

## ANALYSIS

### *Our Town* (1938)



Thornton Wilder

(1897-1975)

“The intimate history of a typical American town, Grover’s Corners, N.H., is sketched during the years 1901-13. On a bare, uncurtained stage, set with a few chairs and tables, the activities of the townspeople are enacted under the visible direction of the friendly Stage Manager, who addresses the audience, describing the characters and commenting on the action, in what the author calls a ‘hang-over from a novelist technique.’ Professor Willard and Editor Webb describe the scientific and social backgrounds, and other incidental figures are Joe Crowell, the newsboy; Howie Newsome, the milkman; Simon Stimson, a frustrated creative artist, the town organist and drunkard; Constable Warren; Mr. Morgan, the druggist; Mrs. Soames, the gossip; and Joe Stoddard, the undertaker. Interest is centered in the families of Editor Webb and Dr. Gibbs. The first act, ‘Daily Life,’ shows the common occupations of cooking, gardening, school, baseball, the church choir, and domestic concerns.

The second act, ‘Love and Marriage,’ deals with the courtship and wedding of George Gibbs and Emily Webb. ‘Death,’ the third act, presents the funeral of Emily, who has died in childbirth. The buried dead become articulate, expressing the quiet and patience resulting from a view of the world outside of time, and their knowledge of ‘something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being.’ Finally aware of the mysterious beauty and terror of life, they embody the author’s aim ‘to present illustrations of harmony and of law...affirmations about mankind and his ends’.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Mr. Wilder’s play is, in a sense, a refutation of its thesis. *Our Town* is purely and simply an act of awareness, a demonstration of the fact that in a work of art, at least, experience *can* be arrested, imprisoned, and preserved. The perspective of death, which Mr. Wilder has chosen, gives an extra poignancy and intensity to the small-town life whose essence he is trying so urgently to communicate.... The perspective is, to be sure, hazardous; it invites bathos and sententiousness. Yet, Mr. Wilder has used it honorably. He

forbids the spectator to dote on that town of the past. He is concerned only with saying: this is how it was, though then we did not know it.”

Mary McCarthy  
*Sights and Spectacles*  
(Farrar 1956) 28

“I think that if the play (*Our Town*) tested its own theme more remorselessly, the world it creates of a timeless family and a rhythm of existence beyond the disturbance of social wracks would not remain unshaken.... I think, further, that the close contact which the play established with its audience was the result of its coincidence with the deep longing of the audience for such stability, a stability which in daylight out on the streets does not truly exist.... To me, therefore, the play falls short of a form that will press into reality to the limits of reality, if only because it could not plumb the psychological interior lives of its characters and still keep its present form.”

Arthur Miller  
*Atlantic Monthly*  
(April 1956) 39

“He is our great unsocial and antihistorical novelist, the artist of the anachronism....Wilder does not think of history as an irreversible process of a river in flood; he thinks of it as a series of recurrent patterns, almost like checkerboards set side by side.... Wilder has written a dozen books, each strikingly different from all the others in place and time, in mood, and even more in method, yet all the books embody or suggest the same feeling of universal experience and eternal return. *Everything that happened might happen anywhere, and will happen again*. That principle explains why he is able to adopt different perspectives in different books, as if he were looking sometimes through one end of a telescope and sometimes through the other.”

Malcolm Cowley  
*Saturday Review*  
(6 October 1956) 50-51

“Although Wilder has been hysterically popular in Germany since the end of the war, when the State Department sent *Our Town* on tour as a ‘representative example’ of ‘modern American theatre’... His star has risen even higher since he received the Peace Prize at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1957.... The vitalistic cosmic optimism of *The Skin of Our Teeth* provides the contemporary German with the psychological reassurance he demands. Shocked and terrified by the situation in which he finds himself as the primary European target of bombs dispatched from opposite directions, the middle-class German reader flees to the lap of Wilder.”

