buried there. Joe explains she died two or three years before. Joe explains that Simon Stimson ended up taking his own life. Sam's cousin died trying to bring her second baby into the world. The dead speak to one another. Mrs. Gibbs explains to Mrs. Soames that her daughter-in-law Emily has died in childbirth. Emily arrives and is welcomed by the others. Emily says that she wishes her mother-in-law had seen the farm, that it was beautiful, and the legacy of \$350 left to Emily and George provided for them greatly. Emily sees how troubled the living are. But, Emily wants to go back. She knows she can go back in her memories, but Mrs. Gibbs tells her it is best not to. The Stage Manager explains to Emily if she does so, she will not only live it, but watch herself living memories. Emily wants to go back and look at the first day she knew she loved George. Mrs. Soames tells her it isn't wise. Mrs. Gibbs tells her to choose an unimportant day if she must remember life.

Emily chooses her twelfth birthday, February 11, 1899. The Stage Manager sets the scene. Emily sees the town before her, fourteen years before. Her father is returning home after giving a speech at his old college in western New York. Constable Warren and Howie say good morning to one another. It is a very cold day. Emily is getting dressed and can't find her ribbon. Her mother explains it is laid out on her dresser. Mr. Webb gets home, and Mrs. Webb asks about his trip. Mr. Webb calls up to Emily and pats his pocket, for he has something for her birthday. The scene is heartbreaking to Emily because everyone looks so young and happy.

A blue paper package has arrived from Aunt Carrie, and George has left a postcard album for Emily. Emily realizes she had forgotten all about it. Emily speaks about how things turned out. Wally died of a ruptured appendix on a camping trip. Mrs. Webb



continues on, saying that the gift in the yellow paper is a family heirloom and she is old enough to wear it now. As her father comes in, Emily stops the memory, unable to go on. She says goodbye to the world of the living and asks the Stage Manager if the living ever realize every moment of life while they live it. The Stage Manager tells her that they do not. But, saints and poets do, to some extent. Simon explains that a happy existence is often blindness and ignorance. Mrs. Gibbs says life is more than that. George returns alone to the cemetery. He falls at Emily's feet. Emily says that the living do not understand, and Mrs. Gibbs says they do not.

The Stage Manager says it is night in Grover's Corners once more, and few people are awake. The Stage Manager comments about how scholars say there are no living beings up among the stars, but it is not settled fact. It is eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners, and the Stage Manager wishes the audience a good night.

Analysis

The unavoidable third act, as a conclusion, is the unavoidable outcome of life –death. Only at the end do people realize how frail, quick, and valuable life really is. This is seen through the eyes of Emily, who tragically has died in childbirth. When the living are living, they pay no attention to living –as Emily says, they do not appreciate every single moment they are alive. The Stage Manager explains that precious few people do appreciate time spent alive, and even then, not all the time.

Emily's determination to relive part of the past –part of her time alive – is borne out by the Stage Manager, who interacts with her. As such, the Stage Manager assumes the role of God, in a way, for the Stage Manager is obviously both part of, and outside of time –and can rewind, fast-forward, and pause time at will. Seeing her old life breaks Emily's heart, for she can never have that time back again. She sees things the way they were.

While the play adds on a sad note, with Emily's death, the reader and the audience will take away a strong message from Thornton Wilder, through Emily: that life is worth living, that every second is to be valued and lived and undertaken and appreciated. People die, and things change, but life goes on. Life should be appreciated before it is too late.

Discussion Question 1

What roles does the Stage Manager assume throughout the play? Which is perhaps his most important role? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why do the dead caution Emily against looking into the past? What outcome does this have?



Discussion Question 3

What message does Thornton Wilder want the viewer to take away from his play? Why is this so important?

Vocabulary

Sentimentality, lugubriousness, bereaved.



Characters

Stage Manager

The Stage Manager is the narrator, guide, sometimes participatory actor, and commentator in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*. The Stage Manager is presumed to be male, taking on the roles of townspeople, minister, and, perhaps, a stand-in for God in a way. The Stage Manager brings the audience through the play, providing context for certain situations, explaining some things, and acting as a source of wisdom for Emily in the third act. The Stage Manager not only directly participates in and narrates the play, the Stage Manager also speaks directly to the audience in welcomes, asides, and an adieu.

Emily Webb

Emily Webb is a beautiful, sixteen year-old girl when the play begins. She is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Webb, and the older sister of Wally Webb. Emily is a bright student, and her dream is to raise a family and settle into Grover's Corners. She has a crush on George, her next-door neighbor, but is hurt when George's fame in baseball gets to his head. She tells him so, and George vows to be a better man, thanking and praising Emily for her honesty and sincerity. This leads, ultimately, to romance, love, and marriage. Emily's early death occurs while she is giving birth to her second child. Emily joins the ranks of the dead and realizes what the other dead have already been forced to realize –that life is something to be valued at every moment and the living never understand this.

