



OUR TOWN

By Thornton Wilder

Directed by Tim Ocel

American Players Theatre Study Guide

OUR TOWN

Welcome to APT's Study Guide, created to accompany the Student Matinee performances of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Use it however you see fit - before or after the performance - whatever is most valuable for your class.

In this packet, you'll find a number of resources designed to help your class better understand and engage with the play. Use them all, or select the sections that best suit your needs. We hope you enjoy APT's production of *Our Town*. Find more information on the play and APT's education resources at americanplayers.org.

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Character Guide

Our Town is one of the most-produced plays in the American canon. On January 22nd, 1938 in Princeton, New Jersey, ***Our Town*** made its stage debut before heading to New York. On the original poster advertising the performance, below the title of the play, it reads "The record of a tiny New Hampshire village as created by the lives of its most humble inhabitants." Let's meet the humble inhabitants of Grover's Corners now.



The Stage Manager played by Sarah Day

The Stage Manager narrates and controls the pacing of the story we see onstage. She talks directly to the audience and shares information about Grover's Corners.



Emily Webb played by Samantha Newcomb

Emily Webb is the protagonist of *Our Town*. She is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Webb and older sister to Wally Webb. She is very bright and a leader at school.



Mr. Charles Webb played by Jefferson A. Russell

Father to Emily and Wally and husband to Mrs. Webb. He is the editor and publisher of the *Sentinel*, Grover's Corners' newspaper. He shares information about the town and answers questions from the audience.



Mrs. Myrtle Webb played by Tracy Michelle Arnold
Mother to Emily and Wally and wife to Mr. Webb. She looks after the Webb house and garden, as well as checks the newspaper for mistakes for her husband. She is friends with Mrs. Gibbs, her neighbor, and sings in the choir run by Simon Stimpson.



Wallace "Wally" Webb played by Susanna Van Hallgren
The little brother of Emily and youngest child to Mr. and Mrs. Webb.



George Gibbs played by Ronald Román-Meléndez
The neighbor and friend of Emily Gibbs. A typical teen boy who is interested in baseball and farming. He is the son of Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs and older brother to Rebecca.



Dr. Frank Gibbs played by James Ridge
The father of George and Rebecca, husband of Mrs. Gibbs and local physician of Grover's Corners. Dr. Gibbs is a hard-working man with an interest in the Civil War.



Mrs. Julia Hersey Gibbs played by Teri Brown
Mother to George and Rebecca and wife to Dr. Gibbs. She is good friends with Mrs. Webb, her neighbor, and participates in the church choir run by Simon Stimpson. She dreams of visiting Paris.



Rebecca Gibbs played by Phoebe Werner
Younger sister to George and child of Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs. She and George often squabble over allowances and other sibling things, but she is still sad when he grows up. She loves money.



Simon Stimpson played by Jim DeVita
The organist of the Congregational Church who is the subject of town gossip because of his alcoholism.



Mrs. Louella Soames played by Tamara Brognano
A local woman and member of the choir who worries over Simon's alcoholism. She always cries at weddings.



Howie Newsome played by Nate Burger
The town milkman who guides a seventeen-year-old horse named Bessie.



Joe Crowell, Jr. played by Kailey Azure Green
Joe is the paper carrier in the first act. A scholar, the Stage Manager calls Joe "awful bright."



Si Crowell played by Trevyn Wong

Joe's younger brother, who takes Joe's paper carrier job in Act II.



Professor Willard played by Brian Mani

A faculty member of State University who recites facts about Grover's Corners.



Samuel "Sam" Craig played by Sam Luis Massaro

Mrs. Julia Gibbs' nephew. He comes back from Buffalo after twelve years absence to Grover's Corners in the third act.



Joe Stoddard played by Brian Mani

The town undertaker, who provides background information during his conversation with Sam Craig.



Constable Bill Warren played by Jamaque Newberry

The town law enforcement officer, whose duties require him to be sure that doors are locked and that drain pipes are adequate.

OUR TOWN Synopsis

A description of the play, from start to finish.



Act I begins with no curtain; the Stage Manager simply appears onstage and brings in a few set pieces. As the play begins, she speaks directly to the audience, telling them who wrote and directed the play, as well as necessary facts about Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, "just across the Massachusetts line." She announces the time as being just before dawn on May 7, 1901.



The Stage Manager points to an imaginary spot downstage and explains that Doc Gibbs lives in this house. Mrs. Gibbs' garden, she explains, is in the corner of the stage. Next door is the Webbs' house and garden. It is a nice town, the Stage Manager explains, even though "nobody very remarkable ever came out of it " Tombstone dates, she adds, go back to the 1670s and 80s.