Paul Fussell  
*Nation*  
(3 May 1958) 394-95

“*Our Town* is a tribute to American life, a microcosm of life and death, love and marriage in a typical American village. The play is based structurally on the device of breaking down the ‘theatrical illusion’ and letting the audience into the production of the piece which is also used in Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. There is a Stage Manager who serves as a sort of narrator or chorus; he introduces the characters and comments on the action. The plot centers around two neighboring families, those of Editor Webb and Dr. Gibbs. In the first act Dr. Gibbs comes in from a maternity case (the them of birth), the Webbs cook breakfast (the sustenance of life) and the children go off to school. The young George Gibbs and Emily Webb play at puppy-love.

In the second act, three years later, the couple are about to be married; their courtship and wedding is described (the cycle of life). In the third act, nine years later, Emily has died in childbirth; the cycle has completed itself. Emily’s ghost appears; she abandons the living and joins the group of the dead, who advise her to forget her past existence and prepare for the future. This play thus attempts to demonstrate that even the humblest lives partake of the divine cycle of life, love, and death.”

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4

"*Our Town* (1938)...presented without scenery of any kind, utilizing a narrator and a loose episodic form, adventurous and imaginative in style, this unique play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1938 and is one of the most distinguished in the modern repertoire. It deals with the simplest and most touching aspects of life in a small town and contains nothing like the brutal Realism of O'Neill's New England plays. A stage manager casually introduces the characters and his narration bridges the gap between the audience and the play's action. At times he also enters the scene and becomes part of the play. The play's action centers around the life of the Webb family and the Gibbs family, their neighbors. George Gibbs and Emily Webb fall in love, marry, she dies, as the life of the town continues to move about them. Burns Mantle said of the play: '*Our Town*...impressively combined a homely and sensitive study of native character with a novelty of form that completely detached it from the ordinary drama of commerce.'

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

"*Our Town* is nonillusionistic, presentational drama. The principal actor is the 'stage manager.' He sets up his demonstration, calling for skeletal or fragmentary stage settings to help the audience visualize a particular situation; he plays the part of a philosophical druggist who has had many occasions to observe the town's characters; and he acts as host, master of ceremonies, commentator, philosopher, and friend to the spectators. He takes them into his confidence and proceeds to communicate to them his knowledge of the little town of Grover's Corners and its people, along with his thoughts about living and dying. In form, *Our Town* achieves, in short, a significant presentation or, as Gordon Craig would have said, 'a noble artificiality.'

Locating *Our Town* historically and explaining its style is, however, less important than experiencing the play. Once we become acquainted with a dramatic style, it rapidly loses novelty and ceases to have any value apart from the life and feeling it conveys. The formal structure calls to mind the scaffolding on a building in the process of construction. The important question is: what sort of building is arising behind the wooden platforms? The theatricalist form of *Our Town* enables the author to build the kind of play he wants to give us—an informal, intimate, and compellingly human drama. It is a work of love and of wisdom: it pulsates with Wilder's love for the New England environment and way of life and for life itself; and it is pervaded by a wisdom about these things that is as down to earth as the life which the author chronicles.

The content of the play is so simple that it is momentous, for it deals primarily with the life in life. Hence Wilder can dismiss all topical issues and situations from his demonstration after briefly noting that they appear in Grover's Corners, as they do everywhere else. Grover's Corners is a little town in New Hampshire, and it can be located by latitude and longitude. But it is all places, and it is located in the universe.... The dying gives significance to the living, and the 'metaphysical' is included in the 'real' [which] may remind us of transcendentalism of Emersonianism so characteristic of New England—the concept that everything is interpenetrated by spirit. But it is homespun philosophy that Wilder's informal presentation gives us, and it serves such simple ends as making us treasure ordinary life just as it is and reminding us to live it to the full before our day is over.

'There go all of us,' Brooks Atkinson has expressed the meaning of the play, 'not "but for the grace of God," but "by the grace of God".' The play deals with 'the days and deaths of the neighborhood of man.' Wilder's cultivated and sophisticated mind reduces out human complexity to its irreducible simplicity.'

John Gassner, ed.  
*A Treasury of the Theatre: From Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller*  
(Simon & Schuster 1935-57) 926-7

Michael Hollister (2015)