

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Our Town

by

Thornton Wilder

Book Information

Thornton Wilder, Our Town
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Illuminating that which is extraordinary about the ordinary aspects of daily life, this play has become one of the most unforgettable of this century.

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Main Characters

Dr. Gibbs a kind, small-town physician who is the father of George and Rebecca

Emily Webb a disciplined and bright young woman who later marries George Gibbs

George Gibbs a young man who hopes to be a farmer and later marries Emily Webb

Mr. Webb the local newspaper editor

Mrs. Gibbs a middle-age housewife who is the mother of George and Rebecca

Mrs. Webb a middle-age housewife who is the mother of Emily and Wally

Rebecca Gibbs the younger sister of George

Simon Stimson an alcoholic who directs the church choir

Stage Manager a person who acts as an omnipresent narrator and assumes the role of a minor character at times during the play

Wally Webb the younger brother of Emily

Vocabulary

brachiocephalic involving the head and arm

lumbago lower back pain

pince-nez eyeglasses that clip to the bridge of the nose

savant a scholar or learned person

Synopsis

Our Town is a three-act drama set in the small town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire at the beginning of the twentieth century. A stage manager stays on the set throughout the play and comments on the action and scenery. The stage contains very sparse scenery that is arranged by the stage manager in view of the audience.

Act One reveals the routines of life in a small town. Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs live a pleasant family life with their two children, George and Rebecca. Mrs. Gibbs has been offered a generous sum of money for an old highboy and would like to sell it to fund a vacation to Europe. Dr. Gibbs, however, is content with traveling to see Civil War battlefields. George and Rebecca Gibbs begin a budding friendship with their neighbor children, Emily and Wally Webb. The children walk to school together and Emily helps George with his algebra. Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs attend choir practice together, and become concerned for their choir director, Simon Stimson, who shows up drunk. Later that evening, Mr. Webb observes Simon wandering the empty streets of town in an apparently drunken and disturbed state of mind.

Three years have passed as Act Two begins on the morning of George and Emily's wedding day. Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs seem concerned about George's ability to handle adult responsibilities. George makes his way to the Webb house where he is told it is not good to see the bride before the wedding. Mr. Webb advises George to not seek others' advice. The stage manager interrupts the scene by flashing back to when George and Emily's romance began. George has just been elected President of the Junior Class, and Emily is the Secretary and Treasurer. On their way home from school, Emily confronts George as to his conceited ways of late. George thanks her for pointing out his fault. When George says men are not perfect, but woman are, Emily cries and admits she is far from it. George

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buys her an ice-cream soda, and during the conversation they find they have liked each other for a while. George decides not to go to Agriculture School after high school but will start work immediately on his uncle's farm instead. Upon returning to the wedding day action, Mrs. Webb tells the audience that she has failed to provide Emily with advice for being a wife, and she hopes that her girlfriends had. At the church, both George and Emily express doubts in their readiness for marriage, but are reassured by the time the ceremony begins.

Act Three takes place nine years later. At the cemetery, Joe Stoddard and Emily's cousin, Sam Craig, are discussing the various gravestones and the people who have died. Joe tells Sam that Emily had died in childbirth, and George is now left alone with their four-year-old son. The town has seen its share of death. Wally, Emily's younger brother, died some years back from a burst appendix, and Mrs. Gibbs has also passed away. As the funeral procession comes up the hill, Emily appears before the other dead. They welcome her to her rest, but Emily is not content. She desires to relive one day of her life. The rest encourage her not to, but relent and urge her to pick an unimportant day. She chooses her twelfth birthday. At first, the nostalgia and youth enrapture her, but knowing the future, she soon loses her enthusiasm because she sees how blind she and others had been at the time. Simon Stimson, who had committed suicide and remains bitter even in death, tells her that life was a time of ignorance. The other dead admonish him by saying there is more. As the play closes, George falls prostrate on Emily's grave. She pities him, knowing he does not really understand either life or death.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why are the descriptions of the town so geographically parceled into ethnic or religious areas?

Before the turn of the century, there had been a wave of immigration into the United States. For language and social reasons, these people sometimes chose to live near people of the same ethnic origin and moved into certain areas of town. For many of these people the church was the center of both their religious and social life. Therefore, the churches were located where most people of that particular denomination lived. In many ways this is still true of recent immigrants, but the fabric of the cities continues to change.

Literary Analysis

Thornton Wilder interrupts the play's sequence in Act Two. How does this help tie the story together?

Mr. Webb had given George some "non-advice" on his wedding morning. Then the audience is taken back to the time George and Emily's romance blossomed. This serves the purpose of showing that George and Emily seemed to have found each other on their own without anyone pushing them, and George himself offered to give up further schooling. It is on this tender note that the audience returns to the wedding ceremony and present action. We witness their doubts, but having just seen their love blossom, we can feel somewhat assured about the relationship, knowing that Emily is able to confront and admit mistakes, and George is willing to work to make changes.

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Inferential Comprehension

What theological beliefs does Thornton Wilder explore in Act Three, and what possible insights can the reader gain?

Philosophers and theologians have debated the concept of life-after-death since ancient times. Wilder's vision of the afterlife includes a clearer perception and an astute awareness of the meaning of past events. Death is painful only in the realization of one's blindness while living life. There seems to be an anticipation of some future for the dead, as they are urged not to live in the past. Although aware of the present day happenings, they cast their eyes upon the stars.

Constructing Meaning

What parallels exist between *Our Town* and your community?

Answers will vary. Students might note concrete things such as schools, newspapers, churches, and businesses. They may also see parallels in characters, the relationships they see in their town, the daily routines that still exist, a story about falling in love, a wedding they attended, or a tragic death they have learned about.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Reading a play gives the students an opportunity to be exposed to a different literary form than that of the conventional novel or non-fiction work. Have the students do some research on the history of American theater. What was early drama in America like and what forms did it take? Where was the first theatre built and what American plays have been performed there? What older theaters still exist?

Making Inferences It is stated a number of times in the story that Simon Stimson had a lot to deal with and could not adjust to small-town life. The narrative and dialogue reveal he was a choir director, a married man, an alcoholic, and an employee of Dr. Ferguson. Ask the students to write a short story about Simon Stimson's life,

weaving in the before-mentioned facts. Have them include what he longed for. The other classmates can share their stories and their differing perspectives to provide material for discussion.

Recognizing Details The stage manager describes the town of Grover's Corners. This is helpful since scenery is lacking in the play. Choose three descriptions of the physical setting of the play and illustrate them. Compare them with those of other students who have illustrated the same place. Do they look similar? What insight has this given as to why Wilder may have chosen to have an empty stage as his canvas?

Responding to Literature After reading *Our Town*, have each student write a short personal interpretation of each of the characters on the cast list. The list should include both physical and personality descriptions that the student envisions. Then have the students attend a production of the play or watch a video of it. Again, have them note their reactions. They could compare the two responses and determine where their interpretations and the director's interpretations were similar or different.