



Our Town

by Thornton Wilder

Teacher's Guide

Written By Mary Ellen Snodgrass

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Synopsis

Act I

EMPTY STAGE

The Stage Manager introduces Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, at dawn on May 7, 1901. The town dates to the 1670s. Near Doctor Frank Gibbs' house, two trellises link his wife's garden with the Webbs' house next door. Weary from late work, Doc returns up Main Street past Joe Crowell, Jr., who delivers the paper, and then past Howie Newsome, the milkman. Doc tells Joe and Howie that he has delivered the twins of Mrs. Goruslawski in Polish Town.

THE GIBBS' HOUSE

Mrs. Julia Gibbs awakens George and Rebecca for school and listens to her daughter's complaint about a blue gingham dress. Next door, Mrs. Myrtle Webb chides Wally and Emily for reading at the table as they eat breakfast. The two women meet at midmorning to string beans and discuss Mrs. Gibbs' longing to travel and the potential sale of a treasured highboy to an antiques dealer.

EMPTY STAGE

At the Stage Manager's prompting, Professor Willard cites facts about Grover's Corners from pre-history to the present population of 2,640, minus the twins Doc has just delivered. Editor Charles Webb adds data about economics, religion, literacy, and politics. The Stage Manager answers questions from the audience about alcohol abuse and local culture.

TWO LADDERS

The Congregational Church choir sings in the distance. George and Emily confer on a math problem. As Mrs. Louella Soames, Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Gibbs return from choir practice, they discuss the alcoholism of the organist and choir director, Simon Stimson. At the Gibbs home, Doc indicates that there are reasons that Simon is unhappy in a small community. By 9:30, Simon passes Editor Webb and Constable Bill Warren. Still moon gazing at the upstairs window, Emily gets a "goodnight" from her father. The Stage Manager formally closes the act with a smoke break.

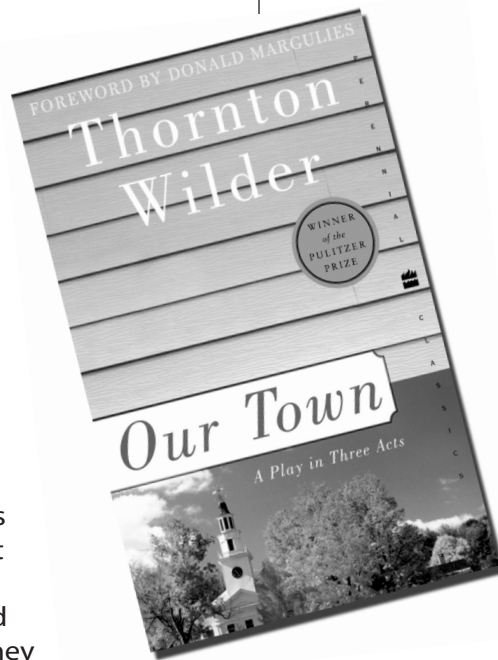
Act II

PREPARATIONS FOR THE WEDDING

Three years later at 5:45 A. M. on July 7, 1904, the Stage Manager introduces "Love and Marriage." Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs make breakfast and ponder the future of their daughter and son on their wedding day. Si Crowell, the paperboy, worries that George Gibbs will no longer pitch for the baseball team if he gets married. Doc believes that marriage is the normal order of things. Editor Webb welcomes George to the breakfast table and suggests that he not ask advice on how to manage his new wife.

MORGAN'S DRUGSTORE

The Stage Manager presents George and Emily as they walk home from school and discuss the recent class election. Emily dislikes how much of George's attention goes to baseball. At Mr. Morgan's drugstore, George explains that Emily was nearly hit by a wagon. The couple order strawberry sodas and discuss George's eventual departure to agricultural college. George prefers to stay home and take over his Uncle Luke's farm. He assures Emily that he pays attention to her. Indirectly, they state their intentions to marry.



THE WEDDING

The Stage Manager assumes the part of minister and makes general comments on wedded life. After the processional and some teasing from George's friends, the groom enters and promises his mother to return home with his wife for Thursday night dinners. Editor Webb comforts Emily's jitters. The wedding begins and concludes with a standard recessional.

Act III

GRAVEYARD

Nine years later, the spirits of Mrs. Gibbs, Simon Stimson, Mrs. Soames, and Wally Webb meet and await an unnamed event. Sam Craig, who has lived out of town for twelve years, talks with Joe Stoddard, the undertaker, about recent deaths, including Sam's cousin Emily's demise at age 26 while giving birth. The spirits welcome Emily, who is unsure about the change in her status. She worries that life will be harder for George, who must manage his farm without a wife.

GROVER'S CORNERS

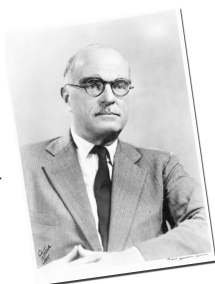
With the Stage Manager's permission, Emily chooses to relive February 11, 1899, her twelfth birthday. She sees the milkman and constable and joins her family for breakfast. She regrets that she did not appreciate her family while they were alive and asks to return to the graveyard. She ponders whether any living person ever realizes the meaning of life. The Stage Manager thinks that only poets and saints come close to relishing their days on earth.

GRAVEYARD

As dark approaches, George comes to his wife's new-dug grave and falls across it in grief. Emily tells Mrs. Gibbs that the living don't understand. The Stage Manager reports that the citizens of Grover's Corners are asleep and suggests that the audience seek their daily rest.

Wilder's Life

One of America's classic mainstream fiction crafters, Thornton Niven Wilder was the only three-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and in two categories—



novel and drama. The survivor of twins born April 17, 1897, in Madison, Wisconsin, Wilder was one of the six children of Amos Parker Wilder, lay minister and editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal*, and Isabella Thornton Niven Wilder, daughter of a Presbyterian minister. The playwright, his older brother Amos, and younger sister Isabel wrote from childhood and became professional writers. In addition to literary pursuits, Wilder also composed music and played classical piano.

While his father entered the U. S. foreign service as consulate-general in Hong Kong, Chefoo, and Shanghai, Wilder, at age nine, attended a German mission school, which he disliked. The move jarred the family, permanently altering Wilder's contentment and security. After returning to the United States, he again lived in China and studied at a mission school. Another source of discontent was his disagreement with Amos Wilder over education and a profession. Wilder wanted to enroll at Yale's drama school; his father insisted on Oberlin College in Lakewood, Ohio. Upon graduation from high school in Berkeley, California, in 1915, Wilder entered Oberlin and, in 1918, halted his education for two years to serve as a corporal in the Coast Artillery Corps at Fort Adams in Providence, Rhode Island. He settled in New Haven and completed a B. A. in classical literature, a preface to a year studying archeology at the American Academy in Rome, where he became proficient in Italian.

In 1921, Wilder began teaching French and serving as housemaster of Davis House at the Lawrenceville School in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. He wrote *The Cabala*, a failed novel, and produced his allegorical play *The Trumpet Shall Sound* at the American Laboratory Theatre in New York City. In 1926, he completed graduate study in English literature at Princeton, composed screenplays for Hollywood for half the year, and taught comparative literature, verse, and theater at the University of Chicago during the remaining months. Among his notable scripts was the thriller *Shadow of a Doubt* for Alfred Hitchcock in 1942. Wilder's successes from on-campus residence include *The Long Christmas Dinner* and *Heaven's My Destination*, a novel set in the Midwest during the Great Depression.

Wilder achieved stardom, a Pulitzer Prize, and financial security in 1927 with the publication of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, an enduring morality novella. MGM made a silent movie of the novel in 1929;

United Artist filmed a second version in 1944, starring Akim Tamiroff, Louis Calhern, and Donald Woods. The plot spawned a series of works about serendipity and the zeitgeist, a place and time in which chance brings together a group of unrelated characters. Discontent with the ups and downs of notoriety, Wilder retreated to Europe to tour with his friend, boxer Gene Tunney. During their sojourn, he wrote *The Woman of Andros*, a romantic novel that recasts one of Terence's classic comedies.

Wilder continued to teach, write, and lecture in 1935 at the University of Hawaii. He wrote for the *New Orleans Double Dealer* and for the Barter Theater of Abingdon, Virginia, both starting points for William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Maxwell Anderson, and Robert Sherwood. While maintaining professional alliances with F. Scott Fitzgerald, Alexander Woolcott, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Ernest Hemingway, and his long-time friend, critic Edmund Wilson, Wilder translated and adapted Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Victors*, André Obey's *Rape of Lucrece*, and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as vehicles for Katherine Cornell and Ruth Gordon. Wilder concentrated on stage plays, climaxing his string of published works with *Our Town* in 1938. After a disappointing debut in Princeton, the play opened to packed houses in New York and won him the first of two Pulitzer Prizes for drama.