George Gibbs

George Gibbs is a kind, athletic, nearly-seventeen year-old boy when the play begins. He is patient and helpful around the house. He wants to become a farmer, taking over Uncle Lucas's farm. As a star athlete, the success goes to his head, and Emily's revelation of his self-absorption hits home. George reforms himself, falling in love with Emily and valuing her honesty and sincerity. He is heartbroken when Emily dies delivering their second child.

Doc Gibbs

Doctor Gibbs is the patriarch of the Gibbs household. He is the husband of Mrs. Gibbs and father of George and Rebecca Gibbs. He is a kind, patient, and morally upright man who is well-loved and well-respected in the community. He helps deliver babies and sees people about their day-to-day medical problems.



Mrs. Gibbs

Mrs. Gibbs is the wife of Doc Gibbs, and mother of George and Rebecca Gibbs. Mrs. Gibbs is incredibly kind, patient, and thoughtful. She is good friends with Mrs. Webb, and is a phenomenal mother to her own children. She worries that George and Emily are getting married too young, and helps reassure his son of his manhood on his wedding day. Mrs. Gibbs dies of pneumonia while visiting Rebecca in Canton, Ohio. She is on hand among the dead to welcome Emily to the afterlife.

Mrs. Webb

Mrs. Webb is the wife of Mr. Webb and the mother of Emily and Wally Webb. Mrs. Webb is a sweet, kind woman, who is clearly her husband's equal at his own insistence. She takes good care of her children and is a good friend to Mrs. Gibbs.

Mr. Webb

Mr. Webb is the gentle, kind, and wonderful husband of Mrs. Webb. He is also the gentle, kind, and sage father of Emily and Wally Webb. Mr. Webb works as a newspaper editor and has a penchant for history. He gives George sound advice about marriage on the morning of the wedding.

Simon Stimson

Simon Stimson is the town's Congregationalist choirmaster and organist. He is frequently drunk. However, having been through an unspecified difficult time in life, he is forgiven for his drunkenness by the town. He ultimately commits suicide by hanging.

Constable Warren

Constable Warren is the kind, protective, and friendly local law enforcement official. His duties seem to be minimal, as the town is well-behaved. He exercises gentle discretion in not making an issue out of Simon's drunkenness. He keeps parents up to date on the things their children do.

Joe Stoddard

Joe Stoddard is the town's undertaker. As such, he knows much more about the lives of people than anyone else. He especially hates burying young people. He is not happy to be burying Emily.



Symbols and Symbolism

Beans

Beans are grown and canned by Mrs. Webb in the play. Her preserving of beans for the winter is an excuse for Mrs. Gibbs to come over and help. They talk about life, while Mrs. Gibbs extends a helping hand out of friendship.

Homework

Homework is done by the children, including George and Emily. George struggles with his homework, so Emily agrees to help him. This leads to Emily liking George, causing her to ask her mother if she is pretty.

Ice Cream Soda

Ice cream sodas are purchased by George for himself and Emily the day they win their student government elections. George purchases them in celebration and in thanks to Emily, who has reminded him that he is becoming too self-absorbed because of his athletic fame.

Postcard Album

George buys Emily a postcard album for her twelfth birthday. Emily remembers receiving it after she has died and is remembering the past. She realizes that, while alive, she forgot that George had ever given her a postcard album.

Our Town

The physical play *Our Town* is often carried about by the Stage Manager. He intends to put a copy of the play into the time capsule in the new bank cornerstone, so that people a thousand or two thousand years from now will know how ordinary Americans lived their day-to-day lives.



Settings

Grover's Corners

A beautiful, small, rural, and lower-middle class town located in the mountains of New Hampshire across the border from Massachusetts, Grover's Corners is the main setting for the play. The 3,149 people who live there are mostly Republican. It is a well-mannered place to live. It is where the Webbs, the Gibbs, and all of the characters in the play live. It is also the location of Morgan's Drugstore, Main Street, the Congregationalist Church, and the Cemetery.

Morgan's Drugstore

Located on Main Street, Morgan's Drugstore is a hit with people, especially younger people who drop in for snacks and ice cream sodas. It is visited by George and Emily so George can buy himself and Emily ice cream sodas.

Main Street

Grover's Corners has Main Street where Morgan's Drugstore and most other shops are located. Main Street is the main thoroughfare in town, from which all activity branches.