At the sound of the first school bell of the morning, all of the children - Emily, Wally, George and Rebecca - charge out of the house and run for school. Then Mrs. Gibbs feeds her chickens from her apron. She and Mrs. Webb string beans. Mrs. Gibbs tells of a second-hand furniture dealer who is offering three hundred and fifty dollars for her heirloom highboy, which is a tall chest of drawers on legs. She would like to sell it and use the money for a trip to Paris, but Doc Gibbs likes to travel only to Civil War battlegrounds. Mrs. Webb encourages her to make the sale.



The Stage Manager's narrative then jumps forward to early afternoon, as Emily is coming home from school. George hurries to catch up with her. He suggests a communication system from her window to his so that Emily can help him with difficult algebra problems. He freely acknowledges that she is naturally bright. When they reach Emily's home, George leaves for the baseball field.



Later that night, the Congregational Church choir sings "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." Meanwhile, two ladders, representing the second stories of the two houses, are moved onstage. George calls to Emily for help with a math problem. She gives him some hints. She also points out how wonderful the moon is.



At the Gibbs', the doctor calls to George and describes how his mother had to chop firewood because George has been shirking his chores. The doctor promises to increase George's allowance to fifty cents a week because George is getting older. He implies that George must take on more responsibility by helping his mother.



Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs return from choir practice. Mrs. Soames, who accompanies them, complains about Simon's drinking. Mrs. Gibbs explains that Dr. Ferguson is aware of Simon's dependency, yet keeps him on as organist. The rest of the congregation has little choice but to look the other way.



At 9:30, Bill Warren, the town constable, comes by and greets Mr. Webb. He notes that Simon Stimson "is rolling around a little " Simon strolls unsteadily down the street; he passes both men without speaking. Mr. Webb asks Bill to help stop George from taking up smoking. The constable says goodnight and departs.



Act 2 is called "Love and Marriage." It is now July 7, 1904. The stage is about the same. Mrs. Gibbs' garden is on one side and Mrs. Webb's on the other, each drenched with heavy rain. As in the first act, the two women come down to make breakfast in their respective kitchens. It is the day of Emily and George's wedding.



Doc Gibbs and Mrs. Gibbs discuss George and Emily's upcoming wedding and they both reflect on their feelings surrounding their own wedding day 20 years ago.



George leaves his home to visit Emily, but is turned away from seeing his bride on the day of the wedding. Mr. Webb and his future son-in-law George talk about marriage and advice handed down from older generations. Mrs. Webb returns and sends George home before the wedding.



The Stage Manager interrupts to reflect on how the relationship between George and Emily began. We go back to a year and learn that Emily and George had a "very important conversation" over a soda sulfate at the pharmacy run by Mr. Morgan, played by the Stage Manager. The two talk about their feelings for one another.



After this flashback, we return to the wedding. Both George and Emily are at first nervous about becoming married, but then happily go through with the wedding.



Act III begins with the Stage Manager showing us the Grover's Corners graveyard, where Simon Stimson, Mrs. Soames, Wally Webb and Mrs. Gibbs reside. She comments on the nature of life and eternity.



As a funeral party emerges, we learn that Emily Gibbs has died in childbirth, leaving behind her parents, her husband George and their child. She tries to adjust to being with the others in the graveyard, but has a hard time joining the land of the dead.



Emily talks to the Stage Manager of the possibility of returning to the living world to relive her days. Though the Stage Manager and others advise against it, she decides to return to her 12th birthday.



As Emily returns to her 12th birthday, she relives all of the memories of that day and that time in Grover's Corners. After a while of enjoying the memories, Emily suddenly becomes overwhelmed with emotion and wants to return to the land of the dead.



Before she leaves the world of the living one last time, Emily praises the earth and feels sad that the living do not appreciate it until they are dead. Once she returns, the dead find companionship in the night sky and the distant stars.



At night, a distraught George Gibbs walks to Emily's grave and sobs upon it. The Stage Manager tells the audience to get home safe.

OUR TOWN

About the Production

Learn more about this production of *Our Town*.



Written by Assistant Director Andrew Oppmann

DESIGNING THE WORLD OF OUR TOWN

The Costumes:

The events of *Our Town*—including the flashbacks—span from 1899 to 1913. Our Costume Designer, Scott Rött, kept the costumes authentic to that period. It was important the costumes looked like real clothes that people worked and lived life in—there’s a worn-in feeling about them. Set in New Hampshire, the New England nature of the play suggests that practicality and efficiency are important to the people of Grover’s Corners (as well as playwright Thornton Wilder). Those values are central to the characters and is reflected through their attire.

The Set:

One of the first stage directions of the play reads, “No Scenery.” Tables, chairs, a bench, a board, and two stools are all Thornton Wilder gives us. Scenic Designer Takeshi Kata honors the intention of the playwright, putting relationships between characters front and center. Limiting the scenic architecture to a handful of simple things further illuminates what is occurring between people.