Although critics allotted *Our Town* an ample share of gibes for innovative stagecraft, overt sentimentality, and colloquial speech, the play earned enduring praise for its affirmation of small-town values. The text maintains its position among standard works in high school and college drama courses. Written during one of Wilder's residences at the MacDowell artists colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, *Our Town* nestles into small-town New England life to examine the structure and aims of a hypothetical community. Philosophical and redolent of classical models, the enigmatic role of stage manager has passed through notable performances, especially that of Sinclair Lewis, who starred in a 1939 summer stock presentation in Ogunquit, Maine, and of Wilder himself, who assumed the role for several years. United Artists filmed *Our Town* in 1940, starring William Holden and Martha Scott. The movie earned Oscar nominations for best picture, art, best actress, and background music by Aaron Copland. The play flourished on radio and, in 1955, as a Broadway musical starring Frank Sinatra.

Despite international turmoil, Wilder continued his travels and literary pursuits during the 1940s and delivered a centennial address at the First Congregational Church in his hometown in 1940. In 1941 he visited South America for the U. S. State Department as an advocate for education. During World War II, he served the combat-intelligence corps as a lieutenant colonel in Italy and mustered out with a Bronze Star, Legion d'Honneur, Legion of Merit, and the Order of the British Empire.

When the war in Europe was reaching its height in 1942, Wilder wrote an experimental history play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which won him his second Pulitzer Prize for drama. The work resurfaced in 1976 at the Kennedy Center's revival of works by American playwrights, which placed Wilder in company with classic authors Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and William Inge. In 1952, the American Institute of Arts and Letters presented Wilder the Gold Medal for Fiction. After lecturing at Harvard in the Charles Eliot Norton poetry chair, he took a two-year sabbatical from his killing pace and rested in Douglas, Arizona.

At peace in the desert, Wilder revamped an unassuming farce, *The Merchant of Yonkers*, into *The Matchmaker*, one of his most successful plays. Paramount filmed it in 1958 with a sparkling cast, including Shirley Booth, Paul Ford, Anthony Perkins, Shirley MacLaine, Wallace Ford, and Robert Morse. *The Matchmaker* formed the basis of *Hello, Dolly*, a 1963 Broadway smash. The spinoff Twentieth-Century-Fox movie, filmed in 1969, is a classic musical, choreographed by Gene Kelly and starring Barbra Streisand and Walter Matthau as the widow Dolly Levi and feed and grain dealer Horace Vander Gelder. Wilder's quirky characterization of Dolly had Carol Channing, Ginger Rogers, and Betty Grable vying for the role. The film earned an Oscar for music, art, and sound and an Academy Award nomination for photography and the year's best picture. While completing his last play and a series of critical essays, Wilder bought a vacation house in Edgartown, Massachusetts, on the famed Martha's Vineyard peninsula. He remained productive until his death on December 7, 1975, at his home, Deepwood Drive, in Hamden, Connecticut, which he shared with his sister Isabel Wilder, his longtime secretary and traveling companion.

Wilder and the Critics

A paean to the ordinary American, *Our Town* is one of the modern stage's most frequently revived dramas. It was the result of his reading of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1911) and of his belief that drama should be a redeeming experience. He told an interviewer from the *Paris Review*, "The theater is so vast and fascinating a realm that there is room in it for preachers and moralists and pamphleteers." Although the staging of *Our Town* appears straightforward, its microcosm built on trivialities reflects residence in almost any community; its tightly interwoven themes and events produce a satisfying theater experience. As a glimpse of life in a slower, less frenetic time, *Our Town* reminds Americans of the roots from which cities spring—the rhythms of the family interspersed with a perusal of the eternal cycle of birth, love, and death.

Established among the century's best writers, Wilder was the first recipient of the National Medal for Literature. Throughout the 20th century and into current times, *Our Town* probed audience perceptions of community and family. NBC-TV featured a 1977 performance, directed by George Schaefer and starring Ned Beatty, Sada Thompson, Barbara Bel Geddes, John Houseman, Robby Benson, and Glynnis O'Connor. Eleven years later, Gregory Mosher directed a reprise at Lincoln Center for the PBS-TV Great Performances series in 1989, which earned five Tony awards. Paul Newman received a Tony nomination in 2003 for his role on Broadway as the stage manager, a part that Henry Fonda played in a 1969 revival. In 2004, 82-year-old Ned Rorem obtained rights from the playwright's nephew, Tappan Wilder, to adapt the play for opera, which premiered at Indiana University featuring libretto by J. D. McClatchy and stage design by C. David Higgins. Wilder's play continues to impress audiences in Brazil, China, Germany, and Poland. The preponderance of Wilder's manuscripts and private papers reside at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Media Versions

Audiocassette (unabridged)

Our Town, Soundelux Audio, 1985

CD

Copland: Our Town, Sony, 1990

Compendium of plays

Three Plays by Thornton Wilder, Bantam, 1972

Bibliography

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- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Thornton Wilder*. New York: Chelsea House, 2002.
- "A Cast, Crew at Home in 'Our Town,'" *Washington Post* (24 November 2005): T29.
- Dalton, Joseph. "Making 'Our Town' Sing," *Advocate* (14 March 2006): 54-55.
- Hart, Sarah. "Thinking Bigger: The American Cycle," *American Theatre* 22, no. 7 (September 2005): 26.
- Hurwitt, Robert. "A Classic That's Ever Teetering Between Saccharine and Subversive," *San Francisco Chronicle* (16 September 2005).
- La Vina, Mark de. "Wilder at Heart," *San Jose Mercury News* (7 September 2005).
- Midgette, Anne. "Voices Raised in Song at Grover's Corners," *New York Times* (27 February 2006): E1.
- Patrick, Stephen Allan. "Thornton Wilder's 'Our Town,'" *Library Journal* 131, no. 7 (15 April 2006).
- "Rorem to Compose 'Our Town' Opera," *Los Angeles Times* (5 September 2004): E38.
- "Thornton Wilder,"
<http://www.tcnj.edu/~wilder/biography/frame.html>

Wilder's Published Works

- The Cabala*, 1926
- The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 1926
- The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, 1927
- The Angel That Troubled the Waters*, 1928
- The Woman of Andros*, 1930
- The Long Christmas Dinner*, 1931
- Pullman Car Hiawatha*, 1931
- Love and How to Cure It*, 1931
- Such Things Only Happen in Books*, 1931
- The Queens of France*, 1931
- The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, 1931
- Lucrece*, 1933
- Heaven's My Destination*, 1935
- Our Town*, 1938
- The Merchant of Yonkers*, 1938

The Skin of Our Teeth, 1942
Shadow of a Doubt, 1942
James Joyce, 1944
Our Century, 1947
The Ides of March, 1948
The Matchmaker, 1954
The Alcestiad: A Life in the Sun, 1955
The Matchmaker, 1958
Childhood, 1960
Infancy, 1960
Someone from Assisi, 1962
Plays for Bleecker Street, 1962
The Seven Deadly Sins, 1964
The Seven Ages of Man, 1964
The Eighth Day, 1967
Theophilus North, 1973
American Characteristics, 1979
Journals of Thornton Wilder, 1985
The Emporium, 1985
The Drunken Sisters, 1997
Bernice, 1997
The Wreck of the Five-Twenty-Five, 1997
A Ringing of Doorbells, 1997
In Shakespeare and the Bible, 1997
Cement Hands, 1997
Youth, 1997
The Rivers under the Earth, 1997