Congregationalist Church

The Congregationalist Church is found in Grover's Corners. It is where Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Soames, and Mrs. Gibbs attend choir practice with Simon Stimson. It is also where George and Emily are married.

The Cemetery

Located on a windswept hill high above Grover's Corner's, the cemetery is where Emily is laid to rest and where her spirit meets the spirit of the other departed souls. It is where Emily realizes that every moment of life should be valued and that the living fail to do so until it is too late.

Themes and Motifs

Americana

Americana is a theme that is found replete throughout Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*. Americana is that which is uniquely American in nature and in character. Americana includes the morals, values, ideas, beliefs, and practices of Americans, as well as customs, styles, products, accoutrements, devices, and other things utilized by Americans. Americana is a beautiful, timeless, and emotionally moving thing in Thornton Wilder's play, reminding Americans of any given generation or year of the best about themselves.

In terms of Americana metaphysically, Americans of the present age find much to relate to with Americans of the past. Family is a valuable, wonderful, and crucial thing in life. Americans in the play do not complain, but they go about their lives as moral, hardworking people who value their history as people and as Americans. They value their homes as well. They are kind and polite, forgiving and faithful, and always seek to better themselves and lend a helping hand to their fellows in need. Like most Americans, the folks in Grover's Corner appreciate beauty, have some understanding of culture, and are committed to those that they love.

In terms of Americana as a physical presence, Americana can be seen throughout the play. The very idea of Main Street with a drugstore that has a soda fountain and ice cream sodas is utterly American. Kids playing baseball and valuing small town living is also uniquely American. A town full of churches, choir practices, Ford automobiles, backyard vegetable gardens, ambitious people with dreams are all uniquely American. As such, Wilder reminds Americans of what is best about themselves through Americana.

Love

Love is a major theme in the play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. Love appears in two prominent forms in the play, and those forms have far-reaching consequences for the characters in the play. Love appears in both the familiar and romantic sense.

In terms of the familial, love can be seen in great amounts and on clear display between the Webbs and the Gibbs. Both families are very-close knit, and take care of one another in various ways. While the fathers provide morally and financially for their families, the mothers provide spiritually, morally, and compassionately for their families. Siblings look out for one another, and parents offer their children advice on life. There is also a sense of ease due to familial love that proliferates throughout the novel, demonstrating that the love shared between family members is real. Mr. Webb catches Emily staying up late to look at the moon, but rather than scold her, he cautions her not to get caught by her mother. Mrs. Gibbs comforts George on his wedding day,



reminding him that he is indeed a worthy man, and bringing him back from nervousness.

In terms of the romantic, love is most notably shared between Emily and George. (It can also be seen on display between their parents.) Indeed, the play revolves around the friendship, love, and marriage of George and Emily in many respects. While they both have crushes on one another, their love is founded upon the sincerity and honesty that they have for one another as well. Emily appears on equal footing with George, and the same can be said of Mr. and Mrs. Webb, and of Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs. Mr. Webb explains that he chose to live his life as his wife's equal, for example, rather than her master, and he has enjoyed a very happy marriage because of it, and the love they share is clear and incorruptible.

Time

Time is a major, dominant, and all-encompassing theme found in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. While the reader and the audience do not realize immediately what a profound impact time will have on the play, they slowly become cognizant of it as the play moves on. The play itself bends time, rewinding the past and fast-forwarding into the future, and the present at once becomes both the past and the future. Years pass between acts, but can then be rewound as needed.

The first perception of time that people will have reading or watching *Our Town* is that of the play taking place in the early 1900s. While many things are noticeably similar –love, family, morality, faith, etc. (see the theme “Americana”), there are many things noticeably different. Horses and wagons still rule the roads; cars are only emerging onto the scene. Vegetables are jarred by families, not purchased at the grocery store in cans. Doors are not locked at night. The value of the dollar is dramatically greater. Patriotism is an unabashed and universal thing. Newspapers are twice weekly; the milkman comes once a day (and milk is delivered). Ice cream sodas are the choice sweet for teens and young adults; parents prefer evenings in with their families rather than going out night after night.

In terms of time as time, people will perceive it more and more as the play wears on. Years slip past quickly –in minutes in the play –and the audience does not think much of it, until Emily dies. That Emily is only in her mid-twenties is heartbreaking; that she watches the living with envy is crushing. Yet it is Emily who points out that the living do not value life until it is too late, when time has passed them by. Now deceased, Emily looks back at life in terms of valuing even every moment, while the living do not see that time is slipping by too fast. Thus, Emily reminds readers and the audience not to take life, or time, for granted.

