

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Our Town**

by Thornton Wilder

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## Introduction

Although generally not ranked with the top three American dramatists (O'Neill, Williams, and Miller) Thornton Wilder guaranteed himself a secure niche in the American theater when *Our Town* was first produced in 1938. Although some critics had reservations, the play was immensely popular with the audiences of the time. Over the years, its popularity has endured because it seems to strike a responsive chord in the American public. As you study this play, see if you can spot what it is that makes it such a popular, well-regarded play.

All references come from the Harper Perennial Classics Edition of *Our Town*, published 1998.

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. identify and discuss the following four major themes in this play:
  - A. Because we get caught up in the routine of daily life, humans fail to see the beauty of life.
  - B. It is important to nature that humankind is not alone; therefore, nature contrives to push people together in love, marriage, and raising a family.
  - C. All people, past and present, share a common humanity. While in a cosmic view humanity may seem insignificant, there is a grandeur and nobility to man's living and striving.
  - D. There is something eternal about life.
2. discuss how and why the set in this play is a departure from the traditional box set.
3. explain how Wilder's characters are universal figures; that is, they are individuals but they also serve to represent human nature in general.
4. comment on the language used in this play and evaluate its appropriateness.
5. identify the following motifs and discuss their significance.
  - A. references to time and the various ways the passage of time is indicated.
  - B. references to religion and church.
6. identify the elements in this play that make it an emotional experience for most viewers.
7. define allegory and state to what extent, and why, this play may be read as an allegory.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. State how this play is similar to a straight, realistic play performed in a box set and how it differs from that kind of play.
2. An allegory is a story in which characters, actions, or settings represent abstract ideas or moral qualities. As such, the story has a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning. Some critics see *Our Town* as an allegory. Assuming it is, state its literal meaning, identify what the symbols are and what they represent, and what its symbolic level of meaning is.
3. Most of the people in this play are simple, country folks and speak like that. But the Stage Manager is obviously not a simple, country person. Why does the author have him speak like one?
4. The Stage Manager has been compared to the chorus in a Greek tragedy. What are the points of comparison between the Stage Manager and a Greek chorus?
5. Time figures prominently in this play. Note some of those references to time and its passage, and state a reason for this prominence.
6. There are also many references to church and religion in this play. Note some of those references and state a reason for their role in this play.
7. Using each of the following as a thesis statement, prove that each of these four is a major theme in this play by citing specific comments and actions from the play.
  - A. Because we get caught up in the routine of daily life, humans fail to see the beauty of life.
  - B. It is important to nature that man is not alone; therefore, she contrives to push people together in love, marriage, and raising a family.
  - C. All men, past and present, share a common humanity. While in a cosmic view humanity may seem insignificant, there is a grandeur and nobility to man's living and striving.
  - D. There is something eternal about life.
8. Throughout this play Wilder poses many juxtapositions. For example, life is said to be awful and wonderful; and war is presented as both noble and foolish. State the dual view the author presents of the significance of human life, marriage, and daily life.
9. Here are some views on life the author seems to hold. What is your opinion of each?
  - A. Most people are so busy that they fail to see or appreciate the simple beauty in life, and they fail to consciously live each minute of it.
  - B. In life, love between people is a real entity (not something foisted on us by advertising) and is one of the most important aspects of life.
  - C. There is a common humanity among all humans that binds them together.
  - D. There is something eternal about life.

# Our Town

## Act I

### VOCABULARY

**anthropological**—relating to the study of humankind  
**burdock**—bristly, weedy plant with purplish flowers  
**careen**—to move rapidly and erratically  
**diligent**—hard-working  
**heliotrope**—plant with aromatic purple flowers  
**highboy**—tall chest of drawers with high legs  
**legacy**—money or property given to someone through a will  
**proscenium**—front area of the stage, located between the curtain and the orchestra  
**savant**—educated or learned person  
**tenor**—male singer

1. What sounds and sights indicate the start of a new day?

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2. The set is obviously not the traditional set, and the narrator is not your average person. What remarkable qualities does the narrator possess?

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3. Cite some of the things the narrator tells us are going to happen after 1901.

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20. In the last part of Act I, the moon and moonlight are mentioned a number of times. In fact, it seems to tie all the characters together. How does Rebecca's question about the moon and South America serve to illustrate this point?

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21. Obviously, the address on Jane Crofut's letter has some significance. What would you guess is its significance?

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22. Jane and Rebecca see the letter as exciting because it links Jane to God and the cosmos. In what way, though, does the address also make Jane (and the rest of us) insignificant?

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