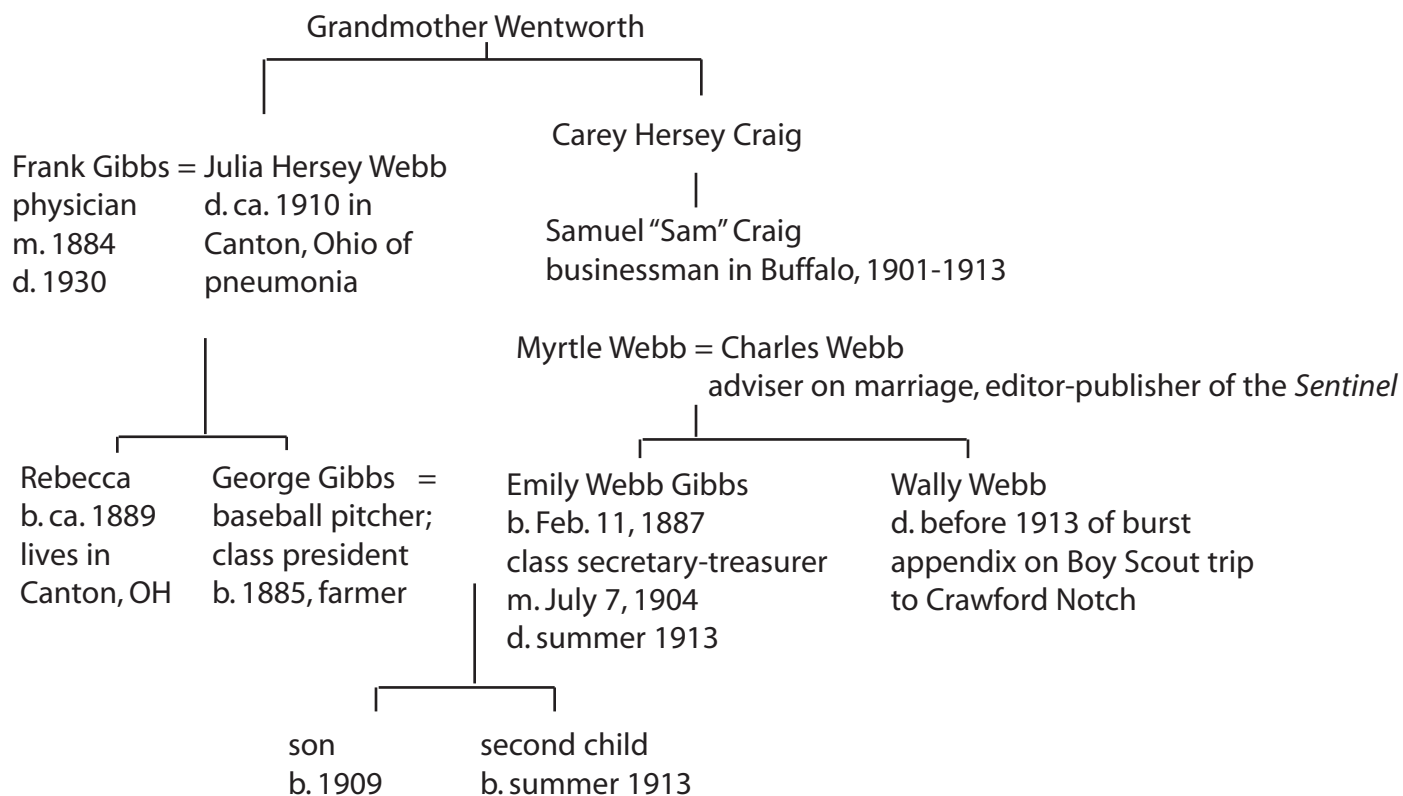
General Objectives

1. To discuss the formation of community and family
2. To characterize deviation from dramatic conventions
3. To discuss the background of colonial New England
4. To outline the relationship between parent and teenager
5. To contrast types of parental discipline
6. To note the value of reflection
7. To read aloud examples of aphorism, advice, superstition, tradition, vernacular speech, cliché, and wisdom
8. To study the convention of omniscience
9. To enumerate examples of social dysfunction
10. To explain the universality of weddings, births, graduations, wars, and funerals in literature

Specific Objectives

1. To describe the merging of neighboring families through marriage
2. To recount how and why George decides to marry Emily
3. To discuss public opinion of alcoholism and suicide
4. To explain how spirits welcome the newly dead
5. To account for George's mute grief
6. To characterize pre-nuptial jitters
7. To list incidents illustrating nostalgia, hope, regret, and longing
8. To evaluate changes in Grover's Corners
9. To account for the stage manager's intrusions
10. To assess the roles of the constable, railroad flagman, teacher, choir director, organist, blanket manufacturer, boy scouts, and druggist
11. To analyze the symbolism of rain and the trellis
12. To contrast Emily as daughter, student, bride, mother, farm worker, class officer, friend, and spirit
13. To summarize the scientific, social, and economic data about Grover's Corners
14. To account for the deaths of Mrs. Gibbs, Wally, Emily, Joe Crowell, and Simon Stimson
15. To account for the \$350 gift
16. To summarize the outlook of spirits
17. To analyze the childhood and maturing of George and Emily
18. To isolate names with symbolic meanings, particularly Webb and Wentworth
19. To explain Emily's discontent at the newness of death
20. To characterize Doc as professional, parent, neighbor, adviser, and husband
21. To order events that lead up to the wedding and funeral
22. To enumerate ways that the funeral changes the story
23. To project how widowers and single parents survive grief

Gibbs-Webb Genealogy



Timeline of the Action

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| <p>1670s The first graves appear in Grover's Corners in Sutton County, New Hampshire.</p> <p>1884 Frank Gibbs marries Julie Hersey.</p> <p>1885 George Gibbs is born.</p> <p>Feb. 22, 1887 Emily Webb is born.</p> <p>ca. 1889 Rebecca Gibbs is born.</p> <p>Feb. 7, 1899 Constable Bill Warren saves a man from freezing.</p> <p>April Jane Trowbridge marries.</p> <p>May 3, 1901 An antique dealer offers Julia Gibbs \$350 for a highboy.</p> <p>May 7, 1901 dawn Mrs. Goruslawski gives birth to twins. The stage manager opens the play.</p> <p>5:45 A. M. Shorty Hawkins prepares to flag the train to Boston.</p> <p>after 7:00 A. M. George throws soap at his younger sister Rebecca.</p> <p>after school Julia Gibbs and Myrtle Webb string beans.</p> | <p>8:30 P. M. The Congregational church choir practices.</p> <p>9:30 P. M. Simon Stimson staggers drunkenly down the street.</p> <p>1902 George Gibbs falls in love with Emily Webb.</p> <p>July 7, 1904 After high school commencement, Emily Webb weds George Gibbs.</p> <p>1909 Emily gives birth to a son.</p> <p>ca. 1910 Julia Hersey Gibbs dies of pneumonia in Canton, Ohio.</p> <p>summer 1913 Emily dies giving birth to a second child.</p> <p>later Emily's cousin Sam Craig arrives from Buffalo for the funeral.</p> <p>after the funeral ca. 1917 George collapses on Emily's grave. Joe Crowell, Jr., graduates from Massachusetts Tech.</p> <p>World War I 1930 Joe dies in combat in France. After Dr. Frank Gibbs dies, a hospital bears his name.</p> |
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Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Thornton Wilder's style, present the following terms and applications to his play:

Dramatic Convention: the traditional arrangement of characters on a stage who appear before sets to speak and act out a series of events that form the play. By setting his drama on a bare stage and using a minimum of props, Thornton Wilder alludes to the origins of Western drama, which were less tied to sets, costumes, and props and more attuned to the words of the chorus and the players with whom the chorus interacted. Because the text confers important tasks on the stage manager, Wilder departs from modern dramatic conventions and presents a play that is more like classical Greek drama than the stagecraft of his own time.

Symbolic Names: a name derived from an allusion or a concrete object that stands for a complex or abstract idea or relationship. In *Our Town*, most names are common Anglo-Saxon surnames, such as Carter, Cartwright, Corcoran, Crowell, Craig, Fairchild, Ferguson, Forrest, Foster, Gibbs, Hawkins, Hersey, Lockhart, McCarty, Morgan, Newsome, Peckham, Soames, Stimson, Trowbridge, Warren, Wentworth, Wilcox, and Wilkins. Wilder features traditional English given names, particularly Bob, Carrie, Charles, Emily, Ernestine, Fred, George, Helen, Herb, Hester, Howie, Jane, Joe, Joel, Julia, Lizzy, Luke, Martha, Norah, Sam, Silas, Simon, Tom, and Wallace. Some names suggest important aspects of the story, especially Myrtle, an evergreen creeper also called vinca or periwinkle, which the Greeks wove into crowns to award excellence.

Of major significance is the name Webb, which indicates the family linkage that draws a community into an interrelated whole, a fact replicated in the familiar Protestant hymn "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." In contrast, the reference to Mrs. Goruslawski differentiates the immigrants from eastern Europe. Poles live in a lesser community that exists across the tracks from the established citizenry, which dates to the English colonization of New England in the 1670s. The subject of separation by nationality, religion, or race is not a primary theme of the play, but Wilder places the idea in the

outer edge of the viewer's mind to indicate that like sticks to like in mostly Republican, mostly Protestant Grover's Corners.

Universality: a quality or theme that applies to all people at all times. The cyclical humanistic motifs of growing up, getting an education, selecting a mate, and creating a new family all precede the greater theme, which is the conclusion of individual lives in death. The universality of George's grief for Emily is thus less significant than the fact that George, too, will join the spirits in the Grover's Corners cemetery and will separate himself from the goals and longings of a farmer and a single parent of two young children. For this reason, the theme of recurrent human situations transcends the town in New Hampshire and extends to all human families that have ever lived or will live on earth.

The Importance of Setting

Thornton Wilder so closely allies fictional personae with place and time that Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, seems like a living, breathing character. By looking back to prehistory and forward to the building of a new hospital, he surveys the passage of time and the impact of individual lives on the stability of the area, a former Indian community that is home to familiar Anglo-Americans and to Polish newcomers. A paradoxical suggestion of incessant flow and positioning in New England derives from the regular run of the 5:45 A. M. train, which offers both a way out of and a return to small-town life. Before the wedding, flooding reminds the audience of the importance of streams and rivers in the history of New England, which thrived from the building of mills on water courses for weaving fabric and making blankets. Flooding also suggests a sudden engulfing of life in unavoidable conflict, the type of human disorder that shortens lives before their expected ends.