Styles

Point of View

Thornton Wilder tells *Our Town* in the first-person reflective omniscient narrative from the Stage Manager's point of view. This is done for various reasons. The first is to allow a casual, intimate, firsthand account of Grover's Corners as might be related by a friend—in this case, the Stage Manager. As such, the play assumes a friendly, idyllic, and colloquial feel. The Stage Manager gives the narration a reflective nature by telling the audience about a past time and place and recalling events and people. Since the Stage Manager is omniscient, all of the occurrences can be put into context for the audience.

Language and Meaning

In *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder uses language that is simple and traditional. As such, the prose takes on a poetic nature. The points that Wilder makes are clear and beautiful. Two such points include that marriage should be an equal partnership between husband and wife and that every moment of life should be valued and appreciated. The simple and traditional way that characters speak in the play also lends a genuineness and believability to the events and people that are illustrated in the plot.

Structure

Thornton Wilder divides *Our Town* into three linear acts, that are generally chronological in nature. Each act deals with a different aspect of the plot and of life in general. Act I deals with daily life; Act II deals with love and marriage; and, Act III deals with death and the afterlife. The acts occur years apart from one another, but the Stage Manager often rewinds the clock within the acts to explain the events as they are unfolding.



Quotes

The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go –doesn't it?

-- Stage Manager (I paragraph 12)

Importance: As the Stage Manager introduces the audience to Grover's Corners, he reflects casually on the morning star shining brightest before it disappears. However, this is much more than a casual observation. It is a metaphorical statement about life. Life only seems to really be seen at the last moment, when it is too late.

In our town we like to know the facts about everybody.

-- Stage Manager (I paragraph 53)

Importance: Giving the audience contextual information about people and what they do, the Stage Manager reveals that small town folks like to know about the other folks in town. This speaks to the close-knit community of Grover's Corners and the diverse characterization of the people in the town and surrounding countryside.

Very ordinary town, if you ask me. Little better behaved than most. Probably a lot duller. But our young people seem to like it well enough. Ninety percent of 'em graduating from high school settle down right here to live –even when they've been away to college.

-- Mr. Webb (I paragraph 231-232)

Importance: The Stage Manager, asking Mr. Webb to address the audience to teach them a little more about Grover's Corners, explains that it is a pretty typical small town, but it is a place for dreams to come true. Because of this, most people who grow up in the Corners settle down there to raise a family and live out life.

This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying.

-- Stage Manager (I paragraph 314)

Importance: The Stage Manager reflects on the way things were in the early 1900s, so that the modern audience might understand the times. Thus, the audience sees that there are many similarities and many differences between the past and the present.

It's like what one of those Middle West poets said: You've got to love life to have life, and you've got to have life to love life... It's what they call a vicious circle.

-- Stage Manager (II paragraph 27)

Importance: The Stage Manager speaks about the difficulties of life, as well as the beauty of life –both being part of a vicious circle. To love life one must have a life, but to have a life one must love life. Finding out what to love about life is a difficult thing to do, or it might be easy. It all depends on the person. The true issues are valuing life and valuing every moment of life.



Yes... people are meant to go through life two by two. 'Tain't natural to be lonesome.
-- Mrs. Gibbs (II paragraph 84)

Importance: Mrs. Gibbs philosophizes about the human condition and human existence the morning of her son's wedding. Life is meant to be shared, as well as valued, between two people who love one another.

M... marries N.... millions of them.
-- Stage Manager (II paragraph 379)

Importance: At George and Emily's wedding, the Stage Manager speaks about how many millions of lives are touched by marriage and how many millions of people get married and raise children. George and Emily are only one such marriage out of all of these, all of them being consequential to someone.

There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.
-- Stage Manager (III paragraph 27)

Importance: In the final act, the Stage Manager speaks about death and the human condition. He explains that there is something eternal in human beings, deep down – love, memories, and souls. He comments late on how many scholars believe there is no afterlife. However, the souls of the dead are now in communion and speaking with one another, demonstrating that there is life after life –that there is something eternal about every human being.

I always say I hate to supervise when a young person is taken.
-- Joe Stoddard (III paragraph 44)

Importance: Joe is saddened whenever he has to bury young people. On this particular day, the young person he is burying is Emily. This causes the reader to reflect on how Emily has gone on sooner than her time, that she was too young to die. But, this only underscores the point of how too many people take life and time for granted.

Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? –every, every minute?
-- Emily (III paragraph 251)

Importance: Emily, who realizes she has taken her own life for granted now that she is dead, is horrified that the living will not value life for every moment that it is. And so she begs the Stage Manager, wondering if human beings every realize life while they live it, to which the reply is, heartbreakingly, “No.”