The Sound:

In a play where there are no props and the set is limited, sound becomes a crucial world-building element. Sound Designer Joe Cerqua sourced and fine tuned everything from train whistles to horse whinnies to chickens and more to bring Grover's Corners to life. We've also built in the use of foley sounds - Joe Crowell hurling newspapers, Mr. Webb pushing his lawn mower, a school bell in the distance - to round out the play's auditory landscape. There's a lot to listen for in this rather quiet town!

Voice & Text:

There is something unremarkably remarkable about the simplicity of this text. Our Voice and Text Coach, Santiago Sosa, helped our actors lean into the non-sentimental, everyday matter-of-factness characteristic of New England, using a limited vocal range to create a grounded straightforward tone that supports the specific poetry of this piece.

THE WORLD OF OUR TOWN

Our Director, Tim Ocel, started the first day of rehearsal with the following thought: "This is our town. Not my town, not your town, not everybody's town, but our town." This production is imbued with the uniqueness of this specific place at this specific time with these specific people.

The real-life inspiration for Grover's Corners is assumed to be **Peterborough, New Hampshire**, considering it's where a significant amount of the play was written. Although the play is set in New England, Thornton Wilder is originally from Wisconsin and a lot of his insights into family life are taken directly from his upbringing in Madison, WI, where his father was even the editor of the Wisconsin State Journal (similar to Mr. Webb).

ACT I: DAILY LIFE

The first act is composed of brief scenes from daily life. There is almost no dramatic action. The day begins and it ends. Although the play is time specific, the conversations between father and son, mother and daughter, husband and wife, etc. each carry something timeless about the human experience. We may or may not identify with the specifics of New Hampshire at the beginning of the 20th Century. The Stage Manager says "This is the way we were," and not "the way we are." Yet still, the play endeavors to examine what connects us both today in 2023 and in 1901.

ACT II: LOVE AND MARRIAGE

George and Emily are at the center of the second act, titled “Love and Marriage”. Wilder chronicles another day in the life of our characters, but this time it’s George and Emily’s wedding day in 1904. Over a hundred years ago, it was common for young people to get married following high school graduation. *Our Town* was originally titled “M Marries N,” and that wording can still be found in the play’s definitive edition.

“I’ve married over two hundred couples in my day. Do I believe in it? I don’t know. M... marries N... millions of them. The cottage, the go-cart, the Sunday-afternoon drives in the Ford, the first rheumatism, the grandchildren, the second rheumatism, the deathbed, the reading of the will...Once in a thousand times it’s interesting.”

THE STAGE MANAGER

In the summer of 1935, Thornton Wilder was the best man at his brother’s wedding and was intrigued by the wedding day customs. He incorporated some of these observations into this act while writing the play in 1937.

ACT III: DEATH

Nine years pass between the wedding and now, making it the summer of 1913. The third act is set on a hill top, much like the Hill Theatre where our production occurs. It looks at how we continue after we finish living our life. Thornton Wilder’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) predates *Our Town* and ends with, “There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.” The Stage Manager in our production attempts to be that bridge, linking the present to the past as we look forward to our future.

THORNTON WILDER BIOGRAPHY (Provided by the Thornton Wilder Family):

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was a novelist and playwright whose works celebrate the connection between the commonplace and the cosmic dimensions of human experience. He is the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes for both drama and fiction: for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and two plays, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. His other novels include *The Cabala*, *The Woman of Andros*, *Heaven’s My Destination*, *The Ides of March*, *The Eighth Day* and *Theophilus North*. His other major dramas include *The Matchmaker* (adapted as the musical *Hello, Dolly!*) and *The Alcestiad*. *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, *Pullman Car Hiawatha* and *The Long Christmas Dinner* are among his well-known shorter plays. He enjoyed enormous success as a translator, adaptor, actor, librettist and lecturer/teacher and his screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* remains a classic psycho-thriller to this day. Wilder’s many honors include the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. More information on Thornton Wilder and his family is available in Penelope Niven’s definitive biography, *Thornton Wilder: A Life* (2013) as well as on the Wilder Family website, www.thorntonwilder.com

OUR TOWN

Classroom Activities

Discussion Questions to get talking about *Our Town*.



CHECK OUT THE “WHERE DO YOU STAND?” ACTIVITY GUIDE FOR MORE INFORMATION ON BRINGING THESE QUESTIONS TO LIFE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- 1) Appreciating everyday-normal-regular-boring life is essential for a good life.
- 2) Preserving traditions is important.
- 3) Learning from history is crucial for shaping a better future.
- 4) Belonging to a community is very important.
- 5) Our connections with others define who we are and our purpose in life.
- 6) Balancing practicality and ambition is key to a successful life.
- 7) The natural world is important to my well-being.
- 8) Social media makes it easier to really talk with others.
- 9) My family has shaped who I am.
- 10) Formal education is not the only path to gaining knowledge.
- 11) Sacrificing for others is important.
- 12) Our choices shape our destinies more than external forces do.
- 13) What my family and friends think of me influences my decisions and actions.
- 14) Art and creativity contribute to a deeper understanding of the world.
- 15) At some point, you stop finding out who you are and just BE who you are.
- 16) Leaving a positive impact on the world is a valuable goal in life.
- 17) Stories from the past don't help me that much.
- 18) My life will start as soon as I move out on my own.
- 19) The further you move away from your hometown, the better your life will be.
- 20) I have had conversations on the nature of death with my family or my friends.