On the individual level, the nearness of the Gibbs and Webb families' residences and the school and churches implies a continuity of outlook, order, and personal philosophy. The marriage of Emily and George at the Congregational Church generates a joyous occasion that is neither unexpected nor challenged by family or neighbors. Disorder in the community tends toward gossip about Simon

Stimson's alcoholism, a pervasive human flaw that disrupts families and towns worldwide. Wilder overrides disunity by emphasizing compassion for Simon, rescue of Emily from a near street accident with a hardware store wagon, high school elections, baseball games, after-school chores and allowances, and idle chats at the drugstore over strawberry phosphates. On the female front, the morning visiting of Julia and Myrtle stresses a similar menu of beans and the feeding of chickens, a type of fowl that lives in a tight flock much as the citizens of Grover's Corners cultivate the sense of a "grove," a symbol of strength in unity.

The conclusion of the play at the cemetery maintains the oneness of local people, particularly in suffering and death. As the living console each other at Emily's graveside and discuss others who have died, spirits gaze out on human life from the perspective of permanent separation from earth throughout eternity. No longer mortal, Emily can look dispassionately on George's prostration over her grave and muse on the child care of her four-year-old son. Wilder implies that the shedding of earthly strivings and troubles relieves mortals of unnecessary turmoil and awards each a well deserved serenity.

Related Reading

Isabel Allende, *The House of the Spirits*
Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth*
Robert Frost, "Departmental" and "Out, Out—"
Kaye Gibbons, *Ellen Foster*
James Houston and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar*
Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*
Barbara Kingsolver, *The Bean Trees* and *Animal Dreams*
Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology*
Walter Dean Myers, *The Glory Field*
Conrad Richter, *The Light in the Forest*
Edward Arlington Robinson, "Richard Cory" and "Mr. Flood's Party"
Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife*
John Van Druten, *Mama's Bank Account*
Yoko Kawashima Watkins, *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*

Cross-Curricular Sources

For related reading and more information about *Our Town*, philosophical drama, death, family struggles, shifts in economy and social status, World War I, and New Hampshire history consult these sources:

Audiocassette

Ordinary People, Recorded Books

CD-ROM

Contemporary Authors, Gale Research

Multimedia

We're a Family, Sunburst

Novels

Black Boy
A Day No Pigs Would Die
The Light in the Forest
So Far from the Bamboo Grove

Plays

The Glass Menagerie
Harvey
Mama's Bank Account
You Can't Take It With You

Poems

"The Ex-Basketball Player"
"Mr. Flood's Party"
"Richard Cory"
Spoon River Anthology

Posters

American Authors of the Twentieth Century, Knowledge Unlimited

Reference Works

Theatre, National Textbook

Videos

The Glass Menagerie
The Miracle Worker
Our Town
Places in the Heart
Queen
Steel Magnolias
To Kill a Mockingbird

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Wilder's *Our Town* should include these aspects:

Themes

- family
- striving
- change
- loss
- love
- memories
- social status
- disorder
- regret
- acceptance

Motifs

- liberation through death
- honoring the past
- family reintegration
- failed ambitions
- middle class values

Meaning Study

Below are significant words, phrases, or sentences from the play. Explain each in context. Act and page numbers pinpoint each entry so you can re-read the passage in which it appears.

1. It's a fact! Dr. Gibbs is never so happy as when he's at Antietam or Gettysburg. (Act I, p. 20)
(Wilder implies the predilection of males for war in the glorification of the Civil War. Frank Gibbs reveals his fantasies about combat in visits to two horrendous battle sites. The decisive battle of Antietam in Sharpsburg, Maryland, on September 17, 1862, demonstrated the strength of the Union army in stopping General Robert E. Lee's advance on Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy. The battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 3-4, 1863, became a turning point in the war because of the North's halting of Lee's advance beyond the Potomac river and into Northern territory.)
2. Grover's Corners ... let me see ... Grover's Corners lies on the old Pleistocene granite of the Appalachian range. (Act I, p. 21)
(A symbol of stability, the granite underpinnings of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, on the Appalachian Mountain range surged upward in the Cenozoic period. During the era, glaciers carved out mountains and valleys in New England.)

3. A shelf of Devonian basalt crosses it with vestiges of Mesozoic shale, and some sandstone outcroppings; but that's all more recent: two hundred, three hundred million years old. (Act I, p. 22)
(The description of softer types of minerals suggests Wilder's views of the various temperaments and ambitions of local citizens. The playwright makes a wry joke out of more "recent" history, which includes a geological era when dinosaurs developed and became extinct.)
4. Yes ... anthropological data: Early Amerindian stock. Cotahatchee tribes ... no evidence before the tenth century of this era ... hm ... now entirely disappeared ... possible traces in three families. (Act I, p. 22)
(Wilder continues satirizing human aspirations for controlling the earth by reminding readers that native Americans dominated New England for some 700 years before European diseases and conquests destroyed aboriginal control and wiped out whole tribes.)
5. Migration toward the end of the seventeenth century of English brachiocephalic blue-eyed stock ... for the most part. Since then some Slav and Mediterranean— (Act I, p. 22).
(Wilder introduces racial newcomers to New Hampshire, the northern European ancestry marked by a short, broad cranium and caucasian coloring. Following English colonization, Slavic and Mediterranean immigration introduced Semitic traits and darker skin and hair.)
6. Is no one in town aware of— (Act I, p. 25)
(Wilder interrupts the action with the question of an aggressive, hostile individual to the rear of the audience who refers to social issues in an industrial state. After raising a rhetorical question about injustice and inequality, he withdraws, a suggestion of the complacency of New Englanders in the era following the Russian Revolution and the spread of Marxism.)
7. But those other things—you're right, ma'am,—there ain't much.—*Robinson Crusoe* and the Bible; and Handel's "Largo," we all know that; and Whistler's "Mother"—those are just about as far as we go. (Act I, p. 26)
*(Mr. Webb dismisses cultural aspirations in Grover's Corners with mention of the Bible, an English novel about a shipwrecked maroon, and two familiar creations—a universally known selection from German/British composer George Frideric Handel's largo from the opera *Serse* (1738) and a sterile, monochromatic painting that suggests the home-centered attainments of local people.)*

8. We're kind of interested in this because some scientific fellas have found a way of painting all that reading matter with a glue—a silicate glue—that'll make it keep a thousand—two thousand years. (Act I, p. 33)
(Wilder continues satirizing human hopes for longevity by mentioning silicate glue made from a hard, glassy mineral found in quartz, sand, and opal. The purpose of the glue is to shield reading matter in a time capsule for one or possibly two millennia.)
9. George crosses the stage to his own home, bewildered and crestfallen. (Act II, p. 62)
(Wilder stresses the strength of tradition in inhibiting George from talking with his future bride on their wedding day. His rejection accords power to women, who supervise nuptials and perpetuate superstitions and customs.)
10. And genealogists come up from Boston—get paid by city people for looking up their ancestors. (Act III, p. 87)
(Wilder's satire continues to skewer mortals for their interest in lineage, the brief strands of human family that can be charted on family trees.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important. Be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the play.

Structure

1. Why does the action conclude at the cemetery?
(The play examines stages of life and concludes with the death of Emily Webb Gibbs, a central character who has grown up, gone to school, and fallen in love with her neighbor George. They marry, live on a farm, conceive two children, and part at her death in the last act. In view of her grieving husband, she learns to accept death at the urging of her mother-in-law, a family friend, and the former church organist, all of whom encourage her not to relive the joys of life.)

Exposition

2. How does Act I begin?
(The stage manager arrives on an empty, partially lighted stage. He sets a leisurely pace and sentimental tone by sketching the confines of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, with rudimentary furniture. He reveals the dramatic time frame as well as facts about location, religious makeup, institutions, people, ancestry, and citizenry. His casual inclusion of various spokespersons leads the audience into the exposition of major characters and the plot.)

Humor

3. What humorous advice does Mr. Webb give George about marriage?
(When George enters the Webb home early on the morning of the wedding, Mr. Webb offers his future son-in-law advice in a roundabout manner. Stating the words of his own father, Mr. Webb notes, "Start out early showing who's boss." His aggressive, no-nonsense approach toward the subjugation of wives concludes with a disclaimer, "So I took the opposite of my father's advice and I've been happy ever since." He teases George by changing the thrust of his wisdom, "And let that be a lesson to you, George, never to ask advice on personal matters.")

Characterization

4. Which characters receive advice from Julia Gibbs?
(A natural busybody, Mrs. Gibbs bustles about domestic chores, tsk-tsking over Doc's loss of sleep while delivering twins and his lack of interest in vacations. She complains about George's preoccupation with baseball, soothes Rebecca's concerns about her blue gingham dress and her tears on George's wedding day, settles sibling squabbles, and feeds the children breakfast. Her compliments balance admonitions, such as, "You look real nice, Rebecca. Pick up your feet." Mrs. Gibbs extends concern to Myrtle Webb's cold, Louella Soames' safety after choir practice, Simon Stimson's alcoholism, and Mrs. Fairchild's locked doors. Even in death, Mrs. Gibbs mutters reminders to Simon Stimson that he seems fretful.)

