

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Our Town
by Thornton Wilder

written by Darcy Carmichael

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Pre-reading

1. Thornton Wilder once wrote, “The response we make when we ‘believe’ a work of the imagination is that of saying: ‘This is the way things are. I have always known it without being fully aware that I knew it. Now in the presence of this play or novel or poem (or picture or piece of music) I know that I know it.’”

Write a paragraph or two about your reaction and thoughts to what Wilder wrote. Do you agree or disagree?

2. Thornton Wilder is definitely one of America’s greatest playwrights. Some even go so far as to say he was “the *first* American playwright.”

Research Thornton Wilder and write a brief biography on his life. The biography should also include a paragraph in which you give your opinion of whether he was the “first” American playwright or just one of the greatest.

3. Dramas have been a major part of history and still are a major part of today’s society (although more in the form of screenplays than actual theater). People are drawn to the stories and lives presented in drama. Thornton Wilder wrote in the preface to *Our Town*, “The theater longs to represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves.”

Thinking of all plays, do you agree with this statement? Is it the symbolic meanings that draw people to drama? Does it really matter who the characters are or exactly what they are doing, or do major themes keep playing over and over in dramas throughout time? Write your feelings in an essay with examples to support your thoughts.

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4. *Our Town* is noted as one of the best All-American plays even though it didn't have a very successful beginning. Once the amateur and stock rights became available, it had been performed in at least 795 communities in a year and a half. Tappan Wilder says in the Afterword, "This laid the foundation for the *Our Town* rule of thumb ever since: It is performed at least once each night somewhere in this country. Behind these figures lies a play that has marvelous parts for young people, it is not expensive to mount, is glorious to teach, and treats life, death, and love in such an immediate fashion as to leave indelible and typically nostalgic impressions on generations of students."

With such a noteworthy statement being said about the play, what do you expect to read, feel, and understand by reading it? Create a list of what your expectations of the play are.

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Act I

5. One of the best known aspects of *Our Town* is the minimal stage decorations. The use of very few stage decorations allows the audience to picture themselves and their memories into the play while they are watching. It creates an opportunity for everyone to use their imagination.

According to the first stage directions, how does the stage strike you? How does your own compare to the one that is described? Do you think it is a good or bad thing to use a minimalist stage?

6. To start the play, the stage manager is describing the town and the people of the town. He briefly states where things are in relation to each other to help the audience visualize the town. When he begins describing the people of the town, he still doesn't say much until he mentions Mrs. Gibbs. The more in-depth description of Mrs. Gibbs creates a connection with her.

How might someone describe you? Write two short sentences that someone might say about you. Would someone feel like they knew you after reading this description? Now, write a longer description of yourself that you might use for a work-related or personal web page.

7. An important part of understanding a play (or any writing for that matter) is the ability to relate to the storyline in some way. The audience may relate with a character, a situation, a location, or even a feeling. Since *Our Town* is about a small town, most people would assume that those who are also from small towns would be better able to relate, and, therefore, understand the play better. However, that might not be the case.

Create two columns in which you compare and contrast Grover's Corners to your town. Can you find similarities that aren't completely obvious? Do these similarities help you relate to the characters, situations, etc., better? Write a brief paragraph explaining how you think these similarities will benefit you as you read *Our Town*.

O u r T o w n

8. After watching a brief interchange between Dr. Gibbs and Joe Crowell, Jr., the Stage Manager takes a break to inform the audience about the future of Joe. He tells the audience about how smart and successful Joe was before the war broke out. He then states that Joe Crowell's education was all for nothing because he died at such a young age.

How do you feel about the subject? What is your opinion on education? If you knew you were only going to live for another five years, would you continue your education? Why?

9. The audience watches the Webb and Gibbs kids getting ready for school. The kids complain about what to wear and not studying enough the night before. They fight with each other and their mothers have to reprimand them.

How does this compare to your school mornings? Do you see any similarities and/or differences? Create two columns on your paper and try to write down at least one thing for similarities and differences.

10. Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb are talking while stringing beans. Women used to do chores together as a way of showing their friendship by sharing the load of work. They also used this time to talk about what was going on in their lives. During their talk, Mrs. Gibbs says, "I've got to tell you something, because if I don't tell somebody I'll burst."

Have you ever felt that way? If so, did you tell someone? Did telling someone change how you felt? Write a journal entry about the time that you felt you had to tell someone something.

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11. Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs talk about wanting to go to Paris. They long to visit somewhere exotic and different from their own little town. Mrs. Gibbs thinks it is important for everyone to visit another country sometime in their life.

Why do you think she feels that way? What are some reasons you can think of that would benefit a person from seeing a foreign country? Make a list of pros and cons for visiting another country.

Now that you have considered the benefits and disadvantages of visiting a foreign country, if you could visit any country in the world, where would you go? Why?

12. Grover's Corners is the typical small town in America. As is common in most small towns, many of the people who grow up in Grover's Corners stay after graduation or return after completing their education or military service. When people grow up in small towns, they either can't wait to leave or have what is known as "small town pride"—they want their kids to experience life just as they did.

Do you plan on settling in your own town? Why or why not?

13. The Stage Manager incorporates the audience into the play when he asks if anyone has any questions for Editor Webb. A woman asks a question and then a belligerent man in the back of the auditorium becomes part of the play. He asks, "Is there no one in town aware of social injustice and industrial inequality?"

Explain what you think he means by this question. Do you agree or disagree?