

## Our Town By Thornton Wilder

First Performed: 1938, New York  
Winner 1938 Pulitzer Prize for Drama  
Genre: Expressionist Drama

### Dramatis Personae

**The Stage Manager** He sets up the stage, introduces the play, describes the setting, provides background information during the play, and sometimes steps into scenes to talk with the characters. In some ways, he resembles the chorus of an ancient Greek play or the omniscient narrator of a novel.

**Charles Webb** Editor of the Grover's Corners Sentinel and father of two children, Emily and Wally.

**Myrtle Webb** Devoted wife of Charles Webb.

**Emily Webb** Intelligent, pretty, engaging daughter of Charles and Myrtle Webb. She marries a next-door neighbor, George Gibbs, but dies nine years into her marriage while giving birth to her second child.

**Wally Webb** Little brother of Emily. He dies after his appendix ruptures.

**Frank Gibbs** Hard-working town physician who goes out to tend to his patients at all hours. At the beginning of the play, he arrives home after just delivering the twins of a woman in Polish town, a section of Grover's Corners.

**Julia Gibbs** Devoted wife of Dr. Gibbs. She dreams of visiting Paris with her husband but never gets the chance.

**George Gibbs** Upright son of Frank and Julia Gibbs. He is a star baseball player who has always loved Emily Webb. When she dies, he is broken-hearted.

**Rebecca Gibbs** Little sister of George.

**Howie Newsome** Milkman who makes deliveries from a cart drawn by his old horse Bessie.

**Joe Crowell** Newspaper boy who became an outstanding student in high school and later at MIT but died in World War I.

**Si Crowell** Joe's younger brother. He takes over his brother's paper route.

**Sam Craig** Emily Webb's cousin. He went west to pursue his career but returns for Emily's funeral.

**Joe Stoddard** Undertaker in charge of Emily Webb's funeral.

**Bill Warren** Constable who keeps law and order and once rescued a man from a snowdrift.

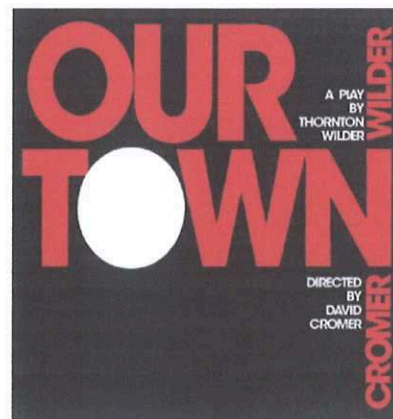
**Professor Willard** Expert on the geological and anthropological background of Grover's Corners. In a boring speech, he helps the stage manager describe the town and its history to the audience.

**Simon Stimson** He is the choirmaster at the Congregationalist church and the town alcoholic.

**Louella Soames** Choir member and friend of Myrtle Webb and Julia Gibbs. She criticizes Simon Stimson for his drinking.

### Setting

The action takes place in the fictional town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, just north of the Massachusetts line, between 1901 and 1913. (However, one of the central characters—the stage manager—exists in the 1930's. While describing the town and its characters and commenting on the action, he flashes back and forth between the early part of the 20th Century and the 1930's.) Grover's Corners serves as a microcosm; it is the world condensed into a small community with characters reflecting the hopes and dreams, the failures and successes, of people everywhere.



### Plot

#### Summary

#### **Act I: Daily**

**Life:** The play begins with the Stage Manager describing the town. After this come scenes in the Gibbs' and Webbs' homes, where both families prepare their children for school. The Stage Manager then guides the audience through a day in the life of the town. The Stage Manager also has Professor Willard, a long-winded local historian, and Mr. Webb, editor of the Grover's Corners Sentinel, talk about the town. After a scene within the Congregational Church at a choir practice, Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Gibbs, and Mrs. Soames discuss

Simon Stimson. Stimson is the church organist with a reputation for being a drunkard. Due to his non-conforming nature, he is often the subject of the town's gossip. The act also includes a scene in which George and Emily discuss school. Also on the ladder, George's younger sister Rebecca, talks about the moon and how it might get nearer and nearer until there's a "big 'explosion.'" The subject of "daily life" addressed throughout this act stereotypes the average "American family."