Action

5. How does Dr. Gibbs admonish George?
(Dr. Gibbs mixes shame and reward to redirect George's enthusiasm from baseball to chopping wood for his mother. Doc draws George's attention to his mother's work load and to her decision to give up asking for help by doing the chores herself. Passing George a handkerchief, Doc makes mental note of his son's tender heart and adds, "I've decided to raise your spending money twenty-five cents a week." Doc sets the discussion into proper perspective by summarizing their transaction, "Not, of course, for chopping wood for your mother, because that's a present you give her, but because you're getting older.")

Interpretation

6. How does the stage manager influence interpretation?
(The stage manager inserts critical commentary at crucial moments by controlling the flow of action, summoning and dismissing characters in a godlike manner, and claiming the audience's attention. At the beginning of Act II, he notes, "You've got to love life to have life, and you've got to have life to love life." His paradoxical remark prepares the audience for Emily's joys and sorrows.)

As a preface to the final act, the stage manager again sums up: "There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being." He describes the gradual separation of mortals from life as a "weaning," which alleviates the desire for advancement, pleasure, and love. The ensuing action justifies his philosophy when Emily arrives at the cemetery, tests the wisdom of reliving a day of her life, and breaks down in frustration.

The stage manager concludes the play with a folksy note that the planet strains "to make something of itself." He invokes the slumber that will refresh local citizens after their daily struggle and wishes the audience a good night. The final remark reminds readers both of their daily rest and their eternal rest.)

Stage Convention

7. How does the stage manager extend his involvement?

(At a crucial point when young George and Emily are examining their feelings about each other, they enter the soda shop, where the stage manager plays the part of Mr. Morgan, the owner. His offhand question about Emily's tears leads George to explain that she was nearly hit by a hardware store wagon. Mr. Morgan pursues the conversation, despite the fact that the two teenagers need to talk undisturbed.

When George reveals that he has no money to pay for strawberry phosphates, Mr. Morgan acknowledges the boy's standing in the community and promises to trust him for ten years. Light humor eases the boy-girl tensions. The scene barely ends when the stage manager returns as the minister at George and Emily's wedding. He comments that even at a "good wedding" there is confusion in the emotions of participants.

By shifting roles, the stage manager directs character thought and audience reflection as he sees fit. The device of the intrusive narrator produces a tighter control of action than drama usually allows. The results are effective—the audience receives a unified, intuitive view of life in Grover's Corners and some insight into universal needs.)

Theme

8. How does Mr. Webb answer questions about social issues?

(In an unusual exchange between pseudo-audience and characters, the stage manager orchestrates a question-and-answer period with the newspaper editor, who serves as community spokesman. The first question involves drinking, which Webb downplays as a minor problem for farmhands and "one or two town drunks." The comment marginalizes drinkers as outsiders rather than acknowledges alcoholism as a pervasive social ill.

The more pointed questions about inequality of social classes leads Webb to espouse the democratic ideal of free enterprise from the perspective of the Republican party. He notes that "we're all hunting like everybody else" for a fair system and that ultimately the town does its best "to help those that can't help themselves." He concludes, "Those that can we leave alone.")

Tone

9. What is Wilder's tone?

(Wilder takes a tender, forgiving approach to human foibles. When Emily realizes that human beings never fully appreciate each other while they have the opportunity, she weeps with frustration. Simon Stimson asserts that people are self-centered and callous to each other's feelings, an appropriate summation from so unhappy a mortal. He concludes that human behavior is "ignorance and blindness."

George's prostration at his wife's grave leads the spirits to conclude that living people don't understand. The author rounds out the scene with a return to daily trivia—and a view of the stars, which never tire of their "journeys in the sky." By ending the play from a celestial perspective, Wilder indicates the natural scheme of things. Although life may not receive appreciation while the living grasp it, the situation is as nature intended.)

Mood

10. What does Wilder suggest about fairness?

(The play struggles with the question of the fair allotment of days to each life. Simon ends his span by choice after wasting time in drunkenness. Emily, a young farm wife and mother, dies at 26 with everything to live for. Mrs. Gibbs dies at Rebecca's home in Canton, Ohio, leaving Doc sad and alone for 20 years. Each has a different perspective on the fairness of life.

Wilder's depiction of small-town life stresses that all people should make use of time each day. As Marcus Aurelius once counselled the Romans, "Live each day as though it were your last." As proof of wisdom and folly, the author describes people who thrive on daily associations and those who waste earthly life. The time in the cemetery stretches to eternity, contrasting the few joys of being alive. Fairness exists only in the attitude of human beings toward the meaning of their allotted span of days.)

How Language Works

Wilder expresses his attitude toward characters and themes through affectionate remarks:

1. To a scolding of chickens, Mrs. Gibbs adds, "Don't be so scared. Nobody's going to hurt you."
2. In boyish attraction to Emily, George suggests, "We might work out a kinda telegraph from your window to mine."
3. Mrs. Soames, a sour choir member, states her view of her husband's scowl, "You'd think we'd been to a dance the way the menfolk carry on."
4. George, in antipathy with formality, grouses, "I wish a fellow could get married without all that marching up and down."
5. Emily, in appreciation of her life, observes, "It goes so fast."

Across the Curriculum

Religion

1. Discuss the stage manager's belief that saints and poets are the only people who appreciate earthly life. Comment on qualities of perception and understanding that saints share with poets.
2. Comment on the metaphysical etymology of heliotrope, which comes from the Greek "to turn toward the sun." How does the word history illuminate the final scene at the cemetery?

Research

1. Create a bulletin board listing places mentioned in the play. Include the Appalachian range, Babylon, Greece and Rome, Lake Sunapee, Lake Winnepesaukee, White Mountains, Mount Washington, Mount Monadnock, Contoocook, Vermont, Canada, Boston, and Peterborough, Jaffrey, Dublin, and Concord, New Hampshire; also, Buffalo, Woodlawn, Albany, and Brooklyn, New York; Paris, France; and Canton, Ohio. Locate

Massachusetts Tech, areas settled by Canucks and Poles, the battles of Antietam and Gettysburg, and the major French battle-grounds of World War I. Determine whether Hamilton College is real or fictional. Cite the sources of your information.

2. Divide the class into small groups to list identifiable parts of the play and to place them on a Freytag diagram. Include exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion. Why does the author return Emily to her 12th birthday? Which acts reflect on her roles as a sister, daughter, student, class secretary/treasurer, girlfriend, wife, daughter-in-law, farm worker, spirit, neighbor, bride, and mother of an infant and a four-year-old son?
3. Survey the critical response to *Our Town* as a stage and radio play, movie, Broadway musical, opera, and winner of a Pulitzer Prize. Express how current attitudes toward drama have changed. Discuss the play as a classroom tool and as an introduction to Thornton Wilder's philosophy of the predictable tides in human life.

Gender Studies

1. Characterize male-female relationships in the play, particularly husband/wife, younger sister/older brother, male doctor/female patient, father/daughter, mother/son, mother-in-law/son-in-law, male clerk/female patron, male and female cousins, male choir director and organist/female singer, male and female high school students, male and female spirits, and boyfriend/girlfriend.
2. Compose a short outline for an oral report on these female roles: Mrs. Soames, Miss Foster, Mrs. Gibbs, Emily, Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Goruslawski, Grandmother Wentworth, Aunt Norah, Cousin Hester Wilcox, Mrs. Stimson, and Rebecca. Determine which roles have the greatest influence on family structure and values.

Reading

1. Read aloud other literary descriptions of neighbors. Include Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, James Houston and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *A Farewell to*

Manzanar, Pliny's "The Eruption of Vesuvius," Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, Hal Borland's *When the Legends Die*, Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Cynthia Rylant's *Missing May*, Robert Newton Peck's *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, Yoko Kawashima Watkins' *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*, N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Toni Cade Bambara's "Blues Ain't No Mockin' Bird," T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*, Kaye Gibbons' *Ellen Foster*, Walter Dean Myers' *The Glory Field*, and Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. Discuss examples of cooperation and shared values, for example, tribal solidarity in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, shared work in *The Glory Field*, or aid to refugee families in *The Bean Trees*.

Literature

1. With a group, list and explain significant literary details. Include these: manual-training class, fly in the face of custom, patent device, Western Hemisphere, overshoes, savant, evangelist, three-day blow, "Largo," *Robinson Crusoe*, *Constitution*, peck, Bible, William Shakespeare, Whistler's "Mother," Canuck, social injustice, basalt, forty winks, gingham, silicate glue, "Art Thou Weary, Art Thou Languid," Congregational, William Jennings Bryan, pantomime, superstition, Solar System, Unitarian, heliotrope, Devonian, hollyhocks, highboy, burdock, "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds," Baptist, Mesozoic, shale, tableau, Mendelssohn, Amerindian, *New York Times*, Cotahatchee, lumbago, brachiocephalic, mountain laurel, genealogist, Protestant, vote indirect, Slav, likker, Louisiana Purchase, industrial inequality, Mediterranean, catcalling, "The March from Lohengrin," Handel, postal district, sandstone, separator, livery, meteorological, hitching post, potato weather, Daughters of the American Revolution, vicious circle, mean precipitation, fossils, Catholic, butter-nut, pince-nez, Pleistocene, "Wedding March," appendix, Methodist, sentinel, trellis, strawberry phosphate, sacrament, proscenium pillar, Napoleon, and Presbyterian. Categorize items under key headings, for example, objects, aphorism, titles, idiom, stage jargon, organizations, and historical events.
2. Explain to a small group why the family situation before a wedding causes younger peo-

ple to be nervous and silly and older people to reflect on their own nuptials. Suggest ways that the Gibbs and Webb families can help George and Emily adjust to a new home on the farm. Name subjects that the minister should cover in pre-marital counseling, for example, sharing chores, developing independence from parents, or financial and family planning.