OUR TOWN News & Multimedia

Immerse yourself in the story of *Our Town*.



DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Program notes from the director of *Our Town*, Tim Ocel

"The play is about Mortality."

Thornton Wilder on *Our Town*

"It is the life of a village against the life of the stars."

Thornton Wilder on *Our Town*

"But soon we shall die and all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning."

Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

Our Town – Grover's Corners, NH – isn't everybody's town: it is OUR town. Every town has its own distinction...

I realize you are viewing the play through contemporary eyes and that the gap between today and the time period of *Our Town* is well over 100 years. And though the Stage Manager attempts to bridge that divide, she will make no attempt to convince you that Grover's Corners is a role model of small-town living; she just tells you how it used to be. As the Stage Manager warns us: "Some of the things they're going to say maybe'll hurt your feelings – but that's the way it is."

Our Town is made up solely of shared relationships. Families/friends/neighbors/citizens: this community believes in the goodness of work, usefulness, and commitment, in protecting each other while respecting each other's privacy, in forgiving and defending, in the freedom to worship, or not, without judgement. They are proud to be a part of the United States of America.

Thornton Wilder felt neither scenery nor props should ever distract from what is occurring between people, so there is nothing in the visual aspect of the play other than a few simple things to help these relationships and values exist. He wishes the audience to enter the play through their own empathies and abilities to imagine. I agree.

I like that the theater is completely exposed because the actors have no place to hide.

The Stage Manager talks about the Eternal in all human beings, and she doesn't mean heaven. She means the essence we eventually become after we die - which is determined by the spirit we are when alive. She means Love. This production, along with American Players Theatre, is interested in those essences – the spirit in which lives are lived and relationships shared.

Tim Ocel, Director of *Our Town*

PORTABLE PROLOGUES PODCAST

Host Orange Schroeder talks to the directors and actors to bring you background information that will make you appreciate each APT performance even more! Listen on Apple Podcast or Spotify! Produced by Buzz Kemper, Audio for the Arts.

EPISODE DESCRIPTION: Director Tim Ocel joins actor Sarah Day, who portrays the Stage Manager, to discuss the 2023 production of *Our Town* at American Players Theater in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Enhance your experience and appreciation by listening to this lively interview before or after your theater visit.

FIND THIS PODCAST ON THE APT WEBSITE OR ON APPLE PODCASTS AND SPOTIFY!

SEASON SELECTS: OUR TOWN

An APT blog series for more info about upcoming productions

FAST FACTS ON OUR TOWN AT APT

Playing: June 23 - September 22

Featuring: Tracy Michele Arnold, Teri Brown, Nate Burger, Sarah Day, Jim DeVita, Tim Gittings, Kailey Azure Green, Josh Krause, Brian Mani, Jamaque Newberry, Samantha Newcomb, Ronald Román-Meléndez, James Ridge, Jefferson A. Russell

Genre: American Classic

Last Seen at APT: 1992

Go If You Liked: *A Raisin in the Sun* (2022), *A View From the Bridge* (2017), *Arcadia* (2016)

If there's one play that's about all of us, it's *Our Town*. It focuses in on the relationships we have with the people closest to us, and to the people who dip in and out of our orbit. It is about caring for each other, and the moments we miss as people we love become more and more familiar. And then there's the third act, which, just in case you haven't seen or read it, we are absolutely not going to spoil.

But one more thing about this production before we move on - the Stage Manager will be played by Sarah Day. Sarah. Day. Brenda will fill you in on all the reasons to see it, but this is a big one.

Now, a bit more about how the play came to be. Thornton Wilder was born in Wisconsin, but *Our Town* was not written in Wisconsin. In fact, he didn't even write it in the country. Wilder was abroad as part of the MacDowell Colony Artists' Retreat while he worked on this play. He decided to write *Our Town* in part as a protest to what he considered overly-lavish and foolish plays and musicals that had taken over stages across the country. It was published and produced to great acclaim in 1938 and won Pulitzer Prize for drama.

FIND THIS POST ON THE APT WEBSITE AS PART OF OUR SEASON SELECT SERIES!

VIDEO

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STUDY GUIDE CREDITS

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION BY ANDREW OPPMANN
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