**Act II: Love and Marriage:** Three years pass and George and Emily announce their plans to wed. The day is filled with stress, topped off by George's visit to the Webb family home. The Stage Manager interrupts the scene and takes the audience back a year, to the end of Emily and George's junior year. Over an ice cream soda, Emily confronts George about his pride,



and they discuss the future and their love for each other. The wedding follows, where George, in a fit of nervousness, tells his mother that he is not ready to marry. Emily, too, tells her father of her anxiety about marriage, saying she wishes she were dead. The text is interrupted

by the individual thoughts, a modern twist to Shakespeare's soliloquy.

**Act III: Death and Eternity:** The setting for Act III is a cemetery near Grover's Corners. The Stage Manager opens this act with a lengthy monologue emphasizing eternity, expressed by the survival of Emily's second child after Emily herself dies giving birth. Emily's coffin is brought to the cemetery and buried, and she emerges from the mourners as a spirit. She joins her relatives and fellow townsfolk in the graveyard. Soon Emily's ghost learns it is possible to re-live parts of her past. Despite the warnings of Simon, Mrs. Soames, and Mrs. Gibbs, Emily decides to return to Earth to re-live just one day, her 12th birthday, and realizes just how much life should be valued, "every, every minute." She then returns to her grave. The Stage Manager concludes the play with a monologue and wishes the audience a good night.

### About the Playwright



Thornton Niven Wilder was born on April 17, 1897, in Madison, Wis. He graduated from Yale University in New Haven, Conn., in 1920 and continued his studies in Rome, Italy, where he studied archeology. He taught literature at the University of Chicago from 1930 to 1937. Among other plays he wrote were *The Skin of Our Teeth*, published in 1942, and *The Matchmaker*, published in 1954. The popular film *Hello, Dolly!* was based on the latter play. Wilder also wrote several novels, the most famous of which is *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, published in 1927. Wilder won a Pulitzer Prize for that book and another for *Our Town*. Wilder died on Dec. 7, 1975, in Hamden, Conn.

### Building Background

Peterborough, N.H., may have been the model for Grover's Corners, a conclusion reached by some townspeople after Thornton Wilder wrote *Our Town* there while he was in residence at the MacDowell Colony, a famous retreat for several hundred composers, writers, and painters.

### Significant Concepts

**Symbols:** Among the symbols in the play are the trains, the tombstones, and the stage manager's watch, all representing the passage of time and the inevitability of death; the birth of the twins in Polish town, the birth of Emily's second child, and the blooming of flowers, all representing the continuing life cycle; the moon, the mountains, the lakes, and the gardens of Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb, all representing the glories of nature that people tend to ignore.

### Themes:

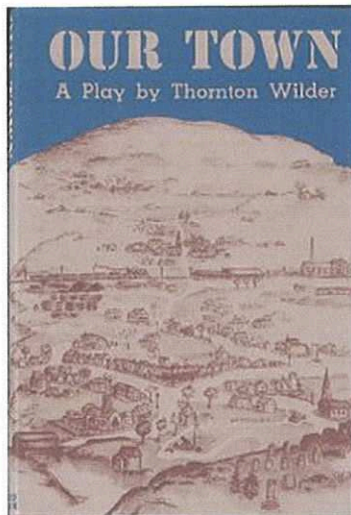
Theme 1: People should appreciate life while they are living it.

Theme 2: Carpe diem (seize the day).

Theme 3: Little things in life are really big things.

Theme 4: No town can isolate itself from the rest of the world.

Theme 5: No community is perfect, not even idyllic Grover's Corners.



themes apply to everyone everywhere. In addition, its simple mise-en-scène—a nearly bare stage with only a few props and no backdrops—makes it easy to produce. The absence of scenery also underscores the universal themes, inasmuch as there are no representations of structures or landscapes associated with specific locales. Grover's Corners could be anywhere.

### Footnotes

#### Why the Play Is Popular

Our Town is a favorite at many playhouses mainly because its setting and characters are so much like ordinary towns around the United States—and the rest of the world. Also, it has the one ingredient necessary for a literary work to become great: universality. Its