3. Contrast minor characters in terms of action, commentary, and significance. Include Simon Stimson, Dr. Ferguson, Mrs. Soames, the minister, Mrs. Goruslawski, Joel, Rebecca, Miss Foster, Professor Willard, Wally, Howie Newsome, Si Crowell, Sam Craig, and Constable Bill Warren. Which characters are stereotypes? Which seem like characterizations of real people? Which have the most influence on the action?
4. Write a theme in which you explain the purpose of a minor incident in the action. Choose from these: Simon Stimson hangs himself, Shorty Hawkins watches trains go by, Emily is elected class secretary-treasurer, an antiques dealer offers \$350 for an heirloom highboy, an evangelist warns town drunks about their behavior, builders of the new hospital name it after Doc Gibbs, the Sentinel announces war news, the bank cornerstone contains a copy of Shakespeare's plays, Uncle Luke chooses George as his heir to the farm, Emily's baby is born motherless, flooding threatens Grover's Corners, Jane Trowbridge is engaged, and Mrs. Gibbs' body is brought from Canton, Ohio, to be buried in Grover's Corners.
5. Compile and discuss a list of images from the story that appeal to the five senses, for instance, "Come out and smell the heliotrope in the moonlight," "There are a few lights on: Shorty Hawkins, down at the depot, has just watched the Albany train go by," "She almost got run over by that hardware-store wagon," "All those bean poles and pea vines: drenched," "Mr. Webb's cuttin' his lawn over there," "Breakfast is just as good as any other meal and I won't have you gobbling like wolves," "Chew that bacon good and slow," and "Here, chick, chick, chick."

6. Suggest ways this play could be written as a novel. Flesh out characters in the action, such as Wally, Rebecca's husband, the Cartwrights, Emily's infant, Simon Stimson, Dr. Ferguson, Miss Foster, Carey Craig, Uncle Luke, Grandmother Wentworth, and Mrs. Goruslawski. Create more realism in the text by displaying alcoholism, snobbery toward Polish residents, Howie Newsome's change of jobs, Constable Bill Warren's heroic rescue, Grandmother Wentworth's heirlooms, Wally's departure for boy scout camp, Joe Crowell's role in the war in France, George's struggle to earn a living by farming, graduation day, a Gibbs family trip to Gettysburg, operation of the blanket factory, and the return of Mrs. Gibbs' body from Canton, Ohio.

Math and Computer Art

1. Use internal data, make a time line of events in the play. Emphasize the period of time that George and Emily are acquainted and the long relationship of the Gibbs and Webb families. Insert specific dates, such as the birth of the Goruslawski twins, Doc Gibbs' death, the wedding, pitching for the high school baseball team, publication of the Sentinel, or the birth of Emily and George's son.
2. Draw an animated television or Internet advertisement for *Our Town* emphasizing the crucial role of the stage manager. Indicate the importance of omniscience to the unfolding events and to flashbacks. Comment on the absence of suspense.

Social Studies

1. Compose a short speech in which you describe the function of each family member. Comment on advice that fathers and mothers give their unmarried children. Note the family response to Wally's untimely death. List behaviors that cause harsh words, quarrels, or scolding, such as hurriedly chewing food, not cutting wood, throwing soap, or refusing to wear the blue gingham dress. Summarize the role of Sam Craig at Emily's burial or of Uncle Luke at George's graduation from high school. Include such minor family figures as Cousin Hester Wilcox, Aunt Norah, Joe Crowell, the insurance man in Canton, Aunt Carrie, Miss Foster's marriage to the man in

Concord, Mrs. Stimson, Joel and his father, and Grandmother Wentworth.

2. Explain in a theme how the author portrays community history. Why are school graduations, births, deaths, baseball games, and local milestones important to a town that dates to the 1670s? What significant events in New Hampshire or New England history are essential to a history of the fictional town of Grover's Corners, particularly colonization, native American life, and the American Revolution? What items enclosed in the bank cornerstone would express this history to later generations?
3. Draw a Venn diagram representing the parallel lifestyles and activities of the Webb and the Gibbs families. Note the aspects they share, for example, residence in town, prestigious fathers, homebody mothers, children in school, gardening and cooking, aspirations, and loss. List their differences, particularly professions, styles of discipline, deaths, husband/wife relationships, and problems in rearing their children.

Law

1. Outline changes in American law that altered society, particularly the right to vote for women and minorities and formal controls on immigration. How would the play change if Emily had chosen to go to college and become a lawyer, writer, or manufacturer? How would a wife's trip to Paris threaten a man absorbed in Civil War battlegrounds?

Psychology

1. Lead a debate about the author's deliberate removal of suspense from the play. Comment on the purpose of timelessness, reflection, nostalgia, vague references to waiting and patience, and the supernatural conversation of spirits at the graveyard.
2. Analyze character interaction by simplifying the events and meaning of a single scene. For example, give a detailed sketch of the constable's concern for local residents, Mrs. Soames' dislike of alcoholism, George's father's scolding him for neglecting his chores, flooding, the teasing of the groom,

George reflecting on the school election, Emily awaiting the wedding, singers departing choir practice, Mrs. Gibbs' longing to see Paris, Wally's sudden death, and Doc Gibbs' return from a late-night delivery of Polish twins.

3. Describe in a short speech the effects of isolation, anticipation, disease, frustration, loss, failed ambitions, parenthood, inheritance, wedlock, overwork, war, education, suicide, and alcoholism on characters in the play. How do the stage manager and other characters ennoble people who appear to have failed? Why does the playwright suggest that the dead have something important to look forward to? What could the spirits be waiting for?
4. Discuss with a group the theme of family love. Why do the characters omit mention of God and love? How does "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds" typify Christian community? How does George display his affection for Emily? How does Emily's father help her overcome fear of matrimony? What do the mothers give their children in addition to breakfast? Why does George visit his future father-in-law the morning of the wedding?

Cinema

1. Draw settings for a film or outdoor drama of *Our Town*. Show the placement of actors, music, costumes, props, sound effects, and lighting. Include classroom discussions of how to stage the wedding and cemetery scenes, family breakfasts, chance meetings on Main Street, choir practice at the Congregational Church, a suicide, the school election, scholarly data about Grover's Corners, the effects of World War I on the community, feeding chickens, birth of twins, answering questions from the audience, and strawberry phosphates at Mr. Morgan's drugstore.
2. Describe aspects of the play that are more suited to radio, film, tableau, illustration, and pageant than to stage, for example, scholarly background about Grover's Corners, a meeting of spirits at the graveyard, the birth of twins before dawn, George's pitching for the baseball team, interest in Antietam, George's

grief for Emily, and the publication of the *Sentinel*.

3. View various films featuring village and community life, e. g. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Ramblin' Rose*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Ordinary People*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Beloved*, *Cimarron*, *Except for Me and Thee*, *One True Thing*, *A Thousand Acres*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Color Purple*, *Little Women*, *Ellen Foster*, *The Friendly Persuasion*, *The Member of the Wedding*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *O Pioneers!*, *Cross Creek*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *Places in the Heart*. Discuss why filmmakers focus on the effects of birth, love, and death on ordinary people.

Science and Health

1. Present a two-column chart detailing symptoms, treatment, and permanent handicap as a result of pneumonia or a burst appendix. Explain how both illnesses have become less life-threatening in the modern era.
2. List possible complications during the birth of twins, particularly anoxia and premature birth.
3. Propose ways of mothering Emily's baby to supply essential bonding with a female parent.

Language

1. Form a team of readers to tape expanded, imaginative episodes of *Our Town* that capture New England pragmatism, family life, and vernacular, such as being a "mite nervous" and the pronunciation of "li-lacks." Create scenes in which the Gibbs family welcomes the newlyweds at a reception, Miss Foster proposes that Emily go to college, Wally and Rebecca become friends, Simon Stimson loses his church job, Emily campaigns for class secretary/treasurer, Grandmother Wentworth purchases a highboy, Sam Craig requests information about Emily's death, Joe's body returns from France for a hero's funeral, Constable Bill Warren accuses George of smoking, and Editor Webb lauds the star baseball player in the *Sentinel*.
2. Define drama as a form of communication. Discuss how Thornton Wilder dismays and disappoints conventional playgoers with his spare stage and violation of the fourth wall

and how he makes up for the barren backdrop with extensive information about his fictional town. Express what you learn about the town's residents, dialect, school, history, size, location, economy, manufacturing, settlers, religion, and politics.

Art, Costume Design, and Music

1. Using desktop publishing or other media, design a layout for a cemetery or high school graduation, a banner announcing the return of heroes from the war in France or warning of flooding, a business card for Miss Foster's husband or for a genealogist, a lesson in table manners for teenagers or in directing a small wedding in the Congregational Church, words and music for "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds" or "Art Thou Weary, Art Thou Languid?" first aid for pneumonia or appendicitis, an epitaph for Wally or Mrs. Soames, a list of items needed for tending the trellis or for planting beans or heliotrope, a uniform and badge for the constable or for a boy scout, a chart of prehistoric periods, an extended definition of flashback or nostalgia, an advertisement for an antique highboy or for a patent device to stabilizing the the level of water in a trough, a wall chart of the train schedule to major towns in New York and Ohio, and a sketch of Main Street or of Emily's wedding gown.
2. Create a bulletin board illustrating visual scenes from the story. Include the shaping of Emily's grave, the passing of the train through town, Doc's return from delivering twins, teasing the groom at a wedding, questioning the stage manager about Grover's Corners, the delivery of milk and newspapers, shelling beans, escaping a wagon accident near Mr. Morgan's drugstore, reporting on flooding, doing homework, rescuing a man from freezing, and playing baseball.

Drama and Speech

1. Write several conversations that are only implied, such as exchanges among the spirits concerning their memories of life, George's immersion in baseball, Emily and George's expectation of a second child, Sam Craig's grief at his aunt's death, Mrs. Webb's disdain of Emily's youthful egotism, Mr. Morgan's trust

in George, Mrs. Goruslawski's delight in newborn twins, Dr. Ferguson's concern for Simon Stimson's alcoholism, Constable Bill Warren's heroic act of saving a Polish Town resident from freezing, the building of a new hospital, and comments on recent deaths. Act out your dialogue for an audio or video taping.

2. Describe aloud the multiple purposes of the Stage Manager. What clues suggest that he is the voice of Thornton Wilder? What does the Stage Manager add to the play's atmosphere and tone? Why does he speak in a relaxed vernacular? Why does he seem on a first-name basis with audience members?
3. Discuss your reaction to Grover's Corners. What role would you play in the fictional town, for example, train engineer, supervisor at the blanket factory, high school principal, or grave digger? Which characters would you choose for friends or family? How would you react to an opportunity to leave town to fight in a war or to attend engineering classes at Massachusetts Tech? What advice would you give George on attending college or preparing himself for the role of husband and father? Would you choose farm life over town life? marriage over living alone? professional over working class? male or female? respected citizen or immigrant?
4. Role-play the part of the undertaker helping George decide on an appropriate funeral, burial site, casket, monument, and epitaph for Emily. Contrast honor to Emily with the town's response toward Simon Stimson's suicide, Julia's death from pneumonia in Canton, Ohio, Wally's sudden demise at scout camp, or Joe Crowell's death in war.

Composition

1. Make an oral report on the theme of appreciation. Summarize lines that urge the viewer to enjoy life and to examine its fleeting beauty in everyday affairs. Explain the attraction of the birthday that Emily relives a year before she enters her teens.

2. Compose a first person account of Emily's arrival in the cemetery. Make a list of questions for her family and friends to ask, such as the cause of her death, the children she leaves behind, George's financial and emotional condition, and remaining family members who mourn Emily and her mother-in-law. Append a brief description of the graveyard and its residents from Emily's point of view.
3. Compose an extended definition of regret in which you compare Emily to the focal character in the book of Ruth, John Updike's "The Ex-Basketball Player," Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," Robert Frost's "Out, Out—" and "Departmental," Yoko Kawashima Watkins' *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*, Robert Newton Peck's *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, August Wilson's *Fences*, or Edward Arlington Robinson's "Mr. Flood's Party."
4. Compose an informal essay on writing drama. List situations you would like to describe in a teleplay, scenario, tableau, stage musical, or outdoor drama. Explain to a small group, how your cast of characters would present flashbacks, exposition, symbolism, and universality.

Education

1. Compose an introduction to drama for use in the classroom. Explain how the stage manager's conversational method impacts the interaction onstage, controls the order of events, and allows flexibility in dramatic flow.
2. Propose sources of sex education and family planning for Emily and George before they marry. Consider books, DVDs, charts, and medical or religious counseling.

Alternate Assessment

1. List in chronological order and describe significant events connected with town history. Mention the time capsule for the new bank, the naming of the hospital, a hero's death during World War I, Amerindian residents, the publication of the *Sentinel*, a local scholar's graduation from Massachusetts Tech, Polish Town, burials in the 1670s, regular train service, and the flood.
2. List events from the play that express strong attitudes toward kinship, romance, hope, obedience, parenthood, marriage, the future, memories, education, nostalgia, grief, and loss. Indicate Wilder's apparent philosophy on each subject.
3. Compose brief definitions of drama, flashback, and irony as they apply to *Our Town*. What changes in the plot would create a conventional dramatic presentation? Why did Wilder avoid those conventions?
4. Summarize scenes that depict conflict, particularly gossip about an alcoholic, the separation between long-term citizens and immigrants in Polish Town, Emily's confusion about being in the cemetery, George's grief for his wife, Mrs. Webb's complaints about wood chopping, concern for teen smoking, George's disrespect of wedding day traditions, female suppression, and suicide.

Vocabulary

Choose words from the list below that complete each citation from the play.

- | | | |
|--------------|-------------------|------------------|
| A. alacrity | F. heliotrope | K. proscenium |
| B. citified | G. indication | L. sentinel |
| C. constable | H. lugubriousness | M. tableau |
| D. cynicism | I. mite | N. trellises |
| E. exertion | J. pantomimes | O. unobtrusively |

- _____ 1. They're all getting _____, that's the trouble with them.
- _____ 2. Suddenly three members of his baseball team appear by the right _____ and start whistling and catcalling to him.
- _____ 3. George returns reluctantly to the kitchen and _____ putting on overshoes.
- _____ 4. Sam Craig enters left, wiping his forehead from the _____.
- _____ 5. The children rise, seize their books and dash out through the _____.
- _____ 6. Two ladders have been pushed onto the stage; they serve as _____ of the second story in the Gibbs and Webb houses.
- _____ 7. In those days our newspaper come out twice a week—the Grover's Corners _____.
- _____ 8. A girl's apt to be a _____ nervous on her wedding day.
- _____ 9. The stage is suddenly arrested into silent _____.
- _____ 10. He now looks at the audience for the first time, with a warm smile that removes any sense of _____ from the next line.
- _____ 11. When they speak their tone is matter-of-fact, without sentimentality and, above all, without _____.
- _____ 12. Mr. Webb comes along Main Street, where he meets _____ Warren.
- _____ 13. This is Mrs. Gibbs's garden. Corn ... peas ... beans ... hollyhocks ... _____ ... and a lot of burdock.
- _____ 14. The stage manager goes off, _____, right.
- _____ 15. Mr. Webb: With _____. "Oh, yes; oh, yes."

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Multiple Choice (30 points)

Identify the following characters.

- _____ 1. George falls
- at Emily's feet.
 - in a collision with a hardware store wagon.
 - on a battlefield in France.
 - while chasing a baseball.
- _____ 2. Both George and Emily hesitate
- to pursue an education at Hamilton College.
 - to run for the high school election.
 - to enter the church on their wedding day.
 - to seek Mr. Webb's advice about buying a farm.
- _____ 3. George suffers from
- alcoholism.
 - motherly coddling.
 - an inflamed appendix.
 - church gossip.
- _____ 4. Dr. Gibbs is sleepy after
- delivering twins.
 - attending Julia on her deathbed.
 - rescuing a freezing man.
 - rains flood the river.
- _____ 5. Uncle Luke plans to
- sell the highboy for \$350.
 - go to Paris.
 - study Antietam.
 - leave his farm to George.
- _____ 6. At the cemetery, Mrs. Gibbs watches the funeral of
- a boy scout.
 - the church choir director.
 - a new mother.
 - a brother from Buffalo.
- _____ 7. George lies about the reason
- the wagon runs away.
 - his girlfriend is crying.
 - he quit the baseball team.
 - he leaves a watch in payment.
- _____ 8. Mrs. Gibbs complains that her son thinks only about
- chopping wood.
 - his allowance.
 - grief.
 - baseball.
- _____ 9. Emily's mother-in-law urges her to select
- a birthday.
 - the day her son was born.
 - an unimportant day.
 - her wedding day.
- _____ 10. The groom comforts his mother by promising
- to spend Thursday nights with her.
 - to buy a farm near Grover's Corners.
 - to chop wood for \$.50.
 - to stop annoying Rebecca at breakfast.
- _____ 11. Mrs. Gibbs receives a visit from
- Sam Craig.
 - an antiques dealer.
 - Constable Bill.
 - Miss Corcoran.
- _____ 12. Mrs. Webb is not sure she feels well enough
- to attend Jane's wedding.
 - to help string beans.
 - to sing.
 - to go to Canton.
- _____ 13. The cornerstone of the new bank will contain
- a list of people buried in the 1670s.
 - words to a hymn.
 - a copy of *Robinson Crusoe*.
 - the *U. S. Constitution*.
- _____ 14. Knowledge of the Babylonians consists of
- the number of people who lived there.
 - copies of wheat contracts.
 - epitaphs.
 - genealogy.
- _____ 15. When Emily explains her boyfriend's faults, he decides to
- change.
 - ignore her.
 - name her faults.
 - go to State Agricultural College.

Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

Part II: Character Identification (20 points)

Which character makes the following statements:

- _____ 1. I'm celebrating because I've got a friend.
- _____ 2. The strain's so bad that every sixteen hours everybody lies down and gets a rest.
- _____ 3. I think it's my duty to make plans for you to get a real rest and change.
- _____ 4. I hate to supervise when a young person is taken.
- _____ 5. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.
- _____ 6. If you see my boy smoking cigarettes, just give him a word, will you?
- _____ 7. That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance.
- _____ 8. I always thought about you as one of the chief people I thought about.
- _____ 9. There's something downright cruel about sending our girls out into marriage this way.
- _____ 10. There you see your mother—getting up early; cooking meals all day long; washing and ironing.

Part III: Identification (10 points)

Explain the significance of each term below:

1. Professor Willard
2. Louisiana Purchase
3. cement drinking fountain
4. blankets
5. french toast

Part IV: Essay Questions (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Account for the marriage of neighbors.
2. Defend Simon's privacy.
3. Compare the stage manager in his various roles.
4. Express the author's attitude toward change.
5. Describe the circumstances that precede the wedding.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: True/False (15 points)

Mark each statement either T for true or F if any part is false:

- _____ 1. George receives a \$.25 raise in his allowance.
- _____ 2. Emily dies giving birth to her first child.
- _____ 3. Mr. Webb declares that Grover's Corners doesn't have much culture.
- _____ 4. The residents are mostly Canuck and Polish in origin.
- _____ 5. Constable Warren dies saving flood victims.
- _____ 6. The team loses Si Crowell, its best pitcher.
- _____ 7. Sam returns from Buffalo to attend a funeral.
- _____ 8. Mr. Gibbs thinks that only city people lock doors.
- _____ 9. George soothes Emily's fears when he leaves for college.
- _____ 10. Mrs. Soames recalls Emily's lovely wedding.
- _____ 11. Mr. Webb urges the groom to conceal money matters from the bride.
- _____ 12. Dr. Gibbs adds Emily's twins to the population.
- _____ 13. The \$350 legacy buys a highboy for Emily and George's new home.
- _____ 14. George lies to the soda clerk about Emily's tears.
- _____ 15. Emily outlines George's faults.

Part II: Matching (15 points)

Match these descriptions with one of the names listed below. You will use some answers more than once.

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| _____ 1. hates to supervise the grave digging | A. Cartwrights |
| _____ 2. refuses to see George | B. Doc |
| _____ 3. hangs himself | C. Emily |
| _____ 4. receives an album for a birthday gift | D. George |
| _____ 5. dies of pneumonia | E. Joe Crowell |
| _____ 6. gets a scholarship to Massachusetts Tech | F. Joe Stoddard |
| _____ 7. is a Boy Scout | G. Mrs. Gibbs |
| _____ 8. owns a blanket factory | H. Mr. Webb |
| _____ 9. refuses to vacation in Europe | I. Professor Williard |
| _____ 10. offers meteorological data | J. Simon |
| _____ 11. wants to build a telegraph | K. Wally |
| _____ 12. makes a speech in New York State | L. the twins |
| _____ 13. celebrates February 11 twice | |
| _____ 14. chooses musical notes for an epitaph | |
| _____ 15. believes that girls are naturally good | |

Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

Part III: Multiple Choice (30 points)

- _____ 1. Mr. Morgan manages
A. the Grover's Corners grocery
B. the *Grover's Corners Sentinel*
C. the drug store
D. the cemetery
- _____ 2. Doc Gibbs delivers
A. papers with Joe Crowell
B. Julia's highboy
C. Emily's wedding dress
D. twins in Polish Town
- _____ 3. Howie Newsome is
A. a baseball player
B. a grave digger
C. a milk man
D. a farmer
- _____ 4. Mrs. Webb is adamant about
A. books on the table
B. elbows on the table
C. wearing white to weddings
D. going to Paris
- _____ 5. Wally dies
A. during World War I
B. of appendicitis
C. rescuing a man from freezing
D. while playing baseball
- _____ 6. Mr. Webb is
A. a Civil War enthusiast
B. a fan of strawberry phosphates
C. a newspaper editor
D. a choir director
- _____ 7. The stage manager
A. assumes the role of Sam Craig
B. assumes the role of Mr. Morgan
C. assumes the role of George's son
D. assumes the role of best man at George's wedding
- _____ 8. Simon Stimson
A. dies by electrocution
B. dies by suicide
C. dies saving a man in a freezing river
D. dies while leading the choir

- _____ 9. Rebecca Gibbs
A. lives in Canton, Ohio
B. lives in upstate New York
C. had appendicitis
D. died giving birth to her second child
- _____ 10. Professor Willard
A. taught at Grover's Corners College
B. taught at the State University
C. was the minister of the Congregational Church
D. wrote numerous letters to the editor
- _____ 11. Si Crowell
A. marries Rebecca Webb
B. writes for the *Grover's Corners Sentinel*
C. delivers milk
D. delivers newspapers
- _____ 12. Mr. Webb reluctantly
A. gives agricultural advice
B. buys Mrs. Gibbs highboy
C. drinks strawberry phosphates with Doc Webb
D. gives George marital advice
- _____ 13. George Gibbs
A. is the father of two
B. is a widower
C. is a farmer
D. all the above
- _____ 14. Constable Warren
A. delivers twins in Polish town
B. arrests Simon Stimson for public drunkenness
C. rescues a man from freezing
D. performs the wedding for George and Emily
- _____ 15. George Gibbs
A. throws paper airplanes between his room and Emily's
B. wants to telephone between his room and Emily's
C. wants to telegraph between his room and Emily's
D. wants a telescope facing Emily's room

Part IV: Essay Questions (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Explain why the spirits don't grieve.
2. Compare the constable, Dr. Ferguson, and Howie Newsome as minor characters.
3. Describe the courtship of Emily and George.
4. Explain why the spirits urge Emily not to return to the past.
5. Predict which characters from the play will thrive.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. G | 11. H |
| 2. K | 7. L | 12. C |
| 3. J | 8. I | 13. F |
| 4. E | 9. M | 14. O |
| 5. N | 10. D | 15. A |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Multiple Choice (30 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. A | 6. C | 11. B |
| 2. C | 7. B | 12. C |
| 3. B | 8. D | 13. D |
| 4. A | 9. C | 14. B |
| 5. D | 10. A | 15. A |

Part II: Quotations (20 points)

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1. George | 6. Mr. Webb |
| 2. stage manager | 7. Simon Stimson |
| 3. Mrs. Gibbs | 8. George |
| 4. Joe Stoddard | 9. Mrs. Webb |
| 5. Emily | 10. Dr. Gibbs |

Part III: Identification (20 points)

- Professor Willard explains the geological history of the area
- Emily distinguishes herself by making a speech on the Louisiana Purchase
- Emily is pleased to add a modern convenience to the farm
- The Cartwrights manufacture blankets at Grover's Corners.
- Julia Gibbs surprises her husband on George's wedding day by making french toast.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (15 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. F | 11. F |
| 2. F | 7. T | 12. F |
| 3. T | 8. F | 13. F |
| 4. F | 9. F | 14. T |
| 5. F | 10. T | 15. T |

Part II: Matching (15 points)

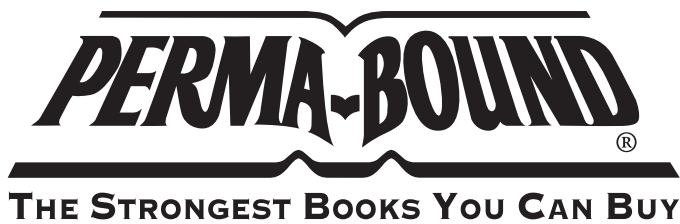
- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. E | 11. D |
| 2. C | 7. K | 12. H |
| 3. J | 8. A | 13. C |
| 4. C | 9. B | 14. J |
| 5. G | 10. I | 15. D |

Part III: Multiple Choice (30 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 9. A |
| 2. D | 10. B |
| 3. C | 11. D |
| 4. A | 12. D |
| 5. B | 13. D |
| 6. C | 14. C |
| 7. B | 15. C |
| 8. B | |

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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